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## The Duels of Monarchs: the Issue of Ritual Communication from Antiquity to the Present Day

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*Abstract:* The paper seeks to explain the significance of the phenomenon, which were the duels of monarchs. They appear to be best understood if analyzed in the context of ritual communication. Challenges to monarchs to fight a duel, although none actually took place, were widespread gestures from antiquity to the modern times. They are known from many documented, literary (*Iliad*) and iconographic sources and also from chronicles. It appears, however, that historians have not so far devoted proper attention to them and failed to correctly interpret this problem and explain it adequately. The present study is an attempt to look at the subject from a new angle.

*Key words:* duel – monarchs – ritual communication

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There is no authority that would not use ritual communication: that is what Gerd Althoff writes in his excellent book *Die Macht der Rituale*.<sup>1</sup> It is to these issues, one of the problems of ritual communication, that I would like to devote the present paper. I place my observations in this context and adopt the book of the German medievalist as the starting point. However, I go far beyond the area of his interest both in terms of chronology and subject. G. Althoff argues that ritual communication can be spoken of as late as in the Carolingian period although some manifestations of it are discernible already in the Merovingian times. He focused, however, on rituals in the exercise of power and in the feudal regime as part of the program of long-term political power. Military rituals remain outside his field of observation. In contrast, I assume that duels that would decide the fates of whole peoples belong to ritual communication. They are a constant element in human history from antiquity until the 21<sup>st</sup> century although their forms changed throughout the centuries.

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1 Gerd ALTHOFF, *Potęga rytuału: symbolika władzy w średniowieczu*, Warszawa 2011, p. 32.

This phenomenon can be at least partly described using one of Althoff's definitions, which says that so-called rituals of politics are understood as performance acts, which, however, are not unreflective but precisely planned and introduced on stage by the director in order to create a specific image or to give some news.<sup>2</sup> Even if this refers to the present-day understanding of politics, it does not change the fact that it is also a part of historical phenomena that are sufficiently complicated not to be confined by one definition. And we will return to the present day at the end of the text.

A special study on ritual communication was authored by the American communication scholar, Eric W. Rothenbuhler. He defines the phenomenon saying that participants in the ritual do something symbolically, use symbols to achieve social goals. "*Ritual is the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life.*"<sup>3</sup> It is also useful for my objectives and correctly describes the phenomenon in question.

Politics is controlled by the monarch who is first of all a symbol. In the *tableau* of authority the physical person who is its bearer is not important. The most significant issue is what this person symbolizes, what symbolic load he carries with him. It is not before a specific man, that the subjects kneel, but before the idea of the King. The person is only a visible embodiment of the Idea. Royal power is sacred, it comes from gods.

The ruler is *ex officio* bathed in sacredness. He is the bearer of dignity, sacredness, the Second Body not because of his individual virtues and merits as a mortal but because of the dignity that he derives from his royal descent or from being anointed.

Two regal incarnations can thus be spoken of: the physical body (the king) and the symbolic, mystical body (the King). One is imperfect and mortal, the other is not subject to ordinary physical limitations, does not know death or illness, it is eternal and infallible. The king lives in two dimensions: earthly and supernatural. The eternity of the King is associated with his immaterial and immortal Body; only the natural body is material and mortal. The king therefore never dies, ensuring the continuity of power over his state.<sup>4</sup> In contemporary states this role passes onto the presidents of republics or constitutional monarchs.

And finally, the duel is an armed fight of two contestants who want to show in this way not only their superiority over the adversary but also (or perhaps first of all) to prove that

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2 *Ibidem*, p. 13. For more on the subject see Philippe BUC, *Pułapki rytuału: między wczesnośredniowiecznymi tekstami a teorią nauk społecznych*, Warszawa 2011.

3 Eric W. ROTHENBUHLER, *Komunikacja rytualna: od rozmowy codziennej do ceremonii medialnej*, Kraków 2003, pp. 44–45.

4 Ernest H. KANTOROWICZ, *Dwa Ciała Króla: studium ze średniowiecznej teologii politycznej*, Warszawa 2007; Jean-Paul ROUX, *Król: mity i symbole*, Warszawa 1998; Jacques Le GOFF, *Święty Ludwik*, Warszawa 2001, p. 30.

their causes are just and they are favored by the superior powers, the gods, Providence. Power equals justice. In this area *duellum* is identical with *ordalium*: “*trials by ordeal (or judgments of God) also served to settle legal questions; they were resorted to in political matters. In 1033 in a dispute between the Lutici and the Saxons, Conrad II ordered a duel at the request of both parties*”.<sup>5</sup>

The combination of these elements – communication acts, the sanctified person of the monarch and the duel together with the *pars pro toto* principle, whose goal was to avoid bloodshed and casualties during a battle – is the object of my interest. The study is devoted to one conception of solving international conflicts, to use the present-day terms. In view of the above-cited findings by G. Althoff and E. W. Rothenbuhler, there is no doubt that we are dealing here with ritual communication within the State understood as a nexus of symbolic relationships.

Some methodological questions need to be specified. This study will not discuss such phenomena as the knightly ethos, honor or ethics,<sup>6</sup> although without the knowledge of these it would be difficult to explain the evolution of the phenomenon of rulers fighting a duel on behalf of their armies and subjects. In pagan antiquity and in the barbarian world, like in the early Christian Middle Ages, i.e. where the concept of political theology had not yet developed, it did not really matter who took part in the duel on behalf of the whole army. It was only the formulation of the concept described by Ernst H. Kantorowicz, the sacralization of political power, that caused this ritual gesture to be included in the theater of power. The following examples prove that there is such a correlation.

