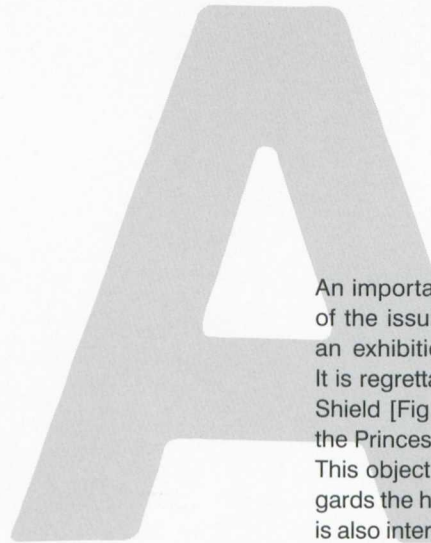


Zdzisław Żygulski, Jr

The Prophetic Shield of John III Sobieski and the Edict of Milan



An important event took place in 2013: the 1700th anniversary of the issuing of the Edict of Milan. To honour this occasion, an exhibition was organized in the Palazzo Reale in Milan.¹ It is regrettable that the exhibition did not include the Prophetic Shield [Fig. 1] of John III Sobieski (1629–1696) [Fig. 2], part of the Princes Czartoryski Collection and the subject of this article. This object is special not only because of its significance as regards the history of Poland, which will be discussed below, but it is also interesting in relation to its dual connection to this edict of tolerance. The shield was decorated using assorted techniques and displays an episode from ancient times known as the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. This battle was of crucial importance for the history of Christianity. The outcome – the victory of Constantine and Licinius over Maxentius – had an impact on the issuing in Milan, in the year 313, of our edict, which granted the Christian faith freedom from persecution. Second of all, there is an interesting coincidence: the place of origin both of the edict and the shield was Milan.

The shield was found in 1679 in Cracow Cathedral on Wawel Hill (Cracow being the capital of the Polish state at that time). An exact description of this event is provided by the poet Jan Gawiński (c. 1622–1684?) from Wilamowice in his Latin-Polish poem *Clipaeus christianitatis to jest Tarcz Chrześcijaństwa* [*Clipaeus Christianitatis this is the Shield of Christianity*], written in 1680. In it the poet provides information about the discovery



1. «The Prophetic Shield of John III», Milan, 2nd half of the 16th century, Cracow, The Princes Czartoryski Foundation



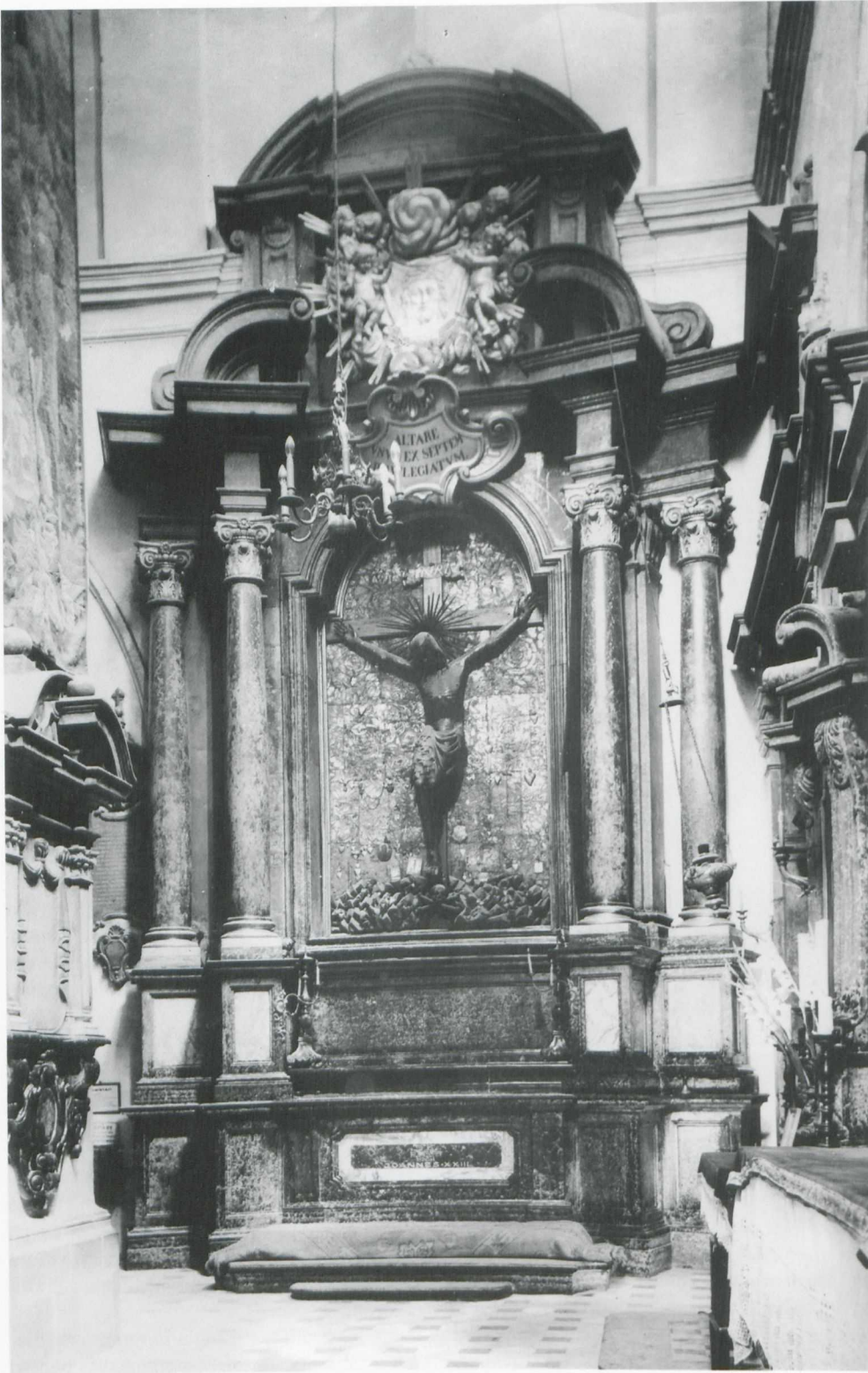
2. John Höhn, Jr, «Coronation gold Medal of John III Sobieski and Marie Casimire», 1676, National Museum in Cracow

of the shield in the 'remains of a wall' during the renovation of the 'chapel' of the Holy Cross [Fig. 3]², carried out by the architect Stanisław Kopernik. This event was considered by the author to be miraculous as the shield for him was similar to icons 'fallen from the heavens', not executed by the hand of any human, as it had literally fallen down with rubble from the vault. Discovered in this way, the object acquired, according to Gawiński, extraordinary power. The poet carefully described the shield, on which, with meticulous craftsmanship, a city is visualized, with towers and an open gate into which the crowned king enters, under banners with the sign of the cross and trumpeters blowing into trumpets. To the right a crucifix appears in the clouds; to the left on a gilded background, a verse in Latin.³

