

SIGNS OF TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY
IN THE LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY
PUBLIC CELEBRATIONS

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The article discusses how the tradition of celebrations, which began developing in the Middle Ages and got afoot in the Baroque period, was changing along with the transformations of society. Second half of the eighteenth century was a period of political, social and cultural changes in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The calendar of public celebrations, held in commemoration of the most important events of the nation, demonstrated what was important to political and social life.

The décor of the first festival dedicated to Stanislaw August was based on a canon of Baroque symbolism and imagery of a traditional ruler. Key ideas of the decorations were expressed through the emblems and inscriptions in Latin and personification of virtues of the King. These virtues were reflecting a concept of the Christian-King, shaped still in the sixteenth century and common to entire Europe. To the very last decade of that century, such public celebrations were held in the Baroque style, seeking to overwhelm viewers with grandeur and astonish with visual effects, designed to represent the powers that be. Such celebrations were usually held by the key figures of the nation's political life. Among traditional centres of power of the late eighteenth century – the Supreme Tribunal, officers of central government, bishops – the Russian military officers were also active in public life, using such festivals as propaganda tools.

Alongside the festivals designed to serve as apologia for the government, the late eighteenth century also gave birth to celebrations that were mainly organized by the educational institutions. One of such new type public festivals, celebrated at schools and arranged by the Commission of National Education, was in commemoration of the Battle of Vienna, and used as a tool for patriotic education of the youth.

During such celebrations the role of verbal communication – speeches and sermons – was increasing. A new image of the King was promoted: the portrait of the Patriot-King, working on behalf of the homeland and its citizens. Symbols of the new era were most clearly demonstrated in the course of celebrations dedicated to adoption of the May 3rd Constitution and the Free Royal Cities Act. These festivals were manifesting ideas of the “citizens’ nation”, inclusive of all estates of the Republic. The central figure of these celebrations was still the King, depicted as the Father of the Nation and Creator of the Constitution.

Last of such festivals was held during the uprising of Tadeusz Kościuszko in effort to consolidate the nation through the use of the image of warrior-citizen, defending homeland and freedom.

Keywords: celebrations, occasional writing, ruler, Stanisław August Poniatowski, the May 3rd Constitution.