I am not interested in knights' tournaments, nor am I going to examine the king's tasks and responsibilities, but it needs to be mentioned, that one of the main duties was to secure peace for his subjects. Historical sources constantly speak of this: ancient literature, mirrors of monarchs; political theorists also emphasize this aspect. In practice, it was an extremely difficult if not impossible task to accomplish. One of the ways of striving to achieve this ideal was the duels in question.

The present paper can only signal the problem rather than describe it in-depth although I am sure that some brevity does not weaken its thesis. It appears that it is important to draw attention to the issues in question, formulate the research question, and give the problems the right dimension by presenting them in terms of social communication.

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5 Jan SZYMCZAK, *Pojedyunki i harce, turnieje i gonitwy. Walki o życie, cześć, sławę i pieniądze w Polsce Piastów i Jagiellonów*, Warszawa 2008, p. 18.

6 Craig TAYLOR, *Chivalry and the Ideals of Knighthood in France during the Hundred Years War*, Cambridge 2013; David J. B. TRIM (ed.), *The Chivalric Ethos and the Development of Military Professionalism*, Leiden 2008; Leszek S. ZAKRZEWSKI, *Ethos rycerski w dawnej i współczesnej wojnie*, Warszawa 2004.

That is why it is not necessary to multiply exemplifications because it is not the issue. I have used a limited source base without in-depth research in unpublished manuscripts (works of ancient writers, medieval chronicles) and iconographic sources. I believe that we do not have to make a complete catalog of relevant citations in this case although it is worth a separate, extensive monographic study. The collected material is entirely sufficient to present and justify my main assumption. I would also like to stress that all the known sources basically repeat all the time the same arguments regarding the advisability and justification for fighting duels of this type (see below). The most important is the finding that such calls to duels are often encountered both in ancient and medieval history and literature.<sup>7</sup>

The duels of rulers (*principes*) as a separate problem have not received enough attention in modern historiography. They are mentioned in all kinds of studies (histories of wars, biographies); no one, however, has sought to distinguish this phenomenon and to examine it thoroughly. Furthermore, historians who referred to it in some ways were not able to appreciate it and wrongly interpreted the problem. This was so, because they viewed these duels only as some minor facts from the past (an element of the battle or of the hero's biography), without their social and communicative context, and not worthy of further interest. It should be understood, nevertheless, that calls on the kings to fight in person cannot be just a minor fact of little value to historians. I will discuss it further in the text.<sup>8</sup>

The possibility of deciding the outcome of war by a fight between two fighters representing both sides of the conflict was known already in antiquity. One of the best-known biblical motifs is the fight between David and Goliath, who challenged the Israelites with the words, "If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants. But if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us" (1 Sm 17, 9).

A similar theme is present in Titus Livy in the story about the duel between the Horatiuses and Curatiuses: "Before they engaged, a compact is entered into between the

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7 More examples are given by Victor M. UDWIN, *Between Two Armies: The Place of the Duel in Epic Culture*, Leiden 1999. Regrettably, while listing ancient and medieval examples in the chronological order, the author does not distinguish between *duellum* and *ordalium*, the duel of knights and the duel of kings; he also fails to find the right context of these problems. Consequently, the value of his study in respect of understanding the problems in question does not go too far beyond a catalog list, even if it is the most complete and closest to the assumptions of my article.

8 The same problem in relation to one source, the work of Liudprand of Cremona, is discussed by Antoni T. GRABOWSKI, *The „duel“ between Henry I and Arnulf of Bavaria according to Liudprand of Cremona*, in: Roman Czaja – Eduard Mühle – Andrzej Radzimiński (edd.), *Konfliktbewältigung Und Friedensstiftung im Mittelalter*, Toruń 2012, p. 389. On duels as a method of the resolving of conflicts see Anika M. AUER, *Vorgeschalgen, vereinbart, verhindert – Gottesurteile als mittel der konfliktlösung* in the same volume, esp. pp. 181–185.

*Romans and Albans on these conditions, that the state whose champions should come off victorious in that combat, should rule the other state without further dispute.*<sup>9</sup>

The same practice was known in ancient Greece. As we learn from Homer's epic, the parties in the *Trojan War* agreed to settle the dispute through a duel between Paris and Menelaus. Hector presented this proposal in the following way:

*"Hear me, ye Trojans, and ye Greeks mail-arm'd,  
While I shall publish in your ears the words  
Of Alexander, author of our strife.  
Trojans, he bids, and Grecians on the field  
Their arms dispose; while he, the hosts between,  
With warlike Menelaus shall in fight  
Contend for Helen, and for all her wealth.  
Who strongest proves, and conquers, he, of her  
And hers possess'd, shall bear them safe away,  
And oaths of amity shall bind the rest"* (III, 100–109).<sup>10</sup>

None of those warriors was the commander-in-chief of the army or the ruler of a state; however, even duels between kings were nothing unusual at that time, to name for example a single combat between Pyrrhus and Pantauchos, or Antony challenging Caesar.<sup>11</sup> Several centuries later the Roman writer and historian Vegetius (late 4<sup>th</sup> century AD), the author of the famous manual of military craft expressed his belief that good commanders, if they have to risk their life in battle at all, have to do it after serious consideration.<sup>12</sup> We can surmise that it was not his private judgment only but that he presented in this way the *opinio communis* of the time. At this point it is enough to emphasize the idea (expressed in the foregoing quotations) of a duel between two warriors, which would decide the fates of whole tribes or nations.