The poem, as the title itself suggests, was dedicated by Gawiński to the king.⁴ At that time, a campaign was gathering momentum for war against the Turks, who, with ever greater impetus, were rubbing up against the south-eastern borders of the state.⁵ The discovery of the shield at such an important political moment – preparations were underway for an overall battle against 'the infidels' – was seen as a good omen and the shield, having been dubbed prophetic, was offered to the contemporary ruler John III Sobieski.⁶ The omen was soon to come true

– in a battle waged by the Polish king on 12 September 1683, which decided the fate not only of Poland but all of Christian Europe. On this day the coalition of Christian forces gathered together outside of Vienna. The Polish king was hailed the chief commander of the troops. The main thrust of the attack on the enemy's camp was carried out from Kahlenberg hill. In consequence of the battle Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa, who gave the order for a retreat, while escaping in haste lost a stirrup as he was changing horses. One of his henchmen, a Pole who had been turkified, kept it and brought it to John III, who in turn sent it by way of his French courtier Philippe Dupont to his wife, Queen Marie Casimire, with a letter informing her of his victory, written in the tent of the defeated enemy. On a leaf of parchment the king added: 'He, whose leg was in this stirrup, by the grace of God has been defeated'. Dupont set out from Vienna on 13 September and three days later arrived in Cracow, where he found the queen praying in the cathedral in front of the altar in which the shield had been found. The queen ordered the stirrup to be hung as a votive offering on the altar, and is now located in Cathedral Museum on Wawel Hill [Fig. 4].

The history of the letter 'from the vizier's tents' proves Sobieski's awareness as a politician of the important role played



3. The Holy Cross Altar in Cracow Cathedral. Photo: W. Gumuła, Photolibrary of the Art History Institute, Jagiellonian University, Cracow



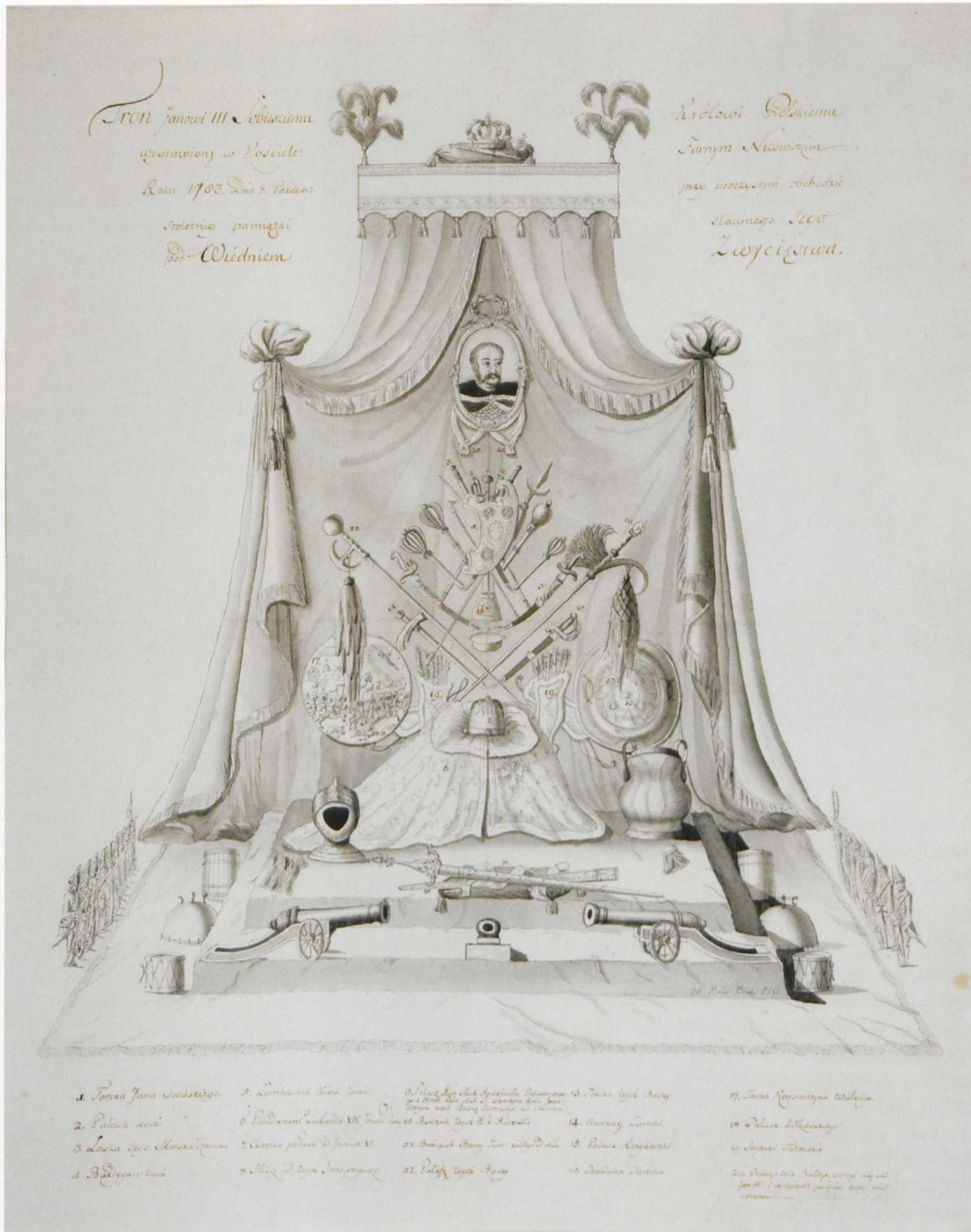
4. Stirrup of the Grand Vizier, 17th century,
Cracow, Cathedral Museum

by literary journalism in the formation of public opinion.⁷ The king had an excellent knowledge of ancient literature, especially the Horatian topos of becoming immortal through art⁸, hence Gawiński's panegyric work was also an excellent tool for propaganda. It is worth noting that the motive of a shield was used in relation to this king even before Gawiński's poem. Henryk Duwen designed an engraving with an emblematic composition depicting a round shield falling from the sky, with the motto 'Missus in salutem' – a reference to Ovid's *Fasti*, before John III Sobieski's election as the king of Poland.⁹ The idea of the king as a protective shield was already known from earlier old Polish literature¹⁰, but it was only after his victorious Battle of Vienna and especially in reference to this king that this concept really took hold. Sobieski began to be called 'the shield of the Poles', 'the defender of Christianity'¹¹, the defence shield against the Turkish-Tatar threat. The eminent astronomer Johannes Heve-

lius, the court astronomer for the king, dedicated a constellation to Sobieski, naming it Sobieski's Shield. On the frontispiece of a work from 1687 entitled *Firmamentum Sobiescianum*, we see the scholar as he offers Urania a shield bearing the cross. The engraving by Carolus de la Haye after a drawing by Andreas Stech shows in the sky the new constellation *Scutum Sobiescianum* – a shield with a large cross.¹² Additional confirmation – though purely coincidental – of the appropriateness of associating Sobieski with a symbolic defence shield was the fact that the king's ancestral coat of arms was the 'Janina' coat of arms, that is, one depicting a shield.¹³

