

## Luxembourg Court Cultures in the Long Fourteenth Century. Performing Empire, Celebrating Kingship. Edited by Karl Kügle, Ingrid Ciulisová, and Václav Žůrek.

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Máté Vas 

Doctoral School of History, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University; 6–8 Múzeum körút, 1088 Budapest, Hungary; [vasm4te@gmail.com](mailto:vasm4te@gmail.com)

The House of Luxembourg is undoubtedly one of the most important ruling dynasties of the Late Middle Ages. Its peak was between 1308 and 1437, and its most famous representatives included such figures as the ambitious Henry VII (c. 1273–1313), the controversial John of Luxembourg (1296–1346), the extremely long-reigning Charles IV (1316–1378) and his successors, the notorious Wenceslas (1361–1419) and the more successful Sigismund (1368–1437). Three of them were Holy Roman emperors, four were kings of the Romans and four were kings of Bohemia. In territorial terms, the sphere of interest and the network of contacts of the Luxembourg court extended to the Bohemian lands as well as to German, Polish, Hungarian, and French-speaking territories. Edited by Ingrid Ciulisová, Karl Kügle, and Václav Žůrek, this volume presents the Luxembourg court as a multilingual and multi-cultural milieu that forged links between different parts of Europe. In addition, it explores a wide range of topics: diplomacy, music, literature, material culture, visual arts, and gender.

Not only do the authors fill a gap about certain neglected approaches to the dynasty but, as a secondary aim, they intend to draw the English-speaking academic world's attention to the House of Luxembourg. Over the past ten years, several important monographs have been published on the dynasty, for example by Martin Bauch, Lenka Bobková, Václav Žůrek, Pierre Monnet, Péter E. Kovács, František Šmahel and Robert Antonín. However, most of them are in German, Czech and French, which is why the editors' aim is praiseworthy. The lack is also reflected by the fact that Iva Rosario's *Art and Propaganda*, published in 2000, has become, if we take only its citations, an unavoidable reference for authors writing about Charles IV in English, which, beyond the virtues of the monograph, is a clear testimony to the difficulties of access to more recent literature on the issue. Although we have

read valuable, innovative, and in-depth articles in English in the past decade, such as those of Éloïse Adde, Pavlína Cermanová, Christa Birkel, David C. Mengel, Marcin Pauk, Pavlína Rychterová, Dušan Zupka and others, the double commitment of this volume is certainly welcome. In addition to the appreciation of the mission undertaken, the issues raised are also intriguing. For example: Was court poetry some kind of 'soft power'? Could symbolic capital be accumulated through the purchase of relics? How did the various chronicles, autobiographies and other works interact with each other if the aim was to manipulate the past and stabilise power? Why is King Wenceslas IV of Bohemia depicted naked in the illuminations of the German-language Bible he commissioned? How can we impress the Italian envoys if we are competing with our brother at the same time?

As the book is divided into four sections and includes a diverse set of studies, I have chosen to briefly summarise them individually. The first section deals with John of Luxembourg, the second with Charles IV, the third with Wenceslas IV and Sigismund, and the fourth with topics that have been neglected in research history.

The first article, written by Uri Smilansky, focuses on cultural exchanges between the courts, particularly the activities of the poet Guillaume de Machaut (1300–1377), who served John of Luxembourg in the western territories. Smilansky argues that, when understood as some kind of 'soft power,' court poetry may even have promoted dynastic interests. Soft power is a practice whereby a political group can gain acceptance for its activities and goals without pressure, for example through its cultural values. Furthermore, the content of certain works may have changed with the change of patrons and circumstances, opening up some exciting possibilities for the interpretation of sources. In the second study, Jana Fantysová Matějková intends to define the social milieu in which Guillaume de Machaut moved. The poet seems to have been mainly responsible for King John's financial affairs, including the payment of soldiers, and financial flows between the courts. Perhaps the most interesting part of the article is Matějková's comparison of the chronicle of Peter of Zittau (c. 1275–1339) and the poems of Guillaume de Machaut. While the chronicler was highly critical of King John, the poet used the chronicle as source material and painted a heroic, chivalrous picture of his patron, quite the opposite of how he is described in the chronicle. It is also a noteworthy observation by Matějková that there is a connection between John's increasing blindness and his heroic portrayal. In the next essay, Lenka Panušková examines a group of paintings from the 1340s known as the Vyšší Brod Cycle. Panušková's main assertion is that the Cycle is not necessarily the work of a foreign master. She argues that this view would not agree with what we know about the methods used in the workshops of the time; moreover, the characteristics of the paintings can be explained in a way that shows their Bohemian origins rather than their sudden emergence without context.