The duel could replace a battle in the early Middle Ages, but it was still the duel of two warriors of lesser rank (for example during the war of the Alemans with the Vandals in Spain). Significantly, in that period the replacement of a battle in the field by a duel was justified by the fact that bloodshed was avoided in this way. Already in the case of Theodoric, the king of the Merovingian dynasty, at Quierzy-sur-Oise, the warriors said

9 Tytus LIWIUSZ, *Dzieje od założenia miasta Rzymu : wybór*, transl. and ed. W. Strzelecki, Wrocław 2004, p. 42.

10 *The Iliad of Homer*, transl. W. Cowper, New York 1960. See also Maria OSSOWSKA, *Ethos rycerski i jego odmiany*, Warszawa 1986, p. 27

11 Plutarch z CHERONEI, *Żywoty sławnych mężów (z żywotów równoległych)* trans. and ed. M. Brożek, t. 1, Wrocław 2004, p. 355; *ibidem*, t. 3, Wrocław 2006, p. 492, 503.

12 Flawiusz Wegecjusz RENATUS, *Zarys wojskowości ksiąg cztery*, wyd. A. M. Komornicka, Meander 28, 1973, nr. 10, pp. 229–230.

that it would be better if one fell than the whole army. In the later Middle Ages it was quite customary for kings or princes at war to set about staging a single combat between themselves and so to end their *“querelle”*. The preparations for it were made with great solemnity and in elaborate detail, the express motive always being *“pour eviter effusion de sang chrestien et la destruction du peuple”*.<sup>13</sup> *Duellum* became one of ways in which the Christian Middle Ages, using the theater of power, tried to humanize war and confine bloodshed, using ancient examples for that purpose (a similar thesis is advanced by Victor Morris Udwin in his book). As we can see, however, reflection of this type and similar solutions were also widely known in the pagan world.

The assumption that the prince and the commander are responsible for their people and army, and for their well-being, gave rise to the idea that an armed conflict should be settled by means of a duel between the commanders, watched by both armies. This idea was widespread in many European regions. According to the French historian, P. Contamine, instead of two armies the two commanders in conflict or the warriors appointed by them entered the lists. This practice, Contamine writes, also confirmed by Gregory of Tours,<sup>14</sup> was not confined to the Germanic world. In 971 a duel was planned between the Byzantine Emperor John Tzimiskes and the Russian Prince Sviatoslav: it would settle the dispute between them to avoid the massacre of their peoples. Similar plans, admittedly almost always given up before they were effected, are evidenced, according to Contamine, in the history of the West until the late Middle Ages.<sup>15</sup>

The knowledge of this custom is also confirmed for the Slavic world. According to a 14<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian chronicle, during the reign of Mieszko II a war broke out between the Poles and Pomeranians caused by the Pomeranians' refusal to pay a tribute to the Poles. However, when the armies faced each other, both sides agreed that it would be a better solution to settle the dispute through a duel. It turned out that the problem was to appoint contestants for this encounter, because both Mieszko II and his sons shied away from fight. The honor of the Polish side was reputedly saved by the Hungarian prince Bela, who said that *“although he considers himself nobler than this pagan, he would nevertheless fight for the benefit of the Polish kingdom and in honor of its prince. In the fight*

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13 Cf. Johan HUIZINGA, *Homo ludens: zabawa jako źródło kultury*, Warszawa 1985, p. 135.

14 *“And when they went out, armed to fight, and were ready for the battle, the king of Alemans said, ‘How long should this war afflict all the people? Please, let our and alien people be no longer killed in vain, but let two of ours stand forth to combat in coats of armor and let them fight with each other. The one whose warrior wins will get the land without fighting’. To that all the people consented so that the whole crowd of warriors would not die by sword.”* Grzegorz z TOURS, *Historie: historia Franków*, trans. K. Liman, T. Richter, introd., ed., commentary, D. A. Sikorski, Kraków 2002, pp. 95–96.

15 Philippe CONTAMINE, *Wojna w średniowieczu*, Warszawa 1999, pp. 269–270.

*Bela knocked the Pomeranian off the horse with a lance and stabbed him with a sword, whereupon the Pomeranian prince acknowledged his defeat and agreed to pay a tribute. In reciprocation, the Polish prince gave Bela his daughter as a wife.*<sup>16</sup>

This history, in an unchanged form, was also included in his Annals by Jan Długosz, from where it entered popular books and handbook. Observe that eventually the duel between the two rulers did not take place: instead, two “knights” fought against each other. While the duel between the princes was probably suggested, which is corroborated by the statement that Mieszko refused to fight, it was only one of the options: his sons did not want to fight, either. Therefore, it appears that the central idea of this compromise proposal was a single combat between “eminent” knights representing both sides, although they did not necessarily have to be commanders.