Going back to the history of the shield, after the Vienna battle it was brought, along with other trophies of the king, to the castle in Żółkiew (now Zhovkva in Ukraine) – the ancestral home of the Sobieskis. By way of inheritance it became the property of the ducal family of the Radziwiłłs¹⁴ and ended up in Nieśwież (now Niasvich in Belarus), in the large family vault of the castle – one of the richest in Europe. The shield was put on exhibit for the 100th anniversary of the victory at Vienna in 1783 in Nieśwież [Fig. 5].¹⁵

Before 1812 the shield was given as a gift by one of the members of the Radziwiłł family to Princess Izabela Czartoryska (1746–1835) [Fig. 6].¹⁶ The princess was known for her love of collecting mementoes of Polish heroes, kings and famous rulers. She stored her collection in the so-called Temple of Sibyl [Fig. 7]. Built in imitation of the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli according to a design by Piotr Aigner¹⁷ in 1801 on the Czartoryski estate in Puławy, the Temple of Sibyl was the first Polish national museum¹⁸, having come into being when Poland did not exist on the map of Europe, divided as it was between Prussia, Austria and Russia. Besides the princess' collection, mementoes from the Polish royal treasury at Wawel Castle were also included, as were the trophies gathered by victorious kings in Cracow Cathedral.¹⁹ Due to the idea behind this building – the presenting of the past of the Polish state to a future generation, one that is free and independent – it was initially named the Temple of Memory.²⁰ There is no doubt that the greatest Polish hero and king, the one whom the princess valued the most, was John III Sobieski, as a result of which the prophetic shield was for Izabela a key memento. This is confirmed by the place that was arranged for the shield: the most exposed location – in the niche across from the entrance, where it was hung along with a large banner captured by Sobieski at Vienna.²¹ In the inventory of the Temple of Sibyl in Puławy, written down in July 1815 in Paris and in August 1849 re-written with the addition 'People and Things', the Prophetic Shield was recorded as the 49th entry.²² An additional element which emphasized the figure of King John III was the honorary shield with the 'Janina' coat of arms, designed by Princess Izabela and placed in the centre of the floor in the Temple of Sibyl, in reality fulfilling a prosaic function – it hid a heating duct [Fig. 8].²³ The central location of King Sobieski's shield,



5. «The Throne» with mementoes of John III Sobieski, on exhibit at Nieśwież Castle in the year 1783, copperplate, Cracow, Wawel Royal Castle. The Prophetic Shield is placed in the bottom left corner of the Throne, partly covered by the Turkish horsetail ensign, still without the rim with King's Sobieski monograms, added in Puławy by Princess Czartoryska



6. Portrait of Princess Izabela Czartoryska, mezzotint engraved by Giuseppe Marchi, London, 1777

which without a doubt became the essence of the Temple of Sibyl, could only mean one thing: for the second time in a row great hopes were placed in it. This time for the restoration of independence.

* * *

There is no doubt that the history of the Prophetic Shield is significant for the history of Poland, but this object is also exceptional from the point of view of its appearance. This is the case

not only in terms of its artistic value but as concerns the events that are portrayed on the shield, which deepen its symbolic dimension in relation to John III Sobieski's victory over the Turks. After all, what is sculpted on the shield is the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, which took place on 28 October 312, an hour north of Rome.

The battle was fought by Constantine the Great, with the help of Licinius, against Maxentius. It was Constantine the Great's decisive battle on his road to autocracy. As a result of Diocletian's reforms the Roman Empire was divided into four prefects, which



7. The Temple of Sibyl in Puławy, 1801 (current state). In the top on the cupola of the Temple was located round window (oculus) covered with violet glass (a gift of the tsar Alexander I), which created inside a mystical atmosphere, by which Princess Czartoryska was very contented

were governed by a tetrarchy: two tetrarchs for the eastern part of the empire and two for the western part. Constantine the Great (272–337), after the death of his father in 306, became one of the Western tetrarchs. However, he had to share his rule with the other tetrarch in the West – Maxentius, who ruled over Rome. Maxentius' rule elicited widespread dissatisfaction, which emboldened Constantine to enter into an alliance with one of the eastern tetrarchs – the tetrarch of the lands in north Africa, Licinius, whom Constantine himself later defeated in various civil wars, making him, as a result, the sole ruler of the Roman Empire.

Maxentius had an army that was more numerous than his opponents²⁴, including the elite troops in the Praetorian guard. Still, he was not confident of victory and directed a request to the priests at the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline hill, asking them to consult the Sibylline Books, which contained prophecies in regards to the fate of Rome. He misinterpreted the oracle that he received and went into battle.

The course of the battle was as follows. Constantine's troops chased after the retreating armies of Maxentius from the direction of Verona, which had already been conquered. When Maxentius reached the banks of the Tiber River, it turned out that the Milvian Bridge, made of stone, had been partly demolished. As a result, he ordered the building of pontoons, which, however, failed: Maxentius drowned in the Tiber along with his soldiers. Constantine achieved victory over an enemy with forces twice as large as his own, becoming the sole ruler of the western empire.²⁵

Before the battle, Constantine had a vision²⁶, a description of which has survived thanks to the bishop Eusebius, who apparently heard it from the emperor himself. Eusebius wrote:

[...] about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle.²⁷

Eusebius also wrote about one more vision experienced by Constantine, during a dream after his miraculous vision. Pon-



8. The second honorary shield, placed under the oculus of the Temple. In the rim of the round bronze plate was name 'Sobieski' among small trophies and royal coat of arms 'Janina': a tiny triangular gilded shield, which was fixed on hinges, that could be raised passing to the Temple hot air from the central heating stoves in narrow room within walls. This is a rare example of double function: technical and ideological of a museum object

dering over the phenomenon that he had seen together with his soldiers, Constantine had a dream in which Christ appeared with the same sign that he, Constantine, had seen in the sky. In the dream Christ ordered Constantine to make a replica of the sign and use it in battle against his enemies.²⁸ Constantine followed the order and on his standard – the *labarum* – was seen a Chi-Rho, the symbol of Christ, made up of the first two letters of the name for 'Christ' in Greek, where 'X', pronounced 'kee', is cut in half by the letter 'P', that is, the Latin 'r'. Joseph Voit, an eminent contemporary researcher of the age, contends that Constantine did not adopt the sign of the cross directly from this vision but that he transformed the solar sign of Apollo into the sign of Christ.²⁹ Many researchers believe that Constantine's



