

RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PAST? WAR BOOTY IN SWEDISH MUSEUM DISPLAYS

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The debate on museums' responsibility in the context of global problems has been ongoing for years, yielding different results. It was also tackled in the talks conducted on ICOM's forum, for example, when adopting the resolution on climate change (2016). Among the global topics that recur also those connected with 'collection decolonisation', display of war booty, and museums' responsibility in these respects can be named.¹ The question of war spoils has also been tackled in Poland, most commonly with respect to Poland's potential claims to Sweden for the objects looted in the mid-17th century.

The paper's main goal is to answer the question what narrative Swedish museums present with respect to the war booty and trophies that have ended up in their collections. Can their actions in this context be regarded as appropriate? Do museum curators have any *moral or legal responsibility to be accounted for* [...] *other people's actions*,² particularly as the looting in question took place over 360 years ago?

The paper has been divided into two parts. In the first one brief principles of war waging valid in the latter half of the 17th century are outlined, while the second discusses the means Swedish museum curators have worked out for communication on this fragment of the difficult heritage. In the last part, playing the role of a conclusion, I refer to the Polish museum experience with war booty and trophies.

The analysis covers the objects looted by Swedish troops from the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the 'Deluge', as well as war spoils and trophies which come from the pre-industrial era kept at selected Polish units. I will use the basic historical method for the narrative, i.e., description.

The context

International law in the shape that we know today is the result of agreements concluded after the end of WWII. In earlier periods, people based themselves on philosophers' and lawyers' writings. One of them being Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), a diplomat, adviser to Louis XIII, and later a representative of the Swedish Court of Queen Christina in Paris. His work *De iure belli ac pacis* placed him among *the fathers of international law*.³ In the three books, the author analyses means and tools for war waging, he introduces, among others, the concept of a just war, etc. He also tackles the issue of robberies, basing himself on natural law, making references to the Bible and ancient as well as mediaeval authors. Of basic importance is his claim that a war can be started only if it is just, so in a way it turns into a certain procedure of exercising one's rights.⁴ This view coincides with Cicero, St Augustine, or St Thomas Aquinas. According to Gropius, the law of nations⁵ introduced a definite form of war and that form, if it is maintained by force of the law of nations draws peculiar effects. Hence the distinction which Gropius wants to use: between a formal war (*bellum solenne*) which is called a just war, namely a full war, according to the law of nations, and informal war (*bellum non solenne*). As for the latter, Gropius continues, although its cause may be just, the law of nations does not support such wars, but does not impede them.⁶

A just war was a defensive one or such whose goal was to regain unlawfully robbed territories; it also had to be approved and declared by the ruler, this additionally

legitimizing looting.⁷ Basing himself on the war concept of Grotius's 'higher necessity', Charles X Gustav convinced the Swedish Parliament (1654/1655) that the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth who were involved in the war with Russia at that time, were planning to declare war on Sweden. Such an approach to the issue unequivocally gave it the status of a just war, at least as perceived from the perspective of the Riksdag and the army, which also gave them the approval of looting.⁸ Not having sufficient financing, the Swedish monarch borrowed money from magnates and nobility, while the still missing rest of the financing was to be supplemented with extraordinary taxes (tributes) in the seized territories, so the war should be able to 'feed' itself.⁹

Running a war on credit lured Charles X Gustav, however it entailed a risk: once it is over, the loans have to be paid back. One of the methods seemed to divide war spoils, that is why during the 'Deluge' their seizure was organized centrally. Swedish troops robbed deliberately and methodically, while the looted items: valuables, everyday objects, book collections, archives, or arms, were treated both as a pay and as enriching Sweden's culture.¹⁰

Swedish museums

The objects robbed in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were dispatched to Warsaw which during the 'Deluge' functioned as the place of reloading the spoils, thus it was a peculiar 'central repository'. Following this, the objects were transported on the Vistula to Toruń, Elbląg, Piława (currently Baltiysk), up to the Royal Castle in Stockholm.¹¹ Militaria, both booty and trophies seized in the battlefield, were placed in the Royal Armoury, where in their majority they have been retained till this very day; meanwhile, art works, book collections, and archives were sent to the royal residence where they were classified: some were translocated to university libraries, others were given to some individuals.¹²

Until the early 21st century Swedish museum curators had not worked out a single communication format with respect to the war booty in their collections. This applies not only to the objects which came from the Commonwealth, but also from Germany or Denmark. In 2008, the Royal Armoury (Livrustkammaren)¹³ mounted an exhibition, symposium, and an international conference summing up a several-years' project dedicated to war booty and trophies in museums, libraries, and archives.¹⁴ Fifty participants from 11 European countries tackled the topic of institutions' responsibility for the heritage of this difficult provenance;¹⁵ they discussed how to narrate the war trophies as museum exhibits, and they attempt at outlining the directions of future research.