In the next century “according to the legend of the *Hełm* [helmet] coat of arms this crest was bestowed upon Bolesław III Wrymouth’s groom in 1111 as a reward for defeating the commander of the Old Prussians”.<sup>17</sup> As the two sources show, the prince could appoint a substitute who took part in the duel instead of him. In the foregoing case the knight fought against the pagan commander, yet it would certainly not have been possible for the king to appoint a knight as his substitute to fight a duel with another Christian king. In the case of Christian rulers the combatants entering the lists had to be of equal status.

Further the north-west direction, William the Conqueror “also avoids, for other reasons, those duels between the commanders – preceded by sending splendidly dressed envoys, who pass on the challenge shaking the staff and the right gauntlet of their lord – which are practiced by some rulers and are a rewarding subject of knightly epics”.<sup>18</sup> William was challenged to a duel by the Prince of Brittany through his envoy. The Prince of Normandy did not take up the challenge.<sup>19</sup>

In the text there is probably the only mention of the ceremonial associated with challenging a ruler to a duel by another ruler. Since nothing is practically known about this rite, it may not have been developed, and ordinary practice was enough to issue a challenge. The knightly etiquette at the height of and in the late Middle Ages was extremely elaborate in diverse aspects. Below is the description of preparations for the duel, given by Johan Huizinga. Taking this fact into account, it can be surmised that these

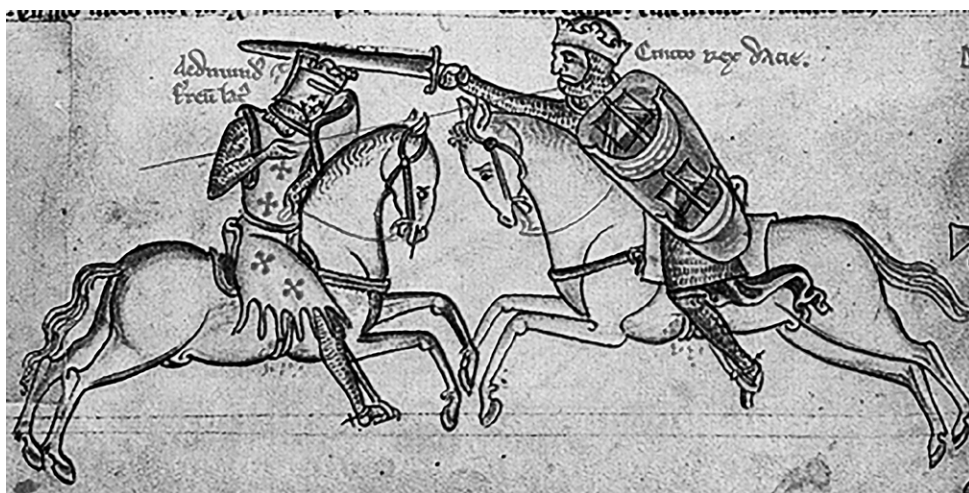
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16 Gerard LABUDA, *Mieszko II król Polski (1025–1034): czasy przelomu w dziejach państwa polskiego*, Kraków 1992, pp. 175–176; J. SZYMCZAK, *Pojedyunki i harce, turnieje i gonitwy*, p. 76; Jan DŁUGOSZ, *Jana Długosza Roczniki czyli Kroniki sławnego Królestwa Polskiego*, vol. 1, vol. 2, up to 1038, Warszawa 2009, p. 383.

17 Kasper NIESIECKI, *Herbarz polski*, vol. 4, Lipsk 1839, p. 345; J. SZYMCZAK, *Pojedyunki i harce, turnieje i gonitwy*, p. 23.

18 Paul ZUMTHOR, *Wilhelm Zdobywca*, Warszawa 1994, p. 147.

19 *Ibidem*, p. 213.



**Fig. 1:** Duel between the King of England, Edmund II Ironside and the Danish king Canute the Great (chronicle of Matthew Paris). (Zdroj: Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EdmundIronside\\_Canutethe\\_Dane1.jpg?uselang=pl](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EdmundIronside_Canutethe_Dane1.jpg?uselang=pl).)

challenges were actually treated exclusively as a communication act whose only goal was a symbolic performance. Its practical execution did not really matter (the action of authority is its drama itself), the challenge being issued in a routine way.

Observe the transformation of the image of the ruler throughout centuries. Although “*the brave attitude in battlefield and personal bravery*” are the features that still play an essential role in the late Middle Ages, interesting changes happen in this era. “*In the early and developed Middle Ages the monarch’s attitude in war set a good example not only as a commander but also as a combatant warrior. Furthermore, there are known examples of excessive bravado. The Austrian Rhymed Chronicle by Ottokar of Styria records that in the battle against Rudolf Habsburg, Premysl Ottokar II wanted to attack the enemy’s ranks single-handedly; it was only his retinue that stopped him, explaining that such conduct was not appropriate.*”

As Wojciech Iwańczak goes on “*a characteristic feature of the images of the king in European literature is that the monarch takes part in the battle less and less often. While initially we encounter descriptions of extraordinary accomplishments of the monarch who would decide the fates of wars single-handedly and kill crowds of enemies with their own hand, with time, in the developed and late Middle Ages, they moved from the front-line to the rear and focus their attention on commanding the troops.*”<sup>20</sup> This would show that after

20 Wojciech IWAŃCZAK, *Tropem rycerskiej przygody: wzorzec rycerski w piśmiennictwie czeskim XIV wieku*, Warszawa 1985, pp. 75–76.



the period of barbarian irresponsibility, there was a return to Vegetius' prudent advice. In contradiction to it, however, is the fact that as late as during the Hundred Years War the monarchs personally took part in battles, commanding the fight rather than remaining in the rearguard. There are numerous examples: Philip VI at Crécy in 1346; ten years later John II the Good was captured at Poitiers, while in 1441 Charles VII personally led the assault on Pontoise. On the English side "*Edward III and Henry V provide us with excellent examples of the martial qualities demonstrated by certain kings.*"<sup>21</sup> This finding is particularly important because it is only in the atmosphere of the cult of the ruler's personal bravery that his participation in duels can be discussed.

