



**MÁTÉ ÁGNES AND OBORINI TERÉZ – ISABELLA JAGIELLON,  
QUEEN OF HUNGARY (1539-1559)**

Máté, Ágnes and Oborni, Teréz (eds), *Isabella Jagiellon, Queen of Hungary (1539-1559)*, (Budapest: Research Centre for the Humanities, 2020), ISBN: 978-963-416-214-8, 362pp.

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Book review

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This book deals with Isabella Jagiellon (1519-1559), queen consort of Hungary when the kingdom was partitioned as a theatre of war between the Habsburg and Ottoman empires. Isabella was the first child of Sigismund I of Poland-Lithuania, and his Milanese wife, Bona Sforza. In 1539, she married John I (Zápolya) of Hungary. Zápolya was a ruler of the eastern half of the country, supported by Sultan Suleiman I, and contested by his Habsburg rival, Ferdinand I. Since neither of them succeeded in consolidating power, the 1538 Treaty of Nagyvárad recognised them as rulers of different parts of Hungary, and Ferdinand as Zápolya's heir. However, Prince John Sigismund was born in July 1540, shortly before Zápolya's death, and thus began Isabella's two-decade-long struggle to secure her son's reign. The bulk of the volume's papers were presented at the *Isabella Jagiellon, Queen of Hungary (1519–1559) – A Memorial Conference* in 2019 in Budapest.

The three authors of the first chapter persuasively demonstrate the political significance of Isabella's wedding and coronation as the establishment of a future dynasty. Péter Molnár highlights circumstances of the festivities in the context of former royal ceremonies. Ágnes Máté looks at epithalamia (poems addressed to the bride), and analyses how historical and mythological female figures were portrayed as role models for the new queen. György Palotás points out the dominance of laudatory elements in the Latin literary works produced in Kraków on the occasion of the wedding.

The second chapter's topic is remembrance. Karolina Mroziewicz argues that Isabella's contemporary depictions served her dynasty's propagandistic purposes, while her nineteenth-century Polish and



Hungarian illustrations portrayed her as a nationalist heroine without displaying much of her personal characteristics. The thirteen attached figures lend this study an enjoyable 'exhibition experience'. Gábor Petneházi and Péter Kasza investigate the perception of Isabella's role in the 1541 Ottoman capture of Buda in narrative memory. By looking at the naming traditions of Isabella's sister, Catherine and her husband, John III of Sweden, Susanna Niiranen states that the Jagiellons considered themselves superior to other dynasties in their kinship.

The third chapter turns to foreign relations. Zoltán Korpás and János B. Szabó state that Ferdinand's main military priority was the unification of Hungary, with significant support from his brother, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. By examining Isabella's Italian family and court connections, Mónika F. Molnár concludes that her network was more complex than stated in previous scholarship. Stanislava Kuzmová points out the great extent to which Isabella had to rely on her family's diplomatic support after she temporarily gave up her territories in 1541. Szymon Brzeziński claims that the queen succeeded in preserving her son's reign, despite her political dependence on the Jagiellons and Friar George, an influential statesman and one of John Sigismund's guardians.

The fourth chapter's theme is governance. In one of the most thorough studies of the volume, Teréz Oborni convincingly argues that Friar George managed to act as the *de facto* ruler of Isabella's lands and unify Hungary under Habsburg reign thanks to his chief state offices. Zsolt Bogdándi analyses two institutions of judiciary and authentication reestablished during the formation of the new semi-independent state of Transylvania. Emőke Gálfi argues that Isabella reformed her urban policy when her decision-making influence was not limited by Friar George anymore. Liviu Cîmpeanu maps how the Habsburg arsenal in Sibiu surrendered to Isabella during her second reign (1556-1559) due to financial isolation from Ferdinand's administration.

In the final chapter concerning Isabella's most influential supporters, Mihály Balázs explores the activities of Giorgio Biandrata, an Italian physician, advisor and religious reformer at the court. In her study of Isabella's 'most trusted' counselor, János Szalánczy, Klára Jakó argues that education, language skills and diplomatic service offered an entry to Transylvania's political, social and economic elite. Szabolcs Varga investigates the career of Péter Petrovics as John Sigismund's



guardian and Transylvania's governor, and emphasises his exceptional loyalty to the Zápolya family.

*Isabella Jagiellon, Queen of Hungary (1539-1559)* is an illuminating volume for scholars and students of early modern Central European history since it sheds new light on a highly interesting queen consort who has not been studied extensively in English-language literature. It opens a new question regarding the leeway and realities of a pre-modern female royal's political agency, whose individual aspirations and activities are yet to be examined. Thus, it fills a crucial gap in the period's historiography by highlighting novel aspects of Isabella's reign, perception, personal and diplomatic relations. Additionally, the literary, art and legal historical, onomastic, and diplomatic approaches surely benefit a broad readership. Nonetheless, this book's main limitation is its predominantly political focus which leaves room for considerable questions regarding the economic, social, cultural and religious conditions of the territories she reigned over. The essays complement well each other, but the second chapter titled 'Memory' should have been better placed at the end. In general, the three existing monographs on Isabella concentrated on different respects, so this book provides the most comprehensive overview of her as a political subject. As the editors propose, a new monograph on Isabella would be highly worthwhile, to which this volume offers a promising contribution.