



Barbara of Cilli (1392-1451)

**By Daniela Dvořáková,
translated by David McLean**

Brill, 2021

Reviewed by: Christopher Mielke



Barbara of Cilli (1392-1451). By Daniela Dvořáková, translated by David McLean. Brill, 2021. ISBN: 978-90-04-49833-4. viii + 258 pp. \$167.00

Considering the public imagination for sensationalism, it is astounding that a book about Barbara of Cilli should not appear prior to Daniela Dvořáková's ambitious publication. Queen of Hungary, Bohemia, and the Holy Roman Empire, she has been smeared as a "German Messalina," a dark intriguer cackling wickedly in her alchemy laboratories, or parading and disposing of her own harem of men and women as a lesbian vampire. Any author would face considerable obstacles in creating a biography of Queen Barbara. Dvořáková expertly navigates dead-end source material, the knowledge of at least four very different primary source languages, and a lack of critical secondary literature to draw on, all of which have hampered previous efforts. Fortunately for the reader, Dvořáková rises to the challenge and delivers a well-rounded, comprehensive, and engaging work on the life of this queen.

This work was originally published in Slovak in 2013 as *Čierna kráľovná Barbora Celjská (1392-1451): Životný príbeh uhorskej, rímsko-nemeckej a českej kráľovnej*. Chapter One explains the family origins of this Slovenian noblewoman and how exactly she ended up King Sigismund's second wife as the result of her father's dynastic policy of working with the rulers of Hungary, Austria, and the Holy Roman Empire. Chapter Two covers the queen's marriage, the Hungarian coronation, the birth of her daughter, Elisabeth, and her coronation as Queen of the Romans. Chapter Three describes Barbara's role at the Council of Constance and all the pomp and circumstance of which she was part. Chapter Four takes a deep dive into the reasons why Barbara fell out of Sigismund's favor in 1419. Chapter Five covers Barbara's consolidation of power, her increase in wealth, and her dealings as a diplomat and administrator. Chapter Six details Barbara's battles with Hussites who invaded the northern realm of Hungary (present-day Slovakia), as well as her activities while Sigismund was abroad in Germany and Italy. Chapter Seven recounts Sigismund's final days, Barbara's time as queen of Bohemia, and her enemies moving quickly against her. Chapter Eight details how her Habsburg son-in-law Albert II, king of the Romans (Albert V of Austria), worked with the imperial chancellor to deprive Barbara of her extensive properties, as well as the vicious campaign of slander that was part of the conflict which spanned Hungary, Bohemia, and Poland. Chapter Nine deals with Barbara's final years in Mělník, even down to a text which describes her as an alchemist and the fate of her lost gravestone at St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague. Chapter Ten goes into the birth of her

legend as the “Black Queen,” and how and why a smear campaign about her life and personality developed in the first place.

Insofar as this monograph concerns Queen Barbara, many major questions about her life are answered. The author fixes the date of 16 November 1405 to Sigismund and Barbara’s marriage, previously a matter of great debate and speculation (23). The author is comfortably familiar with the existing charters and able to reconstruct a narrative from them with great fidelity. The beginning of Chapter Six demonstrates the author’s understanding of both Czech and Hungarian materials and cross-referencing the two. A detailed account of the primary sources for the campaign against Barbara’s character and justifications for the illegal seizure of her property is given in a useful table (200–202). This helps the reader untangle the web of competing narratives and the motives behind them. These are the most impressive and rigorous examples of the author’s contribution and are well worth praise.

In discussing Barbara’s temporary exile and estrangement from Sigismund, Dvořáková poses the question that rather than being a consequence of a fabricated adultery on the part of the queen, it could have arisen from Barbara disagreeing with Sigismund about his choice of a son-in-law (90–91). The author raises this intriguing argument and then immediately backs down since there is no direct primary source that corroborates it. This is where the author does herself a disservice, since this argument would have been a very convincing one if any time had been spared for Barbara’s predecessors. In the 1380s, the queen regent, Elizabeth of Bosnia, reneged on her promise to marry Sigismund to her eldest daughter, Mary. This decision had far-reaching consequences, which included Sigismund rescuing Mary from captivity with Venetian aid, as well as Elizabeth of Bosnia’s own death in 1387. Barbara’s opposition to Sigismund’s choice of son-in-law at this juncture is therefore plausible, as would be Sigismund’s anger and indignation.

This book excels in its use of primary sources, but since its original publication in Slovak in 2013, the author has only added a handful of publications (seven, including online material consulted before publication). It is also a shame to see the author’s treatment of Barbara’s predecessor, Queen Mary (r. 1382–1395) dismissed with only a short paragraph when there has been a great deal more about her life and agency published in recent years (5–6). Works by authors such as János Bak, Attila Zsoldos, Albrecht Classen, and Márta Kondor would have all enhanced the arguments put forth about issues such as the queen’s coronation, the office of the queen, the power of women in Bohemia, and Sigismund’s

government, respectively. Each chapter is punctuated with images from Master Francke's Legend of St. Barbara (c. 1420) altarpiece for the church at Kalanti, Finland. The presence of these illustrations is only explained in the final four pages, and the connection to the queen is somewhat tenuous. Visual culture connected to the queen such as her seal, her residences, or a book attributed to her would likely have been more helpful to the reader. Finally, there are several errors in the editing process which detract from the finished product (to give an incomplete list, "suburbm" should be "suburbs" (117), "granter" should be "granted" (122), and the date of the letter listed on page 167 should be 26 June 1437, not 1436.)

Overall, this is a book that is triumphant in answering the big questions about Queen Barbara, presenting a fair and accurate view defending her from all the accusations associated with her "Black Queen" legend. Readers who wish for insight into gender and power in central Europe will find this monograph full of good information and clever analytical work. What emerges is an interesting story about a complex and astute woman who has been greatly wronged by secondary literature. With this work, the "German Messalina" myth should be put to rest forever.

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