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Maria Kazimiera (1641 – 1716): Networks of Architectural Patronage and Collecting

The PALAMUSTO project aims to “investigate the court residence or palace as a European phenomenon of cultural exchange and interaction. The objective is the creation of a new history of the court residence, which will define its relevance as cultural heritage for present-day Europe.” This new history will be established from the research of ten PhD candidates in material culture and architecture. The ten early-stage researchers will each focus on a different aspect of the court residence, mapping movable objects and representational spaces and combining their results in a GIS based platform.

My topic within the project aims to understand the origin of noble and royal collections of art and rare objects and their impact on residential architecture in the early modern period and is conducted at the University of Warsaw.

On 2 February 1676 Jan Sobieski (1629 - 1696) and his wife of French descent Maria Kazimiera (1641 - 1716) were crowned King and Queen in Wawel Cathedral in Kraków. While King Jan III Sobieski was considered a national war hero, his wife - Maria Kazimiera - was judged less favourably. This portrayal continued in the centuries that followed and caused her actions to be negatively appraised or ignored entirely. As a result, there is still little known about Maria Kazimiera’s husbandry, patronage and material culture. This is where my research can make a contribution.

In response to the criticism in political writings, the couple preferred to create their desired image through art, luxury objects and architecture. But what objects were important for her and her family and why, how did their collections evolve, how and where were objects displayed, what mechanisms of power were at play in their decision making?

Drawing on Actor-Network-Theory, my research takes Maria Kazimiera as point of departure in investigating royal and noble identity-building through collecting and architectural patronage. By mapping her (transnational) networks, I expect to learn more about attitudes to luxury objects and display in the late 17th and early 18th century. Moreover, a critical investigation of behaviours regarding these objects and architecture can uncover constructions of gender and class. Finally, the use of digital humanities, among which GIS, will help visualize these networks of cultural exchange, crossing the borders of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth. This data will also contribute to the digital platform of PALAMUSTO.

Maria Kazimiera is not necessary known as a collector or patron per se, yet I expect actions from her and her networks can reveal more about material culture, the complexities of 'collecting', and their impact on court residences.