The duel was a special form of demonstrating bravery. It should be noted that in the consciousness of medieval people the war understood as an armed conflict between two countries was nothing but an extended duel, a battle differing from it only by the number of combatants. In view of such a conception, the one of the many existing, it was only natural to diminish the scale and reduce the battle between thousands of hundreds of warriors to the one-to-one *duellum*.

Wojciech Iwańczak devoted several paragraphs of his book to the duels of rulers:

*"In Bohemia and Moravia we already find it [duel] in the Life of St. Wenceslaus (probably of the 10<sup>th</sup> c.). Prince Wenceslaus defeats his, also princely, adversary. The episode was also included in later studies on the Life of St. Wenceslaus. We find the duel, for example, in the version prepared by Charles IV. When the two armies stood in front of one another, Wenceslaus suggested that in order to spare the blood of the warriors the two princes should fight against each other and the result of their duel would at the same time indicate the victorious side in the battle. The intervention of the Heavens for St. Wenceslaus prevented the fight between them, however.*

*In later periods, the situations of this type, also known from European sources – for example the duel, planned but not fought, between Richard II and Charles VI in 1386 – were also experienced by John of Luxembourg, whose knightly experiences were the richest among the Bohemian rulers. In 1332 Duke John of Brabant suggested to him – through the herald with a bare sword in hand – the day and specific place of the fight. However, the King had him waiting three days in the rain. Some other time, during the struggle of John of Luxembourg with Casimir the Great near Krakow, the plan of the duel between the kings had an even more original form. The reason for the proposal made by Casimir the Great is present already in the Life of St. Wenceslaus, for example. The duel of the kings would decide the victory of one of the sides and spare the lives of many people (...) In the last case the swords were not crossed because the already blind John of Luxembourg suggested that Casimir the Great should pluck out his eyes for equal chances in the duel, to which, as could be expected, the Polish king did not agree.*

*The difference between the literary and real perspective is confirmed in that in literature, which uses the material of ancient heroes, the expected duel between rulers eventually takes place. In the*

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21 Christopher ALLMAND, *Wojna stuletnia: konflikt i społeczeństwo*, Kraków 2012, p. 96.

*Old Czech prose narrative about Alexander the Great and in the edition of the Latin 14<sup>th</sup>-century Historia de proeliis there are two such cases, in both of them Alexander defeating his adversaries – also monarchs.*<sup>22</sup>

The introduction to Marc Bloch's book about magic-working kings starts with the description of how on 27 April 1340 Friar Francis of the Dominican Order, Bishop of Bisaccia in the Neapolitan province, chaplain of King Robert of Anjou and at that time the envoy of King of England Edward III, stood in front of the Venetian Doge. A dynastic dispute had just started between England and France, which would turn into the Hundred Years War. Friar Francis was assigned the task of securing Venetian support, and seeking the friendship of the Genoese through them. In the extant shorter version of his speech, he duly praised the peaceful intentions of the English king. King of England, sincerely wishing to avoid the massacre of many innocent Christians wrote (if Friar Francis is to be believed) to Philip VI of Valois, who called himself King of France, suggesting that he (Philip) choose one out of three proposals of fighting a great battle without war: either a duel between the two kings – a true trial by ordeal – or a battle between two groups, each six to eight Christians, or one of two other trials. Philip reputedly rejected those suggestions. According to Bloch, it is doubtful whether Edward III ever put forward such proposals; the trial by lions and by miracles should not be treated seriously, just as the invitation to a duel: a classical taunt of the time that started the war of monarchs. They after all knew how to preserve their lives and, as far back as memories went, they were never seen to fight an armed duel. We are therefore dealing here with usual diplomatic parlance or, as in this particular case, with a garrulous diplomat making wild suggestions.<sup>23</sup>

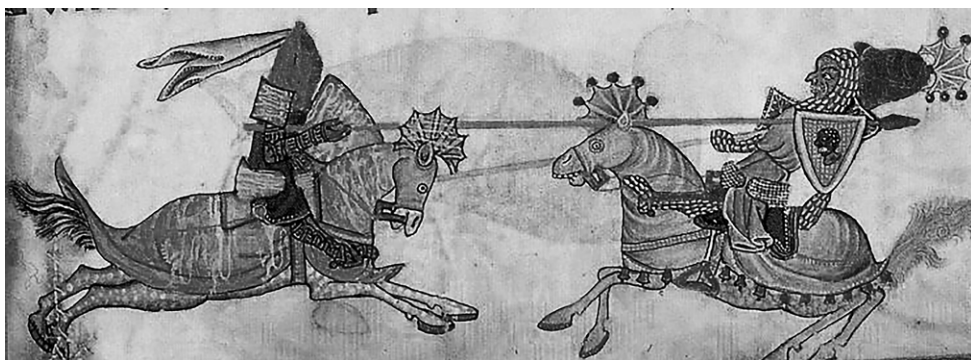
The next examples that could be named come from 1283, when the kings of Naples and Sicily, Charles of Anjou and Peter III of Aragon, were ready to decide political differences in a duel,<sup>24</sup> and from 1346, when, according to Wojciech Iwańczak, Philip VI suggested to Edward III that they decide the fates of war through the duel of kings. The King of England accepted the challenge but with a derisive comment that he would do so only after his armies reached Paris.<sup>25</sup>

