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THE IDEOLOGICAL PROGRAMME  
OF THE SEYM CHAMBERS IN THE ROYAL CASTLE  
IN WARSAW DURING THE REIGN  
OF JOHN III SOBIESKI

The Sejm /parliamentary/ chambers were probably redecorated in c. 1681, and the whole project was finished before 1683, when J. F. Regnard admired the completed Senators' Chamber.

The Chamber of Deputies, where the deputies elected by the gentry debated, was rectangular in shape, with regular divisions in the form of window and door recesses. At the shorter northern wall there were the Speaker's chair and a platform for the commission writing down new statutes. The deputies benches were arranged in a semi-circle around the other three walls. The walls were decorated with stucco panoplies composed of various, ancient and contemporary Polish weapons. These were placed in rectangular, vertical panels between the window and door recesses. The wall above the Speaker's chair was adorned with an outstretched stucco drapery held at the top by an eagle and garlanded at the sides with bunches of palm and oak leaves. In addition the overdoors had two maps, of the Polish Kingdom and of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

The Senators Chamber /Fig. 6/, where the Senate held sessions in the presence of the king, had an elongated rectangular shape and regular divisions too. The royal throne was placed by the shorter northern wall opposite the entrance, while the senators' chairs were arranged in two rows the length of the room. The main element of the new decoration was an imposing stucco canopy over the throne. Its back was a patterned drapery with a Polish eagle with outstretched wings on it, whose breast bore the Janina coat-of-arms of the Sobieski family. The upper part of the canopy was adorned with crenated pelmet. On both sides of the throne the doors leading to the royal chambers were decorated on top with the emblems of Poland and Lithuania in cartouches under a royal crown and a grand ducal mitre, the whole

surrounded by plant ornaments and supported by genii blowing on trombones. The motif of the Janina coat-of-arms also appeared on the breast of the Polish eagle and as a shield held by the rider in the Lithuanian emblem in the overdoors. Below the ceiling the room was encircled with garlands of leaves, fruit and flowers. The longer walls remained plain and carried tapestries purchased for this chamber in 1685 and 1690. It is possible that stuccowork also adorned the shorter southern wall with the main entrance and the queen's box, though no information about it has come down to us.

Perhaps a similar décor was provided for the Ante-chamber before the Chamber of Deputies, the Ante-chamber and Vestibule before the Senators' Chamber, the gallery connecting the two parliamentary rooms, and the chapel, which all formed the parliamentary section of the Castle.

