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The Polish-Lithuanian Union: a prime example for European state integration?

During a time of intense debates on the question of integration within the European Union, when objections to placing limitations on the sovereignty of nation-states are being heard more often, it is often overlooked that in the Middle Ages and the modern era unions of monarchical states (personal, dynastic, and even the so-called real) were the most common method used for integrating different state organisms. Even if these unions were dissolved after a period of time, many of the state-unions were renewed, albeit sometimes just in a new configuration or with a new political system. Examples for the longest standing transformation process of supranational alliances were the personal unions between the Scandinavian states: The Kalmar Union between Denmark, Norway and Sweden (1397–1523); Denmark-Norway (1523–1814); and lastly the Swedish-Norwegian Union (1814–1905). Another example was the Union of Castile and Aragon (the latter a result of the personal union between the allied Kingdoms of Valencia and Catalonia), which came into being on the cusp between the 15th and 16th centuries, and yet still finds resonance today in the debate on Catalanian independence.

“Certain parallels can be found in the four hundred year-long evolutionary developments of the unions – from personal, to real or constitutional unions respectively – between the Polish Crown and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of England and Scotland. The succession of Polish-Lithuanian unions (beginning in 1385 with the Act of Kréva) proved to be almost as durable as their English-Scottish counterparts (starting in 1603 with the Union of the Crowns) – with the exception, that the latter still exists in modified form today (but for how much longer?). Despite retaining certain designated characteristics, it is evident that Lithuania after the real union (from 1596 until 1791), and Scotland after the parliamentary union (from 1707 until 1999) were the weaker partners in their respective union-configurations. The resulting federal system structures in both renaissance-era *Rzeczpospolita* and Great Britain began to incrementally lose their structural complexity with time, whereas their unifying tendencies increased – even if the implementation of these changes wasn’t always so simple.”¹.

By offering readers the module “Polish-Lithuanian Unions”, we hope that the primary sources, monographic essays, and iconographic materials “won’t just” aid in teaching the history of the *Rzeczpospolita* Poland-Lithuania until the 18th century, but that they will assist in providing a broad-based comparative perspective of European history in the Early Modern era. Possible comparative examples of similar processes could be the emergence of the union in Great Britain, or the relations between the territorial states in the Holy Roman Empire or the Habsburg Monarchy. At the same time, the module “Polish-Lithuanian Unions” contains academic essays addressing the significance which the union between Polish Crown and the Grand Duchy of Lithuanian has in the respective commemorative-cultures of the modern successor states of the *Rzeczpospolita* – Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. *Last but not least*, the historic context which the collected materials provide will aid in helping better understanding contemporary European processes, such as the devolution of Scotland or the independence referendums in Scotland and Catalonia.

Translated from German by Jesse Lillefeld

¹ Refer to the German version of this text: I. Kałolewski, *Von der Beständigkeit des Topos der (re-)born statehood in der politischen Kultur Europas*.