22 W. IWAŃCZAK, *Tropem rycerskiej przygody*, 78–80.

23 Marc BLOCH, *Królowie Cudotwórcy: studium na temat nadprzyrodzonego charakteru przypisywanego władzy królewskiej zwłaszcza we Francji i Anglii*, Warszawa 1998, pp. 49–50.

24 E. H. KANTOROWICZ, *Dwa Ciała Króla*, p. 209.

25 Wojciech IWAŃCZAK, *Jan Luksemburski: dzieje burzliwego żywota i bohaterskiej śmierci króla Czech i hrabiego Luksemburga w 21 odśtonach*, Warszawa 2012, p. 288.



**Fig. 2:** The imaginary duel between Richard the Lionheart with Saladin (an English manuscript ca. 1340). (Zdroj: Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:RichardSaladin.jpg?uselang=pl>.)

According to Jan Długosz's account, in 1470 another Czech ruler, George of Podebrady, challenged the King of Hungary Matthias Corvinus to a duel, whose result would decide the war going on at the time. However, Matthias Corvinus declined the challenge.<sup>26</sup>

Still faithful to the medieval knightly ideals, Emperor Charles V, the last medieval emperor, pondered the question why send soldiers to kill one another because of rivalry of the monarchs? They themselves should directly and personally settle the contentious issues between themselves. True to his convictions, he therefore challenged Francis I to a duel. "Earlier, when the French monarch did not fulfill the provisions of the Treaty of Madrid, he summoned the French envoy and told him that he regarded his king as a nasty and despicable man." The same accusation was repeated later in Charles' letter of 18 March 1528 to the envoy: "The King, your lord, acted mean and despicably, not keeping the word that he gave me to conclude an agreement in Madrid, and should he try to deny this, I will personally repeat this to him."

Francis accepted the challenge:

*"and although he did so in the way not entirely appropriate for the knightly custom – remember that Charles V was the knight of the Order of Golden Fleece – the Emperor accepted the answer 'because of my wish to settle contentious matters in my own person, avoiding greater bloodshed' He notified his court in public, asking to be advised what best befitted his honor.*

*Charles chose the French border between Fuenterrabia and Hendaye as the place of the duel, specifying the time of forty days. However, when the Emperor's herald arrived at the French court, Francis vehemently interrupted him before the latter was able to present Charles V's proposal. Thus, the duel did not take place."<sup>27</sup>*

26 Jan DŁUGOSZ, *Roczniki czyli Kroniki sławnego Królestwa Polskiego*, vol. 12: 1462–1480, Warszawa 2009, p. 267; *Rozbiór krytyczny Annalium Poloniae Jana Długosza z lat 1445–1480*, vol. 2, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1965, pp. 266–267; J. SZYMCZAK, *Pojedyunki i harce, turnieje i gonitwy*, p. 78.

27 Manuel F. ÁLVAREZ, *Cesarz Karol V*, Warszawa 2003, pp. 113–114.

And finally, a longer passage from the great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's work, which should be presented at length. He asserts that a special form of knightly fiction used as political propaganda was the princely duel – always announced but never accomplished. As disputes between countries in the 15<sup>th</sup> century were still interpreted in terms of struggle between the feuding parties, as a personal *querelle*, what could therefore be more natural than the rulers jousting with each other; people still dreamt of that kind of jousting (Huizinga supposed) while chatting about politics on a train. Such a solution, which satisfied both the primitive sense of the law and knightly panache, was very common at the time. When we read about solemn preparations for princely duels, observes Huizinga, doubts arise whether all this was only beautiful games of conscious delusion, i.e. a manifestation of pursuit of beautiful life, or perhaps the princely contestants actually expected to fight each other. The historians of that era clearly treated the matter as seriously as the kings desirous of a duel. In Bordeaux in 1283, everything was ready for the duel between Charles of Anjou and Peter of Aragon. In 1383 Richard II of England told his uncle, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, to conduct peace negotiations with the king of France; the right way to do so would be for John to suggest a duel between the two kings, or Richard could fight together with his uncles and Charles with his relatives. Already at the beginning of his chronicle, Monstrelet devotes a lot of room to King Henry IV of England being challenged by Louis of Orleans. Humphrey of Gloucester was challenged to a duel in 1425 by Philip the Good; Philip was in fact the right man to adorn this great theme by means of all the resources of his wealth and by his love of splendor. The challenge clearly states the motive: to avoid the effusion of Christian blood and destruction of the people whom Philip sympathizes with, so that the dispute could be resolved by Philip himself without resorting to war: otherwise, many nobles, both in Humphrey's and Philip's armies, would miserably end their days. Everything was prepared for the fight: the expensive combat gear and magnificent robes that the prince would wear; tents, flags and banners, armors for the heralds and *poursuivants* were given finishing touches, everything was decorated with the coats of arms of the prince's countries – the flint and St. Andrew's Cross. Philip began training, both by restraint in eating and by applying himself to exercise. In his park in Hesdin, he practiced fencing every day under the supervision of experienced fencing masters. The bills show the cost of these preparations. As late as in 1460 in Lille there was still the valuable tent specially prepared for the occasion. But the duel never came off.