9. Gold coin of Constantine, indicating his relation to Apollo – the god of the invincible sun (*Sol Invictus*). Photo: after *Costantino 313 d.C. L'editto di Milano e il tempo della tolleranza...*, p. 46, Fig. 3

vision was politically motivated and that it was a reference to another vision which he had experienced in the year 310 as he was returning from Gaul (at that time he had also averted danger from Maxentius).³⁰ Not far from Massalia, on the Rhine River, Apollo revealed himself together with a winged Victoria, holding in her hand a wreath superimposed with three X's, thus heralding a thirty-year reign. The vision appeared near the temple of the god whose sign was the sun – Apollo as *Sol Invictus*. Henceforth Constantine could proclaim his contact with the god of the sun. This is also how he depicted himself on coins [Fig. 9].³¹

As evidence of his gratefulness for victory, Constantine, together with Licinius, in the year 313 proclaimed the Edict of Milan, which granted Christians freedom from persecution. This document introduced religious tolerance throughout the entire empire, that is, equal rights for all religious faiths, which, over time, consequently led to the triumph of Christianity, recognized as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Contemporary historians do not call the act issued in Milan an edict. It is regarded, instead, as a kind of statement or recommendation by two tetrarchs, wherein the main author is thought to be Licinius. It is worth noting, however, that it was not the first act of tolerance for Christians, for already in April of 311 the Roman emperor Galerius (c. 250–311) bestowed those in the East with

religious freedom by virtue of a document called the Edict of Toleration from Nicomedia.³² In the Milan act the following was written:

When I, Constantine Augustus, as well as I Licinius Augustus fortunately met near Mediolanum [Milan], and were considering everything that pertained to the public welfare and security, we thought, among other things which we saw would be for the good of many, those regulations pertaining to the reverence of the Divinity ought certainly to be made first, so that we might grant to the Christians and others full authority to observe that religion which each preferred; whence any Divinity whatsoever in the seat of the heavens may be propitious and kindly disposed to us and all who are placed under our rule. And thus by this wholesome counsel and most upright provision we thought to arrange that no one whatsoever should be denied the opportunity to give his heart to the observance of the Christian religion, of that religion which he should think best for himself, so that the Supreme Deity, to whose worship we freely yield our hearts may show in all things His usual favour and benevolence.³³

Constantine himself was not baptized until he was on his death bed in 337 in Ancyron, near Nicomedia, receiving this sacrament from the hands of the Arian bishop Eusebius. He was instructed that baptism would wash away all of his sins, and he had a lot on his conscience, for he had ordered the deaths of many people, including members of his own family.³⁴ At the same time, over the course of his life he patronized the development of Christianity by funding the construction of famous churches.³⁵

* * *

The representation on the shield is not an illustration of a historical event but a composition of the object's creators. The shield has a circular shape and is made of iron. It is silver- and gold-plated, with small elements of bronze added, slightly convex, with a diameter of 70 cm. It was executed by way of repoussé, engraving, chiselling, silver- and gold-plating. The rim of the shield is clearly damaged and carries traces of reconstruction, namely additions in gilded bronze in the form of an asymmetrical shield bearing the Sobieski 'Janina' coat of arms as well as 'X' characters, these last being connected to St John the Baptist, the king's patron. The motifs introduced to the rim are small gilded shields with Medusa head, gilded rosettes and helmets in Renaissance type. These additions in the rivet holes were introduced at the order of Princess Izabela Czartoryska, which we conclude from the drawing of the panoply called *The Throne* [Fig. 5] from the previously mentioned exhibition at Nieśwież in 1783, where the state of the shield was registered before it was interfered with a heavily damaged rim struck with brads. The lack



10. «The Prophetic Shield of John III» (detail of Fig. 1): the crucifix in a flaming aureole surrounded by angels' heads



11. «The Prophetic Shield of John III» (detail of Fig. 1): the figure of Victoria, with a plaque with a Latin inscription in hexameter, and a laurel wreath in the left hand



12. «The Prophetic Shield of John III» (detail of Fig. 1): the Holy Angel Bridge and the panorama view of Rome

of ornamentation on the rim points to their having been added in Puławy. In this way the princess connected this national relic with the king to an even greater degree.

The Prophetic Shield was not meant for battle but for ceremonial and representational purposes. An excellent armourer forged the scene – filling the entire circle – before the battle, when Constantine notices, on the right-hand side of a sky with billowing clouds, Christ on the cross in a flaming aureole, surrounded by winged angels' heads [Fig. 10]. On the left-hand side appears a figure in a girded tunic – a winged Victoria-Nike – holding in her right hand and carried on a pole a rectangular plaque with an inscription in Latin [Fig. 11]. In her outstretched left hand the goddess of victory holds a laurel wreath. Her hair writhes in a snakelike manner; snakes are also visible in the upper part of the tunic, which may be a reminder of Medusa's head on the aegis of Minerva. The inscription in hexameter, engraved on the plaque that she is holding, reads:

In oraculum sub hoc signo vince
Pro Domino si bella Deo et vitricia signa
Quaerite o Reges, signa subite crucis

Sub qua vicerunt veteres faeliciter hostem
Sub cruce qui Certas vincere vince Deo
Haec pia militia Est, et ut Est pia subicit hostes
Summo grata Trophaea Deo.³⁶

Between Constantine and the celestial vision there is a panorama view of Rome, including a bridge over the Tiber, with recognizable buildings and places in the city³⁷: the Castle of the Holy Angel³⁸ and St John's Bastion, the Colline Gate (Porta Collina), the Church of Santo Spirito in Sassia, the Church of Sant'Onofrio, the Pantheon, the Campidoglio, the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, St Peter's Basilica, Trajan's Column as well as the Capitoline hill [Fig. 12]. An important element of the composition is the five-span bridge – the Holy Angel Bridge. It was erected during the time of the emperor Hadrian as the Ponte Elio, and led to the mausoleum of this ruler and his family. During the pontificate of Pope Gregory I (590–604) the mausoleum was renamed the Castle of the Holy Angel and the bridge – the Holy Angel Bridge.

The Milvian Bridge was in existence since 206 AD. There is no doubt that what we are looking at on the shield behind



13. «The Prophetic Shield of John III» (detail of Fig. 1): the figure of Constantine on horseback and his armies

the bridge is the panorama of Rome and not the panorama of Milvio as in the fifteenth-century Venetian miniature from the *Historia Romana*.³⁹ A lone figure in a boat is visible on the Tiber. Under the line of the river the armies of Constantine and Licinius have gathered, while somewhat in the back, to the right – the army of Maxentius. On a wide field, taking up a little more than half of the surface of the composition, there are two groups of soldiers. At the bottom of the shield are Constantine's troops, which included the German cavalry, and Licinius' army with its Mauritanian archers. The oriental character of the armour and the three wide flapping banners with decorations reminiscent of oriental writing all draw our attention. Świerz-Zaleski saw here signs of the cross.⁴⁰ The figure of Constantine stands out due to its size [Fig. 13]. He is visible in the foreground, his head turned towards the sky, his face aristocratic, bearded, shown in profile, in a bulbous oriental bell-shaped helmet crowned with a spike. Constantine is clad in full armour glittering in gold, on which a small cross hangs from a chain. He is wearing pointed shoes with oriental characteristics. His arms are completely covered in folded bracers, the coverings on his legs are similar. He also has a gilded breastplate. With an unprotected hand, he wields wide the reigns of a steed with a luxurious mane and a waving tail. The horse's back is covered by a caparison. In his right hand, Constantine holds a small eastern-styled mace. The emperor is surrounded by foot and horse guards. The guards are wearing open helmets in the Burgundian style.

