

Project outline

Ursula Meyer was a simple maid at the female court of the Polish queen at the turn of the 16th century. In spite of her modest condition she gained the trust of the royal couple and became one of the important confidantes not only of the successive queens Anne and Constance, but of King Sigismund III himself. Being not of noble birth her family's origins were the subject of diverse speculation. Ursula Meyer appeared for the first time as a servant at the court of the archduchess Maria in Graz from where - in the wake of the marriage of Maria's daughter Anna with King Sigismund - she came to Poland. For her part, archduchess Maria originated from the Bavarian dynasty Wittelsbach. So the intensive scribal relations with the courts in Graz and Munich that Ursula would go on to develop had their origins in the dynastic marital triangle between Bavaria, Inner Austria and Poland-Lithuania.

Caught between the different spheres of the Polish royal court Ursula Meyer's correspondence covered not only big politics. Surely, she became an astonishing asymmetric diplomatic agent between the courts in Cracow / Warsaw and in Munich. In this role she delivered political and military news from the Polish-Lithuanian sphere of influence directly to the dukes of Bavaria. On the other hand, Ursula's letters in particular to Graz, provide us with an exceptional intimate insight into the day-to-day functioning of the female court as well as the royal couple's personal life.

The letters of Ursula Meyer open not only a new perspective on central European dynastic politics but allow also for the first time a much more detailed view of the internal functioning of the Polish court in the early modern period. The correspondence shows the circulation of knowledge and practices between (Catholic) courts. At the same time, Ursula Meyer is a remarkable and rare witness for the role and circumstances of women at early modern courts in general, and female servants in particular.