Ingrid Ciulisová deals with the reliquary cross of Charles IV, which contained several gemstones. She emphasises that precious stones were not just ornamental elements, but that they had a specific meaning and that her analysis provides a clearer picture of the message that the cross carried. In the next essay, Václav Žůrek analyses the patronage of multilingual literature at the court of Charles. He points out that there was no program for the Czech language, unlike for Latin, and that there was a strong interest in German, while French was almost completely ignored. Matouš Jaluška explains how Charles' autobiography was part of a dialogue that developed in the various Czech chronicles of the time. Jaluška raises several interesting topics, such as self-control, truthful speech, and different versions of the mythical conflict between men and women, that is the narrative of the War of the Bohemian Maidens. Maria Theisen takes a closer look at a valuable source, the German-language Wenceslas Bible, and discusses its historical and theological context and the unanswered questions about it. Gia Toussaint asks one single question: why is King Wenceslas IV depicted naked with maidens, kingfishers, and a jug between his legs in the illuminations of the German-language Bible he commissioned? For the answer, the author presents two types of contemporary images of bathers: one with, and another without erotic connotations. The depictions of Wenceslas are also erotic; it is enough to remember how the king's genitals are symbolized by a jug. But what was the purpose of these depictions? Toussaint explains that Wenceslas was probably infertile, as none of his wives bore him children at a time when childlessness was a source of concern for the elite and was also seen as a sign of bad luck, impotence, and incompetence. She finds that the images can be linked to passages in the manuscript about fertility, the procreation of new life, or the genealogical preservation of a dynasty or clan. Even the kingfisher, one of the first creatures created by God, is a symbol of fertility. Other unusual depictions of Wenceslas, for example presenting him as a wild man, also point to the vitality of nature. Wenceslas, Toussaint speculates, perhaps hoped that the images and texts would dispel the assumption that he was incapable of engendering children and that these illuminations could also be seen as a kind of prayer in which the king prayed for the birth of a child, just as many well-known biblical figures only received this gift from God after a long time.

Mark Whelan's study of a codex in Ellwangen Abbey in Southern Germany not only documents the abbey's incomes and expenditures but also traces how the abbey's ambassadors tried to keep up with the imperial court, which was constantly traveling through Europe. Besides, Whelan shows us how the abbey received the visit of Sigismund of Luxembourg, what kind of material culture it possessed, and what matters it tried to promote. The contribution by Ondřej Schmidt is based on the correspondence of Italian embassies and compares the impressions left by Wenceslas IV

and Sigismund during negotiations, ceremonies, rituals, and journeys. The result, in short, is that Sigismund created a much more favourable image in the eyes of the Italian envoys than Wenceslas. Schmidt's argument is that it is futile to assume that this image was also influenced by court propaganda because it appears anyhow that Sigismund and his retinue were more successful in this respect. Another small detail: the image of Wenceslas was negatively influenced by his passion for alcohol, hunting, dogs, and small gifts. In fact, these factors made the monarch appear somewhat 'childish.' His less direct negotiating style did not help him either, as his advisors could intervene in the course of a conversation at any moment, which would increase the hearing's unpredictability. In contrast, Sigismund presented himself as an energetic, politically committed monarch who preferred face-to-face negotiations and often displayed spontaneous outbursts of emotion, whether in the form of joy or anger. However, this spontaneity did not detract from the monarch's image, as he came across as a man of flesh and blood.

Julia Burkhardt's article deals with the role, agency and impact of female rulers. She also pays attention to the fact that when a source contains stereotypes about women, we see not only these elements, but also the opportunities for women to play with stereotypes in order to expand their political space that could help them achieve their specific goal. However, as Burkhardt shows us, masculine and feminine roles might be reversed, or some authors can play with them, as we see in Enea Silvio Piccolomini's (1405–1464) *De viris illustribus*: Albert Habsburg (1397–1439) is portrayed as weak and passive, while his wife Elizabeth of Luxembourg (1409–1442) is not only clever, but according to Piccolomini, she "carried in the body of a woman the spirit of a man and usually brought her husband to do what she wanted." Foreignness is also an important aspect, as the source states that Duke Albert was disliked by the Hungarian nobility because of his German origin and was only accepted because he was Elizabeth's husband. Using the terms 'image-making' and 'image-breaking,' Len Scales writes about the practices of Charles IV's self-representation. Previous research has emphasized how successful the monarch was in cultivating his own image. However, this finding is overshadowed by the fact that several sources report negative reactions rather than undivided success. In various accounts, Charles is portrayed as an oppressive, highly taxing and, in extreme cases, even a false Christian. These opinions were provoked by the success of Charles's image-making, which involved a variety of methods, ranging from the remodelling of Prague to the purchase of relics and the blending of clerical and secular roles. Scales points out that image-making had a more complex influence on contemporaries than previously thought. In the last article in the volume, Karl Kügle examines not only the musical and literary legacies of the Luxembourg courts but also their broad political context, such as the relationship between John of Luxembourg and

the contemporary minstrels and the anti-French attitude of Charles IV's early reign. Kügle concludes that the scholarly idea that medieval music underwent an evolutionary change from monophonic to polyphonic music merely imposes a development-centric concept of a later age on contemporaries and, thus, impedes the understanding of fourteenth-century culture.

Finally, I would like to address a few minor structural issues. It is certainly to be welcomed that successive articles within a section attempt to cover a narrower period or subtopic, while an earlier article provides a point of reference for the next. This was most successful in the case of the articles dealing with the Wenceslas Bible, although the editing could have provided information in a somewhat more staggered fashion for readers less familiar with specific topics. Perhaps the structure of the articles could have been more coherent: explicitly marking the place of the introduction and the conclusion to each essay would help readers' orientation. While some articles are well-structured, easy to follow and clearly argued, others are more fragmented and somewhat chaotic in their argumentation, thus in the way they present information. As a result, the quality is variable—not in terms of content, but rather in terms of structure. This is certainly true of almost any edited volume of essays, but because of the double commitment of this collection, for some of the texts, a more rigorous editing process might have been appropriate. Nevertheless, the overall view is highly promising—the book is inspiring and encourages us to continue research into the long fourteenth century.