The author of this composition did not make use of original representations of Roman weaponry, preserved on triumphal arches and columns. As regards both armies their weapons have mixed characteristics: Renaissance elements as well as, to a large extent, Byzantine and Turkish. What predominates in the crowd of soldiers are casques and morions, most of which are topped with a spearhead. For side arms, falchions with wide, single-edged curved blades were used. Some of them, made from gilded bronze – like Constantine's aforementioned small mace – stand out from the background. Next to the emperor is



14. «The Prophetic Shield of John III» (detail of Fig. 1): the figure of Maxentius on horseback and his troops

a heavily armed cavalry, but in the ranks extending farther outwards legionaries make up the infantry. The legionaries, similarly armed on both sides, are carrying almond-shaped shields, decorated with mascarons. Within the ranks trumpeters can be found, blowing into eight golden trumpets, as if they were under the walls of Jericho. At the bottom of the shield small tree trunks can be seen, while on the right-hand side a large tree trunk separates both armies.

Slightly above this, on the right-hand side, Maxentius is shown – with an open helmet, in Renaissance armour, though



15. Nicolas Beatrizét, «The Castel Sant'Angelo and Ponte Sant'Angelo», copperplate, Cracow, Print Cabinet of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Polish Academy of Sciences, inv. no. 14885

less ornate than Constantine's. He is trying, on horseback, to break through a host of soldiers, and the measure of his efforts is the horse's head turned backwards. He is moving in the direction of his rival, whom, however, he will never reach as Maxentius will meet his demise in the currents of the Tiber. Maxentius' troops, being closer to the city, are depicted as if in miniature and carry less striking armour. Here as well, above these troops banners are also flapping [Fig. 14]. Far removed as they are, they are not witnesses to the vision which Constantine and his soldiers, both clearly depicted, are experiencing. The moment of silence before the battle is captured here. All movement has ceased, everything has come to a standstill under the influence of the unusual phenomenon in the sky: the appearance of Christ on the cross in a flaming aureole as well as the appearance, in the clouds, of the herald of victory – Victoria.

The history of this famous battle of Constantine was a frequent subject in art. It became more topical especially after

Constantinople was taken by the Turks in May of 1453. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Constantine's victory was visualized by painters on both oil paintings and frescoes – it is enough to mention the paintings of Piero della Francesca in the Franciscan church in Arezzo (1459–1464) or the frescoes in the Sala di Costantino in the Vatican, designed by Raphael and executed by Giulio Romano (1525). In Arezzo the artist showed the vision in Constantine's dream as well as Constantine himself at the front of his army, his hand stretched out with a small white cross. The appearance of his army was modernized: the knights wield huge lances and their full armour is from the fifteenth century. The Vatican composition is characterized by frantic movement and the noise of battle: Constantine with his spear, and behind him, his soldiers with standards bearing the sign of the cross, all come up against their opponents' troops drowning in the Tiber. However, scenes preceding a battle are rare in art. In the Sala di Costantino, Giulio Romano created the great compo-

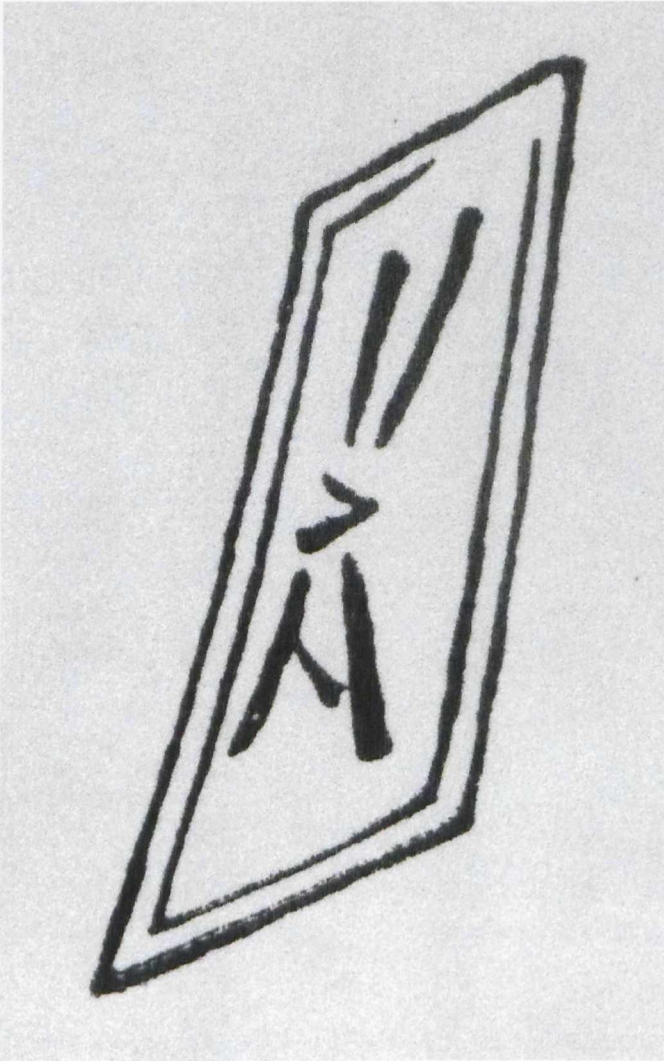


16. «The Prophetic Shield of John III» (detail of Fig. 1): the papal coat of arms on the Colline Gate

sition *Speech of Constantine*, showing him speaking to his soldiers before battle. A cross carried by angels appears in the sky; in the background the Castle of the Holy Angel is also visible.

