

Abstract

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War, Arms, and Armour in the Representative Strategies of Bohemian and Moravian Aristocracy, 1550-1750

dissertation thesis, 2012

In Czech historical writing, history of aristocracy has been on a rise ever since the turbulent days of 1990s. It has always been characterized by application of various methods borrowed from different other fields, such as cultural or social history as well as historical anthropology, and its primary goal was to understand the mentality of the specific social class that is early modern aristocracy. Throughout time, several approaches emerged from the initial probing: first, study of political culture and power; second, study of aristocratic courts and residences; and, third, study of aristocratic family and its life-cycle. All this research was originally focused on 16th century aristocracy; however, it also successfully tackles topics of late 17th and 18th century in recent years as well. Study of aristocratic residences especially has quite a long tradition in Czech historiography, following the lines of socially interpreted art history. On the other hand, as military history is a rather neglected part of writing on the early modern era, this problem transpires into the connection of warfare and aristocracy in 16th to 18th century. For example, not even one analysis has been written on careers of noblemen in the armies of Habsburg monarchy.

This study acknowledges its inspiration in the so-called “new military history” as practiced in western historical writing on warfare since late 1970s. It mainly looks to its cultural and social approach to the topic of war and follows two primary goals. First, it wants to give a higher profile the influential concept of so-called “military revolution”, which interprets (in various ways) the dynamics of continuity and change in early modern warfare and tries to create a strong link with the changes in contemporary social structure. Repeatedly discussed ever since it appeared in 1950s, this theory has been completely neglected in Czech historical writing on early modern era and so, one of the things this text would like to achieve, is to put the “military revolution” into the proverbial “spotlight”.

As is evident from the chapter 2 (on military revolution), the real military importance of aristocracy underwent a steady decline during the early modern era, as the state was gradually usurping the monopoly on warfare and non-aristocratic infantry masses were superseding the aristocratic heavy cavalry on the battlefield. And it is here where the second main goal of this study comes forward – the text thoroughly analyses the representative strategies used by the early modern noblemen to defend their warrior social status in spite of their ever-diminishing role in the contemporary military reality. I analyze not only those aristocrats who actively sought a career in the army – attention is given to the aristocracy as a whole, basic criterion being the family had to have a seat of residence in Bohemia or Moravia. The core of my thesis (chapters 4 and 5) follow precisely these residences, especially specific parts of their interiors. While earlier (chapter 3) I analyze aristocratic armories and changes in their function as well as in the understanding of their purpose in the minds of their owners, chapter 5 represents an interpretation of artistic

decoration of the residences. Its purpose is to define how much the iconography reflected the warrior ethos of the class, usually through presentation of family ancestors' heroic deeds.

The presented research clearly proves that even those aristocrats who did not seek military career and did not think of it as a primary venue of heroic performance, considered the military part of their heritage to be of paramount importance, as it has been proven that beyond doubt that they follow this logic in their representative and symbolic strategies. Not only in the furnishings and interior design of their family residences (mainly armories), but also in the iconographic concepts – in all these areas they consciously build the self-image of themselves as well as their families in the context of widely understood knightly and military virtues.

The right (and duty) to fight in war was the key fact that gave the aristocracy its social privileges during the early Middle Ages. Therefore, the concept of warrior has always been a key and long-standing part of aristocratic image. What this study proved is that, despite radically changed military and social circumstances and absence of any real military career, heroic ethos remained a specific and very important part of building one's aristocratic prestige and public image well into the 18th century. And, what is important to note, this was usually true without any regard for personal preferences or real-life career of any given nobleman – the only thing that mattered in these terms was his noble status, and with it his belonging to the traditional “warrior class”.

Keywords

aristocracy – nobility – warfare – armories – iconography – military revolution – 1550-1750