This did not prevent Philip from later challenging the Duke of Saxony in the dispute over Luxembourg while at the festivities in Lille, when Philip was almost sixty years old, his vow as a crusader was that he was eager to fight face to face with the Grand Turk if the latter so wished.

Huizinga writes that the idea was still alive in Italy at the height of the Renaissance. Francesco Gonzaga challenged Cesare Borgia to a duel; he wanted to free Italy from the terrible and hateful enemy with a sword and dagger. The mediation of the King of France, Louis XI, prevented the duel and the event ended with a moving reconciliation. Even Charles V twice offered to appease the dispute with Francis I through a personal duel. For the first time when, after returning from war captivity, Francis broke his word in the Emperor's view; and then in 1536. This series duly ends with the challenge sent by Prince Karl Ludwig of Palatinate in 1674: although not personally to Louis XIV but to Henri Turenne.<sup>28</sup>

No duel between rulers ever actually took place. But not because of cowardice, because the kings often fought armed in battles. Therefore, although *“the chronicles scrupulously recorded the challenges issued by sovereigns against one another, and described long preparations for duels in detail, it is difficult to assume that they really expected their kings to fight a duel. What mattered was the fact of challenge, which demonstrated and emphasized the knightly virtues of the monarch. The late 14<sup>th</sup> and the early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries in Western Europe was the time of constant preparations for the duels of monarchs. Only a few of them never challenged another sovereign or were never challenged by one.”*<sup>29</sup> Challenging an enemy prince was a ritual communication act aimed to ideologically emphasize the challenger's own reason, to convince others that he defended the right cause and had God on his side, and to show that the monarch cared for his people, his army, and was ready to defend them. However, as a ritual it did not necessarily have to involve actual, physical action. The above-cited historians probably did not understand this when they encountered the problems of princely duels in their studies and expressed their amazement at or irony towards these ritual gestures, dismissively placing them in the sphere of fiction. It is necessary to understand that they had a very specific meaning. The challenge issued by Casimir the Great against John of Luxembourg, which was treated by the Warsaw scholar as an anecdote only, played a very concrete communicative role. What Huizinga describes so vividly was not just an empty form without content; the problem is that the historians who paid attention to the problem failed to describe it adequately.

The rulers were (and still are) actors, one of whom tries to impose his will on the other, preserving the ritual form. The other, adopting his role, ritually accepts the challenge although it is a gesture mistakenly regarded easily as actually an empty threat (especially from the perspective of an external observer failing to understand the dynamics of the processes

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28 Johan HUIZINGA, *Jesień średniowiecza*, Warszawa 1992, pp. 123–125.

29 Dariusz PIWOWARCZYK, *Obyczaj rycerski w Polsce późnośredniowiecznej (XIV-XV wiek)*, Warszawa 1998, pp. 171–172.

taking place). When studying these problems we should realize that the drama of authority is its action.

The duel of commanders personally deciding the course of the war is a very colorful motif, introducing the element of emotional tension, and hence repeatedly utilized in literature. It was employed inter alia by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra in *Numancia* (this short story has none of the satire of *Don Quixote*). The Iberian inhabitants of that town were besieged by the Romans during the Punic Wars. First, the town defenders suggested honorary surrender to the enemies, and when the offer was not accepted, they suggested that the war be decided by a duel, which was also rejected.<sup>30</sup> A similar theme appeared in the early 13th century in *Parsifal* by Wolfram von Eschenbach, when King Clamide besieging Pelrapeir, having lost the duel with Parsifal, retreats.<sup>31</sup> In the *Song of the Nibelungs* several decades earlier (ca. 1200) Siegfried challenges Gunther, although the situation here was different. It was not about deciding the fates of the war but “only” about a knightly *duellum*, the stake being the kingdom (“if you are so bold as to fight a duel with me, fight with me for crown and life. I would gladly call this castle my own... everything I have shall be yours if you defeat me. In future, the whole country of the Nibelungs will obey you”).<sup>32</sup>

The aforementioned John of Luxembourg took part in the crusades against the pagan Old Prussians and Lithuanians. These adventures were immortalized in literary works. For example, in *Myreur des histors* the chronicler of Liège, Jean d’Outremeuse, gave an account of the preparations for the duel of the Czech king with the commander of the “Saracens”, Margalis, in front of the walls of the besieged Lithuanian fortress. Eventually, however, this duel did not take place as well.<sup>33</sup>

Less often such duels were shown in the fine arts. As an example, I would like to point to two miniatures in medieval manuscripts. One shows the duel between the King of England, Edmund II Ironside and the Danish king Canute the Great. The duel reputedly took place during the battle of Assandun (18 October 1016). The illustration comes from the chronicle of Matthew Paris (Fig. 1). The other is the imaginary duel between Richard the Lionheart with Saladin (an English manuscript ca. 1340, Fig. 2).