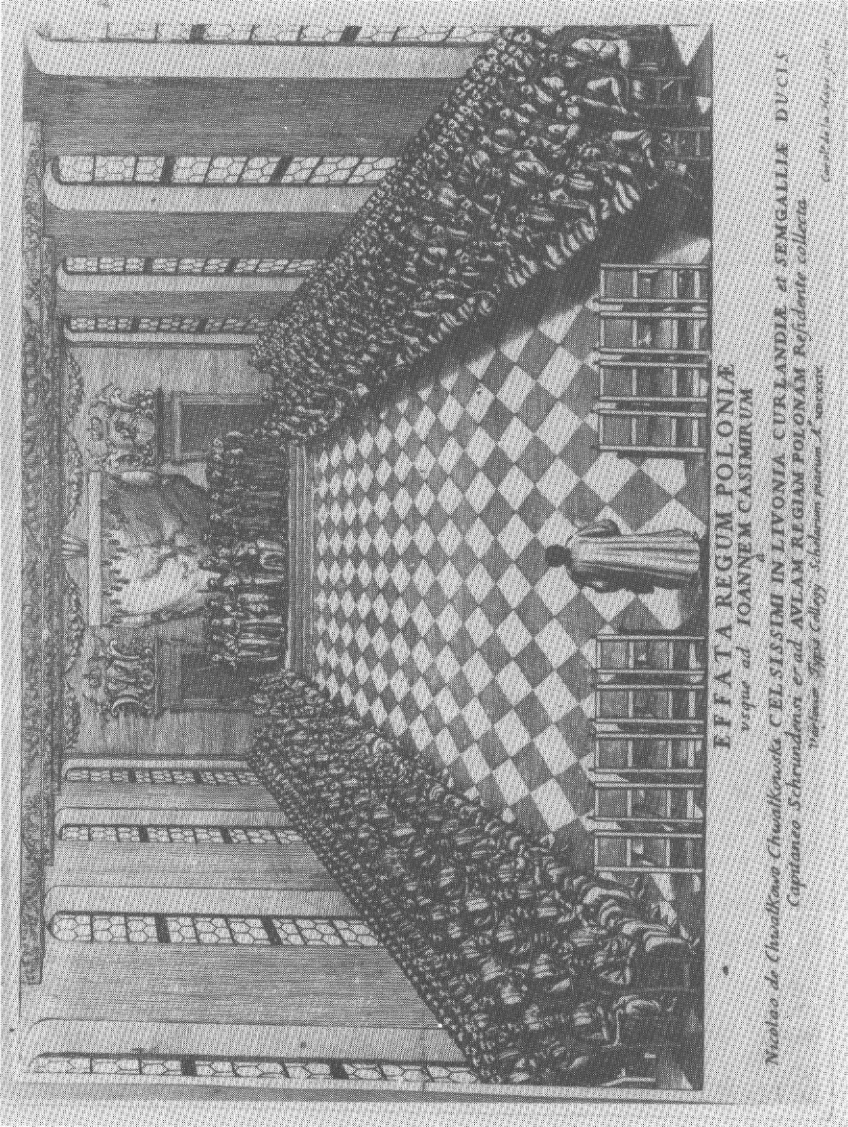
The forms applied in the decoration of the parliamentary rooms have many analogies in Baroque art, both in Warsaw and in the leading contemporary artistic centres, that is Rome and Paris. Bernini's famous portal in the Vatican's Sala Ducale dating from c. 1656, adorned with a stucco drapery, was often imitated, for example in the Bielińskis' mansion in Stary Otwock near Warsaw. Draperies also appeared as a backdrop in a number of sepulchral monuments, e.g. of King John Casimir in the church of St. Germain des Prés in Paris. Panoplies or war trophies were an equally popular decorative motif. In our case of special note should be the panoplies sculpted before 1570 by A. Vittorio in the Palladian villa of Barbaro-Velpi in Veneto, since stucco workers active in Warsaw came mostly from northern Italy. The Warsaw panoplies were also influenced by the French art of Louis XIV's epoch, the decoration of the Salon de la Paix in Versailles and the interiors of the Chateau d'Issy, known from Mariett's prints. However these examples provided merely formal inspiration since in the parliamentary rooms these motifs acquired a different, purely Polish ideological significance.

The decoration of the Deputies' and Senators' Chambers had its sources in contemporary historiosophical views according to which, for example, the Polish gentry were descended from the ancient Romans, the proof of which was allegedly the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the sole heir to the political system of the Roman republic. Hence the tendency to revert to antiquated

forms and ideas, also in the decoration of the parliamentary rooms. The panoplies adorning the Chamber of Deputies symbolized ancient war trophies, captured weapons displayed in the camp on stakes driven into the ground, or tropaeum. The drapery over the Speaker's chair represented the ancient Roman mantle, the padulamentum, against the background of which Roman generals had reviewed processions of captive enemies. The eagle holding the paludamentum personified authority and power, while the palm, laurel and oak leaves were symbols of honour and fortitude. Thus the Chamber of Deputies turned into an ancient military camp ready for what was referred to as a minor triumph. Here representatives of the gentry, calling themselves the knights' estate, sat in session continuing ancient virtues in the Polish Kingdom and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

A development of this idea was the decoration in the Chamber of Senators. The back of the canopy over the throne was a kind of patterned paludamentum to which the commander-in-chief and the sovereign ruler was entitled, while the Polish eagle with the Janina coat-of-arms of the Sobieski family personified the Polish king. The emblems of Poland and Lithuania in the overdoors signified two countries in which he ruled and which were joined together in one Commonwealth of the Two Nations. We do not know what the tapestries on the walls represented, perhaps war trophies again?

This décor was destroyed in the early 18th century, and therefore we have no knowledge of its real artistic merits. One thing is certain, though: that it recalled the decoration of the Wilanów palace. The paludamentum over the royal throne perhaps recalled the patterned draperies with an image of Sibyl, while the emblems of Poland and Lithuania might be similar to those on the garden front of the palace. The war trophies in the Chamber of Deputies, the measurements of which are known to us, seem to have had an almost identical form to those preserved on the Wilanów gate. These similarities may indicate that the stuccowork in the parliamentary rooms in the Castle was produced by the same artists who were employed at Wilanów.



6. 'Senator's Chamber' of the King's Castle of Warsaw. Engraving by K. de la Haye, 1694