From a formal aspect the models for the depiction on the shield were provided by prints and works already located in Rome, for example the aforementioned Sala di Costantino in the Vatican Rooms, which were also available on a wide scale in print. In showing the Castle of the Holy Angel, the designer of the shield, as can be deduced, made use of a few copperplate engravings, including, among others, a work by a French printer working in Rome, Nicolas Beatrizét (1507/15 – c. 1577).⁴¹ Beatrizét executed engravings by Michelangelo, Giulio Romano and others as well as views of Rome for publishers. He cooperated with Antonio Salamanca (1479–1562)⁴², a typographer who worked in the Eternal City and, for some period of time, in Milan. The Beatrizét engraving that might have functioned as a model for the shield depicts the Castle of the Holy Angel with a wav-

ing banner as well as the bridge over the Tiber that leads to the buildings of the Vatican [Fig. 15]. On other engravings by this artist, like *Death of Meleager* or *Rape of Ganymede* after Giulio Romano, we perceive the identical manner in which the clouds are depicted, as billowing, cotton-like forms. The creator of the shield may also have had recourse to copperplate engravings drawn from books about Rome published by Antonio Lafreri and Antonio Salamanca in c. 1543.⁴³ Other fragments of the fortifications, simplified on the shield in comparison to the engraving, can be found on a drawing from the first years of the sixteenth century.⁴⁴ The figure of the warrior with an oval shield and spear, which is depicted at the bottom of the Prophetic Shield with his back to the viewer, alludes to the figure from the scene in Giulio Romano's *Speech of Constantine* in the Sala di Costantino. On the other hand, the papal coat of arms is visible on the Colline Gate (Porta Collina) already on a drawing of Giuliano da Sangallo from 1500.⁴⁵



17. The no longer decipherable signature on the shield.
Photo: after Świerz-Zaleski, p. 189

The execution on the Cracow shield of a multi-figure composition with a panorama view of Rome, the bridge, the Tiber and the miraculous phenomenon in the sky was a difficult artistic problem and a technical one as well. Only a master armourer working in a centre with a long tradition in this craft could have undertaken this job. The depiction of a battle scene of such breadth, in a rich landscape, with a panorama view of the city and the turbulent action in the sky required no small amount of imagination and skill. The iconographic programme itself had to be the work of an educated humanist who above all displayed on the shield the significance of the victory at the Milvian Bridge

as a triumph on the part of Rome as the capital of Christianity and the seat of the pope. The Castle of the Holy Angel emphasizes this as does the papal coat of arms – crossed keys – on the gates of the city fortifications [Fig. 16]. What is also interesting is the fact that the unknown author of the program of the shield's content decided to combine in the sky both of Constantine's visions: the Christian vision as well as the one belonging to the ancient world, which, even though it was transformed, yet it was still pagan, appearing to one side of the Crucified Christ using Sol Invictus as a model, on the other side, however, as Victoria with a laurel wreath and a plaque announcing victory.

Early scholars of the Prophetic Shield were not in agreement concerning the place in which it was executed – analogies were sought for amongst masters and workshops in Augsburg, Nuremberg, even Paris and Brussels.⁴⁶ Certain arguments in favour of northern attributes were not cited. The first monographer of the shield, Stanisław Świerz-Zaleski, was an advocate of the shield's having a northern provenance, indicating Augsburg at the end of the sixteenth century.⁴⁷ Świerz-Zaleski was also the first to publish the faded signature on the shield, located on the lid of the chest in the foreground, with letters that are difficult to read but which one can attempt to decipher as 'T V', as if they were enclosed by an engraving stylus.⁴⁸ Today the signature is no longer decipherable [Fig. 17].⁴⁹

Świerz-Zaleski was an enthusiast of Viennese learning, which at the time was at the forefront in hoplology. He relied on the work of W. Boenheim⁵⁰ and on famous German goldsmiths and engravers like Peter Flötner⁵¹ or Sebastian Münster, searching here for models for the representations on the shield. It wasn't until the next generation of outstanding Austrian hoplologists, Bruno Thomas and Ortwin Gamber⁵², that the Milanese provenance of the shield was announced in 1958. I confirmed this attribute through my own research.⁵³ Not only the workshop style but the subject itself and its message make it possible to connect the shield with an armourer's workshop from northern Italy, most probably in the main centre of this trade, Milan, but what also supports this view is the unusual combination of the two visions of Constantine in one composition.

The shields produced in workshops were very valuable objects. Many artists of various specialties worked on them: armourers, engravers, goldsmiths. In the collection of arms great attention was paid to shields, and in their selection an important role was played by the subject depicted on the shield, of which the most important were Greek mythology (in particular the Trojan War) and events surrounding Julius Caesar as well as other heroes of the Roman republic. Shields, combining artistic values with emotional, decorative and representational ones, were of primary importance in the formation of panoplies. At large auctions in the nineteenth century artefacts of this kind were sold at higher prices than the works of Rembrandt and Titian. Original shields from the Renaissance were objects of interest



18. The so-called Shield of Caesar, Milan, 16th century, Cracow, The Princes Czartoryski Foundation

to every weapons collector, as a result of which many forgeries appeared. The eminent weapons expert Bashford Dean has estimated that the number of original shields came out to only about one-hundred specimens.⁵⁴

Besides the Prophetic Shield under discussion here, at the Czartoryski Museum in Cracow there are five other Renaissance shields. Among these the most similar to Sobieski's shield as regards the manner in which the theme is portrayed is undoubtedly the so-called Shield of Julius Caesar [Fig. 18].⁵⁵ This shield also belonged to Princess Izabela Czartoryska, who received it before 1812 from her friend and museum agent general Michał Sokolnicki (1760–1816). Sokolnicki purchased many priceless artworks for Princess Izabela, especially in Flanders, among others precisely this shield, excavated from the Sambre River near Fleurus – the site, in 57 BC, of a battle between Julius Caesar and the Gauls. Sokolnicki regarded the shield as having belonged to Caesar and as having been lost during the battle.

On the Shield of Julius Caesar a scene is portrayed from the *Iliad* – the fight over the body of Patroclus – through the division of the space on the shield into three zones: a sky zone with the Olympian gods (Zeus and Athena), a land zone showing Troy, its landscape and buildings, as well as a lower zone where a fierce battling is taking place. This division is reminiscent of the one that is utilized on the Prophetic Shield of Sobieski. Also similar are the curved falchions and Renaissance armour which are portrayed on both shields. Another thing that they have in common is the choice of the moment of battle – the action is interrupted: on Sobieski's shield the armies have frozen in the face of the supernatural phenomenon, on the Shield of Julius Caesar all movement has stopped before Zeus, who is throwing a lightning bolt. This moment was described in the *Iliad* as follows:

Then, lifting high
His tassel'd Ægis radiant, Jove with storms
Enveloped Ida; flash'd his lightnings, roar'd
His thunders, and the mountain shook throughout.
Troy's host he prosper'd, and the Greeks dispersed.⁵⁶

On both shields the phenomenon of heavenly intervention takes place: on the one hand from Christ and Nike, on the other – from Zeus.

But as concerns the theme, the return on a Renaissance shield to the history of Constantine isn't accidental either. It was always dug up when Christian Europe found itself in danger from the 'infidels'. It was this situation precisely that took place in the sixteenth century, during the invasion of the Turks. Under

the leadership of Pope Pius V (1504–1572) the Holy League of Christian states was formed, its goal being the defence of Europe. The following states entered into the alliance: the Papal States, Spain, Venice, Genoa, Sabaudia and Malta. It was doubtless at that point, in the 1560s, that the shield which depicted the miracle heralding the victory of Constantine was forged.

