

Mítoszok és értelmezések: Tanulmányok a középkori magyar uralkodók megítéléséről [Myths and interpretations: Essays on the assessment of medieval Hungarian monarchs]. Edited by Enikő Csukovits. Budapest: ELTE Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute of History, 2025. 316 pp.

Myths and stories about medieval rulers have gained considerable popularity in recent historical research as well as among hobby historians. Each nation in Europe has at least one ruler whose reign serves as a model for others, while other monarchs are met with more ambivalent assessments. The picture becomes more complex when a ruler governed more than one country. In such cases, stories and myths also varied depending on each nation's historical memory and traditions. Each country thus develops its own set of ideas connected to such a leader. Some rulers are commemorated with statues and paintings, while others are rejected or even erased by later regimes, only to be rehabilitated in subsequent periods. A closer examination of contemporary sources and authors provides a basis for interpretative studies of how monarchs were assessed by the general public in their own eras, while also tracing changes in these judgements over time and under different regimes. At the same time, modern interpretations can reveal how a constructed image of a monarch functions and what it may indicate about contemporary and modern politics and society.

In the recently published volume *Mítoszok és értelmezések* (Myths and interpretations), edited by Enikő Csukovits, the various contributing authors offer a detailed examination of local and international assessments of rulers in the medieval and early modern Hungarian Kingdom. Contemporary sources, such as chronicles, yearbooks, tractates, memoirs, and diplomatic documents, are carefully analyzed, alongside a wide range of nineteenth-century materials, from political speeches to paintings. The central argument of the volume is that the images of medieval monarchs in most cases relied on chroniclers and their relationship to the rulers they described, which often meant that these authors were commissioned to shape a particular image, whether idealized or not, following the royal propaganda or opposing it. When dealing with interpretations, one should keep in mind that some chroniclers or writers drew on previously produced works, retaining only those elements for which they lacked independent knowledge, or omitting them for the same reason. Some added details by drawing on different authors or their own ideas of an appropriate reign, resulting in a relatively varied interpretation of the rule of many monarchs in the Hungarian Kingdom.

Beyond the perspectives of individual authors, changes in the image of a monarch could also occur under later regimes, often driven by political motives or broader social transformations, when societies developed a sense of nostalgia for certain rulers. The image of kings could also shift as a result of decisive events, such as a lost battle, or simply because the given monarch's reign came to be regarded as more favorable than the period that followed. The essays, however, share a common aim: the re-evaluation of traditional narratives and myths as part of a larger effort to construct a more nuanced picture of monarchs who have tended to be more or less cherished in popular narratives, such as Matthias I or Louis II of Hungary.

The volume contains fourteen essays arranged in chronological order. The analysis begins with international assessments of the rulers of the Árpád dynasty, such as Coloman or Béla IV, proceeds to images of monarchs from foreign dynasties, from Charles I of Anjou to Sigismund of Luxemburg, summarizing the local and international interpretation of their policies in relation to the Ottoman Turks and the defeat at Mohács, and concludes with myths concerning medieval rulers in nineteenth-century narratives and art.

In the introductory chapter, Enikő Csukovits outlines the key aspects addressed by the volume, focusing on both well-known myths and lesser-known details that frame the subsequent essays. In the opening studies, Judit Csákó examines one of the most famous French chronicles from the Abbey of Saint-Denis, situating rulers such as Coloman and Béla III within a wider Western European context. Veronika Rudolf then draws on sources from the Holy Roman Empire, in which Hungarian monarchs tend to appear mainly in connection with military conflicts and dynastic relations, often in narratives and depictions shaped by propagandistic intentions.

The focus then shifts to the Anjou rulers of the Hungarian Kingdom represented in Italian and Polish sources, discussed by Enikő Csukovits and Dániel Bagi, who highlights the often ambiguous portrayal of figures such as Charles I and Louis I in foreign accounts. Renáta Skorka continues with an analysis of the image of Sigismund of Luxemburg in urban narratives, where characterizations reflect both ideals of kingship and the perceived human qualities of rulers. Foreign perspectives remain central in Tamás Pálosfalvi's study of Polish views on the Hunyadi family, particularly Matthias I, whose image was at times shaped by his political opponents. Gergely Tóth further examines the legacy of Matthias I in shaping perceptions of later Habsburg rulers, emphasizing the role of early modern authors and their reliance on Bonfini's chronicle, often adapted to serve

political aims. The assessment of Habsburg rulers is extended in the studies by Emőke Rita Szilágyi, Levente Nagy, and Júlia Papp, which trace interpretations across a longer period and incorporate both local and foreign sources. The image of Louis II varies between depictions of weakness and portrayals of a devoted ruler, while interpretations of the Battle of Mohács likewise remain ambivalent, often shifting responsibility from the monarch to broader political failures.

Returning to narrative traditions, Emőke Gálfi and Éva Gyulai analyze the works of Gáspár Heltai and Antal Verancsics, highlighting the interplay of propaganda, authorial background, and local traditions, as well as the enduring influence of Bonfini on the images of rulers. The volume then turns to nineteenth-century artistic representations, as discussed by Júlia Papp and Beatrix Basics, demonstrating the continued cultural reception of Hungarian rulers in a wider European context. The closing essay by András Cieger places medieval Hungarian kings within nineteenth-century political ideologies, with particular emphasis on the concept of the Holy Crown as a sacral embodiment of the state's traditions and laws. It also shows how interpretations of rulers were shaped by the perspectives of the nobility, whose influence in leadership significantly affected not only political developments but also the various myths concerning rulers.

The volume provides a significant contribution to studies of the reception and assessment of medieval Hungarian rulers in both contemporary and historical reflections. It allows the reader to engage with the prevailing perceptions of these monarchs in the neighboring states, whether rivals or allies of the Hungarian Kingdom, thus showing the impact of external assumptions and Western traditions on the construction of these images. Drawing on a wide range of sources, such as chronicles, memoirs, and works of art, the essays provide abundant examples of how Hungarian rulers were assessed and depicted, offering details that challenge and add layers of nuance to earlier interpretations and deepen our understanding of the factors shaping the ways in which they were perceived. At the same time, in some of the essays, including those by Dániel Bagi, Emőke Rita Szilágyi, Levente Nagy, and Éva Gyulai, the research objectives and questions remain somewhat implicit, resulting at times in descriptive overviews and extended contextual discussions in which the underlying research objectives are not always clearly articulated. There is also a tendency to rely on extended quotations or long footnotes, sometimes at the expense of deeper analysis of the source texts themselves.

Although the essays will be engaging for a broader readership, the intended audience of the volume is not always clear. While some studies are accessible to non-specialists, others seem to be aimed at a narrower audience of experts, resulting in uneven tone and presentation. Greater clarity concerning the aims of the volume and the contributions in the individual essays would have enhanced the coherence of the collection. Nevertheless, these limitations do not detract from the volume's overall value, and the careful arrangement of essays and the volume's extensive engagement with both local and international sources make it an important reference work for scholars of Hungarian historiography, reception history, and myth studies.

To summarize, by combining detailed case studies with broader explanatory analysis, the volume provides a more nuanced picture of how medieval Hungarian monarchs have been represented and evaluated across time and space. It thus serves not only as a valuable reference work but also as stimulus for further research into the construction and transformation of historical memory from both national and comparative perspectives. It is particularly suited for readers interested in representation studies, as it demonstrates how diverse sources present varying perspectives on individual rulers, making it virtually impossible to construct a single, definitive image.

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