

This project investigates how the 18th-century magnate elite of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth shaped their public image, social status, and prestige within a republican political system that rejected hereditary aristocratic titles and promoted the ideal of noble equality. At the centre of the research is Józef Aleksander Jabłonowski (1711–1777) – voivode of Nowogródek, writer, traveller, patron of learning, and member of prestigious European learned societies. He left behind an extraordinarily rich legacy of letters, travel journals, genealogical texts, public speeches, manuscripts, printed works, and visual materials. These sources make it possible to reconstruct not only his individual strategies of self-fashioning, but also broader patterns of elite representation in the Saxon era (1697–1763).

The project is based on the concept of “self-fashioning” – a set of intentional practices through which individuals and noble families constructed and communicated their identity and status. These include linguistic acts (letters, speeches, panegyrics), visual forms (portraiture, dress, heraldry), ritual performances (ceremonies, travels, foundations), and spatial strategies (residential planning, symbolic uses of space). The research combines perspectives from cultural history, symbolic anthropology, performance theory, and discourse analysis, drawing on the works of Stephen Greenblatt, Erving Goffman, Pierre Bourdieu, Clifford Geertz, and Michel Foucault. It assumes that elite identity was not fixed, but continuously shaped and negotiated through repeated acts of symbolic communication.

By examining Jabłonowski’s strategies, the project addresses broader questions: How did magnates distinguish themselves from the ordinary nobility? How did they express their political, genealogical, and cultural ambitions in a society without formal aristocratic ranks? How did they communicate their status both within the Commonwealth and on the international stage? The project argues that magnates, although lacking recognised aristocratic titles, made extensive use of symbols and gestures that allowed them to function as a *de facto* aristocracy. Through a detailed case study such as Jabłonowski’s, we gain a deeper understanding of how symbolic power operated in a noble society.

The four-year project includes archival and library research in Poland (Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań, Wrocław), Lithuania (Vilnius), France (Paris), Germany (Dresden), and Ukraine (Lviv, Kyiv). The collected material will be organised into five research databases: ego-documents, genealogical and literary writings, public activity, intellectual networks, and symbolic artefacts. The project will result in a series of academic articles. Research findings will also be presented at international conferences and discussed at the Centre for Polish-Lithuanian Studies in Aberdeen.

The project offers a new perspective on the symbolic culture of the Saxon era, showing that in the absence of strong royal authority, noble elites took on the role of shaping the Commonwealth’s representational order. It also demonstrates that the Polish-Lithuanian magnate class—despite lacking hereditary titles—developed a sophisticated system of prestige communication comparable to elite cultures in France, Germany, or Italy. Beyond its academic value, the project helps illuminate how mechanisms of representation and legitimation functioned in non-absolutist political systems, where power and prestige were built through language, ritual, and gesture rather than inherited rank. More broadly, it contributes to a more inclusive European comparative history, in which Central and Eastern Europe is fully recognised as a vital part of early modern symbolic and political culture.