Since the Battle of Varna in 1444 the fight against Islam was joined by Poland. Its might was held in esteem by the popes, who, in the middle of the sixteenth century, tried to encourage Sigismund August Jagiellon (1520–1572) to join the fight against the armies of the crescent moon which at that time were considered a threat. Giovanni Francesco Commendone, the papal legate in Poland, for many years exerted himself in acquiring the king for activity against the Ottoman state.⁵⁷ It was known that the king of Poland was fond of beautiful knight's armour and was in possession of a large armoury. And so, the hypothesis can be put forward that among the gifts for the monarch which were sent from Italy, perhaps even from Pius V himself, was the ornate shield portraying Constantine as he prepares for battle against Maxentius. It can be assumed with great probability that the shield was executed in the run up to the Battle of Lepanto (7 October 1571) and made its way into the hands of King Sigismund August. An object of this kind – a symbolic object, not a military one, of the highest artistic quality – was an Italian specialty. The shield was undoubtedly kept in the treasury of Cracow Cathedral on Wawel Hill.

In the middle of the seventeenth century, in 1655, Cracow was occupied by the Swedish army. The city was ruthlessly plundered by the invaders, but they were unable to acquire the contents of the royal treasury, which in advance had been transported abroad. In the resulting chaos someone, perhaps one of the cathedral staff members, hid the precious shield in the cathedral itself, where it remained until the moment of its 'miraculous' rediscovery during the renovation of the altar.⁵⁸

History played itself out in such a way that it was not the Polish king Sigismund August – to whom the shield was undoubtedly given as a gift – but one century later a different Polish king, John III Sobieski – to whom the miraculously rediscovered shield was offered – who fulfilled the mission whose contents were included on the shield itself and for which the shield was sent to Poland. Due to the theme portrayed on it this object linked Constantine the Great, whose Edict of Milan after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge granted freedom of religion to Christians in the Roman Empire, with John III Sobieski, who, 1370 years after the Edict of Milan was issued, defended Christianity in the Battle of Vienna.

Words of gratitude I turn to Professor Teresa Grzybkowska for her great help in writing of this difficult study.

- 1 *Costantino 313 d.C. L'editto di Milano e il tempo della tolleranza*, ed. by G. Sena Chiesa, exh. cat. Milan, Palazzo Reale, 25 October 2012 – 17 March 2013; Colosseum and Curia Iulia, Rome, 27 March – 15 September 2013, Milan, 2012.
- 2 There was never a chapel in this location, only an altar with a Crucifix famous for its miracles, from the last quarter of the fourteenth century.
- 3 J. Gawiński, *Clipaeus christianitatis to jest tarcz chrześcijaństwa* [Clipaeus Christianitatis this is the Shield of Christianity], trans. by R. Sawa, ed. by D. Chemperek and W. Walecki, Cracow, 2003, p. 33.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 D. Chemperek, *Jana Gawińskiego spraw tureckich tesaurs, czyli Tarcz Chrześcijaństwa. Konwencja i eksperymenty literackie* [John Gawiński's Thesaurus of Turkish Affairs, Namely, the Shield of Christianity. Convention and Literary Experiments], in Gawiński, *Clipaeus...*, pp. 7–23.
- 6 Chemperek, *Jana Gawińskiego spraw tureckich tesaurs*.
- 7 J. Okoń, 'Odsiecz wiedeńska Jana III w staropolskim teatrze wschodnim. Z dziejów propagandy sukcesu' [John III's Relief of Vienna in Old Polish Theatre of the East. From the History of the Propaganda of Success], *Pamiętnik Teatralny*, 1984, nos. 1–2, pp. 103–116.
- 8 H. Barycz, *Lata szkolne Marka i Jana Sobieskich w Krakowie* [The Cracow School Years of Mark and John Sobieski], Cracow, 1939.
- 9 Gawiński, *Clipaeus...*, p. 28.
- 10 C. Backvist, *Szkice o literaturze staropolskiej* [Sketches of Old Polish Literature], ed. by A. Biernacki, Warsaw, 1974, p. 642; E. Iwanoyko, 'Emblematyczne Sobieszciana Gotfryda Peschwitz' [The Emblematic Sobieszciana of Gotfryd Peschwitz], *Artium Quaestiones*, 1983, p. 15.
- 11 Chemperek, *Jana Gawińskiego spraw tureckich tesaurs...*, p. 12.
- 12 J. Hevelius, *Firmamentum Sobiescianum, sive Uranographia*, Gedani, 1687. Fig.: *Tarcza Sobieskiego* [Sobieski's Shield] – an engraving by C. de la Haye after a drawing by A. Stech (The Gdańsk Library of the Polish Academy of Sciences).
- 13 Another name for the coat of arms is, for example, 'A Field in a Field', after S. Górczyński and J. Kochanowski, *Herby szlachty polskiej* [Coats of Arms of the Polish Nobility], Warsaw, 1994, p. 66.
- 14 Z. Żygulski, Jr, *Dzieje zbiorów puławskich. Świątynia Sybilli i Dom Gotycki* [The History of the Puławy Collection. The Temple of Sibyl and the Gothic House], Cracow, 2009, p. 74.
- 15 *Odsiecz wiedeńska 1683. Wystawa jubileuszowa w Zamku Królewskim na Wawelu w trzechsetlecie bitwy. Tło historyczne i materiały źródłowe* [The Relief of Vienna 1683. Jubilee Exhibit at Wawel Royal Castle for the 300th Anniversary of the Battle. Historical Background and Source Material], vol. I, Cracow, 1990, Fig. 16.
- 16 Z. Żygulski, Jr, *Dzieje zbiorów...*, p. 74.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 71–74.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 19; p. 38, Fig. 21.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 74, 86.
- 22 *Odsiecz wiedeńska 1683. Jubilee Exhibit...*, Fig. 16.
- 23 Żygulski, *Dzieje zbiorów...*, p. 107.
- 24 The number of soldiers on both sides are most often given as forty-thousand soldiers for Constantine, eighty-thousand for Maxentius, but such estimates are generally unreliable.
- 25 J. Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, trans. by M. Hadas, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983.
- 26 Doubtless a result, as we suspect today, of the occurrence of an aureole, composed of clouds and rays of light from the setting sun.
- 27 D. Barends, *Constantine and Eusebius*, London, 1981; Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine*, The Bagster translation, vol. I: 'Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers', 2nd Series, ed. by P. Schaff and H. Wace, Edinburgh, 1955, chapter XXVIII (accessible online: <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/vita-constantine.asp>> [accessed on 1 April 2014]).
- 28 Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine*, chapter XXIX.
- 29 J. Vogt, *The Decline of Rome: The Metamorphosis of Ancient Civilization*, trans. by J. Sondheimer, London, 1967.
- 30 Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*; H. Gregoire, 'La Visio de Constantin "liquidee"', *Bizantion*, 1939, no. 14, pp. 341–351, and recently: A. Marcone, *L'editto di Milano: Delle persecuzioni alla tolleranza, in Costantino 313 d.C. L'editto di Milano...*, pp. 42–47, esp. p. 46.
- 31 Constantine, in a laurel wreath, holds a spear in his hand. On his shoulder there is a shield decorated with the motive of Apollo's chariot harnessed to four steeds, and behind him Apollo with a golden crown.
- 32 Marcone, *L'editto di Milano...*, pp. 42–47, esp. p. 47.
- 33 Lactantius, *De Mort. Pers.*, chapter XLVIII, in *Opera*, ed. by O. F. Fritzsche, vol. II, p. 288 sq. (Bibl. Patr. Ecc. Lat. XI), Leipzig, 1844, trans. in the Dept. of History, University of Pennsylvania, *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European history*, vol. IV, pp. 28–30 (accessible online: <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/edict-milan.asp>> [accessed on 1 April 2014]).
- 34 Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*.
- 35 B. Weber-Dellacroce and W. Weber, "Dort, wo sich Gottes Volk Versammelt" – die Kirchenbauten Konstantinischer Zeit, in *Konstantin der Große*, ed. by A. Demandt, J. Engemann, exh. cat.: Rheinisches Landesmuseum Trier: *Herrscher des Römischen Imperiums; Bischöfliches Dom- und Diözesanmuseum Trier: Der Kaiser und die Christen; Stadtmuseum Simeonstift Trier: Tradition und Mythos*, Mainz, 2007, pp. 244–257.
- 36 The English translation reads:

