chapter 1

Frameworks for Visual Cultures of Death in Poland-Lithuania

This warning about Death’s annihilation of earthly power, written by Klemens Bolesławiusz (c. 1625–1689) in his frequently-republished poem Przeraźliwe echo trąby ostatecznej (‘The Dreadful Echo of the Final Trumpet’), first published in Poznań in 1670, is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it is representative of a popular genre of vernacular eschatological texts, frequently accompanied by edifying illustrations, which enjoyed wide circulation in printed form during the existence of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Providing both a devotional and iconographical context for the creation of larger religious artworks discussed in this chapter, these publications followed in the footsteps of the earliest printed vernacular didactic literature to appear in Polish, such as Jan Karten’s treatise on the Four Last Things (death, the Last Judgement, heaven, and hell), published in Kraków in 1562. The authors of many texts of this type were Catholic preachers and members of the numerous religious orders active in Poland-Lithuania, who harnessed the power of the printing press to enhance their reputations as well as to reach a wider audience; Klemens Bolesławiusz, for example, was a Reformed Franciscan, while Jan Karten was a Carmelite friar.

1 'Biada, panowie, co poddanych macie/ Za psy i onych okrutnie ściskacie,/ Ach, w jakie sami niewoli będziecie/ Po tym tu świecie'. See Mrozowski, 2000, p. 110. For the full text, see Klemens Bolesławiusz, Przeraźliwe echo trąby ostatecznej, ed. Jacek Sokolski, Warsaw 2004. For Bolesławiusz (or Boleslavius), see also Karol Estreicher, Bibliografia polska, vol. xiii, Kraków 1894, pp. 241–243.

2 Jan Karten, O Czterech ostatecznych rzeczach, księgi czwory, Kraków 1562. See also Karol Estreicher, Bibliografia polska, vol. xix, Kraków 1903, p. 160; Mrozowski, 2000, p. 90.

3 For the Reformed Franciscans (the Reformati) in Poland-Lithuania and the Counter-Reformation, see Waldemar Kowalski, 'From the “Land of Diverse Sects” to National Religion:
The second reason that Bolesławiusz’s verses are pertinent to the present study is that they shed light on the strict hierarchical stratification within Polish-Lithuanian society, which played a crucial role in influencing the lay patrons who invested with particular vigour in commemorative practices. Home to one of early modern Europe’s largest noble classes relative to the size of the population – around nine percent by the mid-seventeenth century – the Commonwealth has sometimes been defined as a ‘Republic of Nobles’. Seeking to establish the frameworks that supported the emergence of pronounced visual cultures of death in Poland-Lithuania, this chapter begins by assessing the motivations of such key patronage groups, focusing on the powerful szlachta (usually translated as ‘nobility’, but sometimes divided into the sub-groups of magnates and gentry), as well as those wealthy burghers who aspired to emulate the nobility. It is the specific social structure of the Commonwealth, within which the elected monarch was primus inter pares in relation to the politically-engaged nobility, which helped foster the extensive uptake of distinctive visual cultures of death throughout its vast territories.

Moving on to consider further frameworks for the development of complex cultures of death in Poland-Lithuania, this chapter will investigate additional factors that encouraged the unprecedented production of memento mori artwork at this time. It will do this by outlining several contributors to this phenomenon, including the cultural impact of the Counter-Reformation in the Commonwealth and the development of the print trade in Central Europe. The potential implications of increased mortality as a result of warfare and plague will also be considered, raising questions about the ways in which

4 Paul Robert Magocsi identified several distinct estates (stany) that defined Polish society in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: the crown, the nobility, the clergy, the townspeople, the Jews and the peasants. Paul Robert Magocsi, A History of Ukraine, Toronto 1996, p. 140.
5 Ibid., p. 142. This statistic does not account for regional demographical variations, however. In the Kingdom of Poland’s recently-acquired Ukrainian territories, for example, the nobility only constituted two percent of the overall population. Timothy Snyder, The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999, New Haven and London 2003, p. 112.
7 Magnates (who constituted at most one percent of the szlachta estate in the mid-seventeenth century) enjoyed great wealth and often served as powerful statesmen. By contrast, the lowlier members of the szlachta (sometimes referred to as gentry) enjoyed the political privileges of their estate, but often had a far more modest lifestyle. Magocsi, 1996, p. 142.