One of the seminar's participants was Prof. Bénédicte Savoy of Technische Universität Berlin, an expert on art translocation in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, collection histories, and looted art works. In her address she pointed to the fact that war booty can be analysed from different perspectives, e.g., legal, object movement, and changes in their provenance, or history of the tastes of the period. She treated a museum as a place in which things are legitimized. She distinguished three areas of interest to museum curators:

1. *The iconography. How is the war booty displayed and what part does the museum play in this?*

2. *Museum practice. Why does museum activity legitimize the victor's annexation practice?*
3. *Rhetoric. How was the museum described, in words and pictures, in connection with the debate on war booty.*¹⁶

Prof. Savoy's paper, but also the accompanying debates yielded collective recommendations to Swedish cultural institutions, addressed to the participants of the international conference as well. It was the emphasis on the responsibilities of museums, archives, and libraries that was of key importance. In this case the responsibility was understood as proper storage, studying, conservation, and display of war booty and trophies as well as securing access to them, both the originals and their images (on-line databases). The objects were treated as a part of common heritage administered by the current owners.¹⁷ Agreement was also reached that it was essential to show the past period's contexts and realities not only in historical museums, but also, albeit to a limited extent, in art museums. Leaving information on a looted object inspires visitor's confusion, and only a broader context allows the public to correctly get to know the past and the history of the collection itself. Such an approach is strictly related to the philosophy of Freeman Tilden, an American researcher into natural and cultural heritage.¹⁸ The author actually says what Swedish museum curators worked out: *Information as such is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However all interpretation includes information [...] Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.*¹⁹

Thus museums presenting war booty and trophies should relate history, yet they can do it on various levels, e.g., in a succinct caption under the objects (extended in a curatorial text), a recording in an audio guide, an exhibition catalogue, or as a supplementary note in the online database. The principle has been introduced in many Swedish museums. When visiting the display of the National Museum in Stockholm or the Royal Armoury, in the textual layer we will be informed about the provenance of the objects, and the supplementary texts will show their broader context. Additionally, online databases users have been provided with an another functionality allowing to search for objects through keywords, in this case, e.g. war booty (*krigsbyte*).²⁰

Why was it decided that such a solution should be adopted? According to the symposium participants, honesty and transparency of the message conveyed are our museums' responsibility, and we assume it for visitors to *be able to enjoy admiring objects*.²¹ Furthermore, such actions harmonize with the policy of the 'history of things' and return to them²² which based on a thoroughly investigated and studied provenance of objects. This is a key activity that has for many years been emphasized in Swedish, but also many foreign museums.

Instead of a conclusion

The format of communication on war booty based on the principles of heritage interpretation worked out by Swedish museum curators allows to conduct a transparent

communication policy of museums, also in the context of the collection's past. This is particularly important in the times of social media and creating institutions' long-term communication and advertising strategies. What has always been a key element permitting transparency are the activities aiming at studying the collections and a thorough investigation of their provenance.

In Polish museums war booty and/or trophies are also found, which is no reason for feeling ashamed, but which demonstrates that we have been and continue being a part of Europe's history. The Wawel Orientalia brought by John III Sobieski after the Battle of Vienna or single objects from the collection of the Polish Army Museum (MWP) in Warsaw²³ are merely some of the examples. Detailed provenance studies are something MWP can boast of: they have in their collection e.g., the Radziwiłł cannon. It was cast in 1638 when Birze was remodelled, at the same time artillery reform was being implemented; afterwards, looted by the Swedes in the course of the Second Northern War (after 26 September 1704), and then having been seized by the Russians, it was taken to St Petersburg. It reached MWP only on 17 March 1963.²⁴

More Polish museums could be named which have war booty in their collections. However, no coherent message format on that category of objects has been worked out. This can result from many problems, yet the most worrisome one is delays in collection studying and unused opportunities for provenance studies, or considering the latter to be an unimportant supplement to the current museums' operations. Without deepened knowledge of our collections the working out of communication policy for which such provenance studies form the grounds is entirely out of the question.