In prophecy under this sign overcome	
In battle for the Lord, all signs bow down to the Cross	
Under which your forefathers were happily victorious under the	Cross,
which will bring certain victory to God,	
For this is what a pious army is like and through its piety it defeats	enemies
To the Lord on High the Trophy in gratitude.	

- 37 Help in identifying the buildings came from the view of Rome attributed to Michael Forensus from the year 1457, an illustration for Euclid's *Geometry*, Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 2224, f. 98', see J. Garms, *Vedute di Roma. Dal Medioevo all Ottocento*, Naples, 1995, Fig. 8, p. 25.
- 38 M. Borgatti, *Castel Sant'Angelo in Roma*, Istituto di Architettura Militare (Museo del Genio), Rome, 1986.
- 39 *Historia Romana*, Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms. 667, f. 76', see Garms, *Vedute di Roma*, Fig. 7, p. 1.
- 40 S. Świerż-Zaleski, 'Wróżebna tarcza Jana Sobieskiego' [The Prophetic Shield of John Sobieski], *Sprawozdania Komisji do Badania Historii Sztuki w Polsce*, vol. VIII (Cracow) 1912, p. 185.
- 41 I am thankful to Dr Krzysztof Krużel from the Print Cabinet of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cracow for pointing out this engraving. M. Grivela, *Beatrizet*, in *Saur Allgemeines Künstler Lexikon. Die Bildenden Künstler aller Zeiten und Völker*, vol. VIII, Munich–Leipzig, 1994, pp. 52–53.
- 42 S. Deswarte-Rosa, 'Les gravures des monuments antiques d'Antonio Salamanca à l'origine du "Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae"', *Annali di Architettura*, 1, 1989, pp. 47–62.
- 43 Borgatti, *Castel Sant'Angelo*, p. 373, Fig. 171.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 272, Fig. 101.
- 45 *Ibid.*, pp. 236–237.
- 46 J. Łepkowski, 'Wróżebna tarcza Sobieskiego' [The Prophetic Shield of Sobieski], *Czas*, 1882, no. 68; M. Sokołowski, 'Muzeum XX. Czartoryskich w Krakowie' [The Princes Czartoryski Museum in Cracow], *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, 1892, pp. 16–17; S. Świerż-Zaleski, 'Wróżebna tarcza Jana Sobieskiego', pp. 183–192, Fig. 120, p. 185; S. Komornicki, 'Muzeum XX. Czartoryskich w Krakowie. Wybór cenniejszych zabytków sztuki od starożytności po wiek XIX' [The Princes Czartoryski Museum in Cracow. A Selection of the Most Splendid Art Objects from Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century], *Muzea Polskie*, 1929, no. 254; T. Kusion, 'Tarcza Wróżebna Jana III Sobieskiego' [The Prophetic Shield of John III Sobieski], in *Amor Polonus*, exh. cat. The Palace Museum in Wilanów, April–August 2010, ed. by T. Grzybkowska and Z. Żygulski, Jr., Wilanów, 2010, vol. I, pp. 50–51.
- 47 Świerż-Zaleski, 'Wróżebna tarcza Jana Sobieskiego', p. 190.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 189.
- 49 After the year 1945 the surface was graphitized improperly, hence the dark hue of the metal. I saw the shield for the first time in 1949, after it had already been subject to conservation.
- 50 W. Boeheim, 'Nürnberger Waffenschmiede und ihre Werke in den kaiserlichen und in anderen Sammlungen', *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses*, vol. XVI, 1895, pp. 364–399; *idem*, *Handbuch der Waffenkunde*, Leipzig, 1890.
- 51 K. Lange, *Peter Flötner, ein Bahnbrecher der deutschen Renaissance*, Berlin, 1897.
- 52 B. Thomas and O. Gamber, 'L'arte milanese dell' armatura', in *Storia di Milano*, Milan, 1958, p. 794.
- 53 Z. Żygulski, Jr, 'Pamiętki wawelskie w zbiorach puławskich' [Wawel Mementoes in the Puławy Collection], *Studia do dziejów Wawelu*, 1960, p. 406; *idem*, 'Italian Arms. Armour and Insignia in Poland', *Armi Antiche*, 1961, p. 21; *idem*, 'Princess Isabel and the Czartoryski Museum', *Connoisseur*, 1973, p. 18; *idem*, *Dzieje zbiorów...*, p. 54.
- 54 B. Dean, 'A gift of two embossed sixteenth-century round shields', *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, vol. XX, no. 12, New York, 1925, p. 290.
- 55 Z. Żygulski, Jr, 'Tarcza renesansowa w zbiorach Czartoryskich (przyczynek do dziejów kolekcjonerstwa polskiego)' [The Renaissance Shield in the Czartoryski Collection (a Contribution to Events in Polish Collections)], *Rozprawy i Sprawozdania Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie*, 1954, pp. 149–172.
- 56 Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. by W. Cowper, ed. by R. Southey, New York, 1860, lines 714–718, book XVII, p. 443 [accessible online: <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16452/16452-h/16452-h.htm>> (accessed on 1 April 2014)].
- 57 *Listy Jana Franciszka Commendoniego do Karola Borromeusza* [The Letters of Giovanni Francesco Commendone to Charles Borromeo], published by M. Malinowski, vol. I–II, Vilnius 1851, *passim*.
- 58 Sokołowski, 'Muzeum XX. Czartoryskich w Krakowie'.