The dueling princes were the product of the Middle Ages with its knightly ethos and feudal order. And the idea also receded into the past with them. This motif still returns

30 The newest editions: Alfredo HERMENEGILDO, *La destrucción de Numancia*, Madrid 1994 (Clásicos Castalia, 207); Gaston GILABERT, *Tragedia de Numancia*, Nürnberg 2014. See also: Zofia SZMYDTOWA, *Cervantes*, Warszawa 1965, p. 57.

31 Wolfram von ESCHENBACH, *Werke*, hrsg. von K. Lachmann, Berlin 1891, p. 185: 25–28.

32 Karl TREUMUND, *Saga o Nibelungach*, transl. from German A. Sznaper, Gdańsk 2000, p. 18. See also: V. M. UDWIN, *Between Two Armies*, passim.

33 *Le myreur des histors*, chronique de Jean des Preis dit d’Outremeuse, publiée par S. Bormans, vol. 6, Bruxelles 1887, pp. 414–415. See also: W. IWAŃCZAK, *Jan Luksemburski*, p. 197.

in the modern period but only as its weak echo. Maria Ossowska, who investigated the changes in the knightly ethos, says that in the modern times the focus of the ideal shifts from armed rivalry between knights towards courtly models. Today's "duels of rulers" are admittedly fought in different forms, although just as brutal as they were in the past.

The text should close with a suitable ending. Ian Kershaw in his book *The Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* pointed out the theological dimension of totalitarian power.<sup>34</sup> In the Third Reich the Führer embodied the Idea, which was worshipped through him, the very Myth, attributed to him by the Nazi propaganda. Less important was the physical person of the leader. He thus also had two Bodies. Certainly, the origin and legitimation of power (royal power described by E. H. Kantorowicz, and Nazi power) were different; however, the tools of exercising power were, in a sense, similar. As it states the Introduction: "*sources of Hitler's immense popularity have to be sought (...) in those who adored him rather than in the leader himself*". I think, however, that the focus lay outside of both the Leader and the people who admired and accepted him. They needed the Idea, the Myth, and believed that Hitler embodied it.

Why do I mention this? It seems indisputable that the theater of ritual communication has survived with its unchanged core into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century (which is also demonstrated by E. W. Rothenbuhler's book). The symbolic ending of the war is the act of killing the enemy leader (which is also a well-known motif from antiquity, to mention for example Judith and Holofernes), although no one challenges him to a personal duel. But this was the purpose of the attempt on Hitler's life (or to be precise, on the Myth embodied by his physical person), and in recent years the hunt for Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, or Muammar Gaddafi. Johan Huizinga was indeed right because duels like those in the Middle Ages still take place in politics when the leaders of the ruling party and the opposition party fight against each other. These are not duels using lances and swords although they are just as brutal as the medieval ones. The ritual continues in a changed, modernized form (not for the first time). War, after all, is considered to be nothing but politics conducted by other means.

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34 Similar conclusions were arrived at by Norman COHN, *W pogoni za milenium: milenarystyczni buntownicy i mistyczni anarchiści średniowiecza*, Kraków 2007, pp. 263–266.

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## Resumé

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### Souboje panovníků: otázka rituální komunikace od starověku po současnost

Text se pokusí objasnit význam jevu, jakým byly souboje mezi panovníky. Zdá se, že nejlépe je mu možné porozumět v kontextu rituální komunikace. Výzvy k souboji panovníků, ačkoli se ve skutečnosti nikdy žádný neodehrál, byla gesta rozšířená od starověku až do doby novověku. Ve své pozměněné podobě je známe také z naší současnosti.

V politickém životě přetrvalo v jádru nezměněné divadlo rituální komunikace až do 20. a 21. století (jak o tom ostatně svědčí kniha E. W. Rothenbühlera). Symbolickým zakončením války je akt zavraždění nepřátelského vůdce (což je mimochodem motiv také známý od starověku, připomeňme Judit a Holoferna), i když už nikdo nevyzývá k osobnímu souboji. Ale tomuto cíli měl sloužit atentát na Hitlera (či přesněji řečeno: na mýtus ztělesněný jeho fyzickou osobou) a v posledních letech pátrání po Usámu bin Ládínovi, Saddámu Husajnovi nebo Muammaru Kaddáfim.

Motiv panovníků bojujících ve jménu svého lidu a vojska se objevoval ve všech historických obdobích v celé řadě pramenů dokumentárních, literárních (*Ilias*) a ikonografických, stejně jako v kronikách či životech panovníků.

Aby byl tento jev správně pochopen, mělo by být bádání zasazeno v širším kulturně-politickém kontextu. Musí se zohlednit kombinace několika faktorů: komunikační akty, rituál vlády, posvátná osoba panovníka (dvojí tělo krále), a také souboj spolu se zásadou *pars pro toto*, jehož cílem bylo vyhnout se krveprolití a obětím během bitvy. Zdá se, že doposud historici nevěnovali náležitou pozornost rituálním soubojům mezi panovníky a nepodařilo se jim správně problém interpretovat a náležitě ho vysvětlit. Pokus o nový pohled na tuto tematiku je předmětem předkládané studie.

Ze zřejmých důvodů je pramenná základna předkládané studie omezená, ale tato skutečnost v žádném případě neoslabuje argumentaci a hlavní tezi článku. Shromážděný materiál je naprosto dostačující k představení a zdůvodnění hlavního předpokladu. Je třeba také poznamenat, že ve všech známých zdrojích se po celou dobu opakuje tentýž argument o oprávněnosti a spravedlnosti konání tohoto typu soubojů.