Article 2 of the currently valid Act on Museums in Poland stipulates in point 2 that the museums shall implement their goals by 'cataloguing and scientific classification of collections'; organization of exhibitions comes only in point 5, while educational activities are mentioned in point 7. I propose that we 'turn to things' again, and precisely that we treat collection studying as a priority activity, since this expresses our responsibility for our common heritage. It is only through collection studying and studying of objects' provenance that we can obtain the full image and understanding of our institutions.

Abstract: The paper's goal is to attempt to show what narrative Swedish museums conduct on spoils of war and trophies which are in their collections, how this strategy was worked out, and how to understand the responsibility *versus* the visitor watching such objects. Materials from a symposium and a conference held in Stockholm in 2008 have been analysed, and so have current texts (labels, curatorial texts,

entries in online catalogues). Swedish museum curators have considered their responsibility to be proper preservation, studying, conserving, displaying those objects, making them available to the public (exhibitions, online bases), thus the basic museum activity has turned into a synonym of modern responsibility. The key activity which enabled the working out of this joint policy is to be found in detailed provenance studies.

Keywords: spoils of war, trophies, Swedish museums, Swedish 'Deluge', collection provenance.

Endnotes

- ¹ One of the most spectacular examples was the recommendation issued by the Dutch Council of Culture (2021) on the return of museum objects which were brought from Netherlandish colonies between the 17th and the first half of the 19th century to their original owners. The issue was extensively commented on. See e.g., Dutch museums vow to return art looted by colonialists', <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/08/dutch-museums-vow-to-return-art-looted-by-colonialists> [Accessed: 25 May 2022].
- ² *Responsibility: 1. the state or fact of having a duty to deal with something or of having control over someone. 2. the state or fact of being accountable or to blame for something.*, Oxford online dictionary [Accessed: 23 July 2022].
- ³ H. Grotius, *Trzy księgi o prawie wojny i pokoju w których znajdują wyjaśnienie prawo natury i prawo narodów a także główne zasady prawa publicznego*, introduction and comp; R. Bierzaniek, Warszawa 1957. The first edition was published in 1625 in Paris where Grotius was staying. See J. Miller, *Hugo Grotius*, in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2021 Edition)*, ed. by E.N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/grotius/> [Accessed: 25 May 2022].
- ⁴ H. Grotius, *Trzy księgi o prawie wojny...*, p. 22.
- ⁵ Equivalent to natural law in Grotius's eyes. See: *Ibidem*, vol. 1, p. 109.
- ⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 110.
- ⁷ Grotius presents the concept of the Roman *bellum iustum*, concentrating on the examples from the Bible and Roman law. See H. Hartung, "Praeda bellica in bellum justum?" The legal development of war booty from the 16th century to date: a chance of bettering museum practice?', in *War Booty. A Common European Cultural Heritage*, ed. by S. Nestor, Stockholm 2009, p. 26; E. Norberg, 'Krigets lön', *Livrustkammaren. Journal of the Royal Armoury*, (2007-2008), 70-72.
- ⁸ Grotius was later followed by subsequent lawyers and researchers into the topic of the modern era, e.g., Emer de Vattel (1714-1767) who in his study first published in 1758 spoke about conditions and possibilities for looting. See e.g., E. de Vattel, *The Law of Nations; or, Principles of the Law of Nature*, Philadelphia 1844.
- ⁹ H. Landberg, 'Krig på kredit. Svensk rustningsfinansiering våren 1655', in: *Carl X Gustaf inför polska kriget. Kungamakt och statsfinansier 1655*, ed. by A. Stade, Stockholm 1969, pp. 119-123.
- ¹⁰ K. Wagner, 'Szwedzkie zdobycze w Rzeczypospolitej. Zarys problematyki', in: „*W hetmańskim trudzie*". *Księga Pamiątkowa ku czci Profesora Jana Wimmera*,

- ed. by Z. Hundert, ed. by M. Wagner, Oświęcim 2017, p. 124.
- ¹¹ There also existed alternative routes, e.g., on land to Szczecin, from where to Sweden, yet that mentioned in the text was one of the most popular and most frequently used ones; it was also considered the safest. *Ibidem*, p. 126.
- ¹² The example of the Swedish General Magnus Stenbock from the time of the Great Northern War who sent a part of the looted objects to his wife shows that he mainly appreciated their material worth, and in his letters he precisely specified which objects should be kept, and which given to the Stockholm Mint to be melted for scrap. See *Magnus Stenbock och Eva Oxenstierna. En brevväxling*, vol. 1, no. 291, ed. by C.M. Stenbock, Stockholm 1913, p. 202.
- ¹³ 'Krigsbyte. War booty', *Livrustkammaren. Journal of the Royal Armoury*, (2007-2008).
- ¹⁴ M. Hagberg, 'War Booty: a Common European Cultural Heritage', in: *War Booty...*, p. 7.
- ¹⁵ The topics also covered objects from mediaeval ones (15th-century conflicts) till the 19th c.
- ¹⁶ B. Savoy, 'Looting of Art: the Museum as a Place of Legitimation', in: *War Booty...*, p. 11.
- ¹⁷ *War Booty...*, p. 9.
- ¹⁸ F. Tilden, *Interpretacja dziedzictwa*, trans. by A. Wilga, Poznań-Warszawa 2019.
- ¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 44. Tilden's quotation in English after: <https://mylearning.nps.gov/library-resources/tildens-six-principles-ace/> [Accessed: 23 July 2022]. The same thought has also been present in Polish literature. E.g., *From the very beginning of opening a museum the language key was needed. A museum was established thanks to the 'word' and its narrative and 'sensual perception' (image, sound, smell, touch). Today the term of a 'narrative museum' is often used, yet a story, narrative, verbal interpretation were from the ancient times inseparably connected with the concept of museum*. D. Folga-Januszewska, 'Dylematy etyczne w muzeach, czyli o prawdach', in: *Muzeum etyczne. Księga dedykowana Profesorowi Stanisławowi Waltosowi w 85. rocznicę urodzin*, ed. by D. Folga-Januszewska, Kraków 2017, p. 47.
- ²⁰ The National Museum in Stockholm displays the busts of John II Casimir and Louise Marie Gonzaga looted during the Swedish 'Deluge' from the Kazimierz Palace (Villa Regia). The online catalogue, similarly as both objects' label contain information on their provenance. See Giovanni Francesco Rossi, Bust of Marie Louise, marble, ca 1651, 122 x 34 cm, collection of the National Museum in Stockholm, ACNO NMGrh 2430, <http://collection.nationalmuseum.se/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=39497&viewType=detailView> [Accessed: 29 May 2022]; Giovanni Francesco Rossi, Bust of John II Casimir, marble, ca 1651, 121,5 x 34 cm, collection of the National Museum in Stockholm, ACNO. NMGrh 2429, <http://collection.nationalmuseum.se/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=39496&viewType=detailView> [Accessed: 29 May 2022]. A similar approach is used by the Royal Armoury which in the e-catalogue provides general information that a given object is war booty and then it informs more extensively on the events' context. See <http://emuseumplus.lsh.se/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=56957&viewType=detailView> [Accessed: 29 May 2022].
- ²¹ B. Savoy, op. cit., p. 16.
- ²² See e.g. B. Olsen, *W obronie rzeczy. Archeologia i ontologia przedmiotów*, trans. By B. Shallcross, Warszawa 2013; *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. by A. Appadurai, New York 2017; F. Trentmann, *Empire of Things. How We Became a World of Consumers, from the 15th Century to the 21st*, London 2017; D. Sudjic, *Język rzeczy. Dizajn i luksus, moda i sztuka. W jaki sposób przedmioty nas uwodzą?*, trans. by A. Puchejda, Kraków 2013.
- ²³ Standard of Swedish cavalry seized during the 'Deluge' is in MWP collection (MWP 664), the second with Charles X Gustav's monogram is kept at the Wawel, while the same King's command sash is to be found in the Wilanów collection. MWP also has in its collection e.g., a Cossack kanjar (MWP 30111) from the early 19th c. seized in the Battle of Ostrołęka (1831).
- ²⁴ I would like to acknowledge Mr Jarosław Godlewski for sharing with me information on the objects found in the MWP collection.

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