

# ABOUT POLAND, IN ENGLISH



natalia.nowakowska  
@some.ox.ac.uk

**W**e talk with the British historian **Dr. Natalia Nowakowska** about winning a 1.5 million euro ERC grant for the project “The Jagiellonians: Dynasty, Identity and Memory in Central Europe” and about why the Jagiellonians may be interesting to British students?

**ACADEMIA: You have secured a prestigious European Research Council (ERC) grant. How does one go about winning such funding?**

**NATALIA NOWAKOWSKA:** My fellow scholars at Oxford are also asking me that question. It started five years ago, when we were encouraged to file applications for European grants and stipends. Generally only researchers in the physical sciences were applying, because it was known that only a small percentage of the EU money could be allocated to projects in the humanities. The idea was to stimulate researchers in other fields, but the results were very meagre. Applications are very time-consuming to prepare, essentially it's like writing a serious research publication in its own right. In my case, it took a month to write up how I imagined the project, specify all the research questions, explain what my work would look like in practice, how many people would be in the research team, how I would work with researchers from other countries, who would do what, and what publications would be the end result. I sent all of this to Brussels electronically.

Two months later I was told that I had made it through the preliminary screening step for the ERC. I breathed a sigh of relief, because there are three possibilities at that point: A – you move on to the next stage, B – you might be allowed to move on, and C – if the application is considered uncompetitive, then it's “please do not apply for a grant for the next two years.” Later I had a 45 minute interview in Brussels. In 15 minutes I had to present the project in broad strokes, then answer questions for half an hour. The panel consisted of 12–15 historians from around the world, not only Europe.

**How important to you was collaborating with researchers outside the UK, as is required for such a project?**

They asked me about that during the interview in Brussels. In my field, history, collaboration can be done in various ways. In the United Kingdom, for instance, it's often through a network of historians who meet perhaps three times a year and write separate books or articles. But in the case of the Jagiellonians project, we are talking about radical cooperation: we are a six-member team of historians and we write books together. Especially since there were Jagiellonian kings in Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, and Bohemia. I write about Poland, Giedrė Mickūnaitė from

Vilnius works on the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Stanislava Kuzmová is actually from Slovakia, but is writing about Hungary. Dušan Zupka, also from Slovakia, is writing about the German lands, especially the female Jagiellonians who went there as wives of various princes, electors, etc. Also involved are Susanna Niiranen from Finland, who is working on Catherine Jagiellon, the queen of Sweden in the late 16th century, and Ilya Afanasyev from Russia, who is writing about Bohemia. We have also created a mailing list of people working on the Jagiellonians in the United States, Australia, Poland, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. Four times a year, we send out information about all conferences dealing with the dynasty and about the latest books in various languages.

**What role is played by researchers from Polish centers?**

Researchers from the University of Warsaw took the initiative of organizing large research conferences about the Jagiellonians in Oświęcim every two years. At the first, held last year, I presented our project. We also have a lot of contacts with doctoral students who are writing about the Jagiellonians. In March 2016, here in Oxford, there will be a very large international conference about the dynasty in the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries. At it, we want to compare the Jagiellonians to the Tudors and Borgias. A lot of participants from Poland have already come forward. We are also planning a seminar in Oxford 2016, with Prof. Dariusz Kołodziejczyk from the University of Warsaw talking about the Jagiellonians' contacts with the Muslim world.

**How long will you be working on the project?**

It lasts five years and has three stages. The first lasted a year: I had to find researchers, build a team, and create a website. Now the team will be working for two years, then for the subsequent two years I will be working on my own. The plan is to write three different books. The first will be a collective publication about the memory of the Jagiellonians in all the countries of Central Europe, Scandinavia, and the German lands. Each contributor will write an article about the situation in specific countries, so as to look at the Jagiellonians from an international perspective. Although the team members know various languages, we do not know all the languages of the 13 former Jagiellonian countries, and so we also



NATIONAL MUSEUM IN KRAKÓW

Elizabeth of Austria, the first wife of Sigismund II Augustus. The 17-year-old Elizabeth was wed to the 23-year-old Sigismund on 6 May 1543 at Wawel Castle in Kraków. Part of a 16th-century diptych

A scene from the film "Epitaph for Barbara Radziwiłł" (1982) directed by Janusz Majewski, telling the tragic tale of the love of King Sigismund II Augustus, the last of the Jagiellonians (played by Jerzy Zielnik) for the Lithuanian noble Barbara Radziwiłł (played by Anna Dymna), his subsequent short-lived wife



FILMOTEKA NARODOWA

have collaborators in Croatia, Belarus, and Ukraine, for instance. In the second, main book, to be called "Jagiellonians: Dynasty in the Making," we will try to answer questions about the notion of dynasty, what it was in the 15th-16th centuries. Each member of the team has spent time in different archives and is familiar with different sources, but we very much want the chapters in the book to be comparative, for each of them to include material from Finland, Budapest, Warsaw, Vilnius, etc. Although of course I realize that no single book can cover everything the Jagiellonians did – that would be impossible even for a much larger team. We are asking ourselves a question that is very simple yet at the same time very difficult: Who were the Jagiellonians, and who did they think they were? We are studying their family letters to see how they wrote about themselves, but also looking at what others wrote about them. Did they think of themselves as a dynasty, for instance, or as a group of various related royal families?

At the end I will write the third book myself, about the Jagiellonians and the concept of Central Europe. I am very much interested in whether they had any

notion of the countries they ruled being somehow connected. This is somewhat visible in their letters. They do not talk about Central Europe or Eastern Europe, but they do say: our lands lie between empires, to the west we have the German empire, the former Roman Empire, to the east we have the Ottoman and Muscovite empire. We are "in between." This includes Scandinavia as well, because the Swedes then found themselves between Germany and Russia.

**In Poland, Paweł Jasienica's well-known book about Jagiellonian Poland, written in the 1960s, has been fundamental reading for several generations of Polish students of history. Do you think it makes sense to translate such older books about Polish history into English?**

If my memory serves me right, Jasienica's book was translated into English and published in the United States. Apart from it, however, there is no book in English explaining who the Jagiellonians were, where they ruled, and what their court culture was like. Newer publications, such as the recently deceased Prof. Urszula Borkowska's *Dynastia Jagiellonów w Polsce*

(PWN, 2011), are also valuable and could be translated. But that is difficult, as there is little funding.

### What sparked your interest in the Jagiellonians?

I have always been working on them. At the start of my career I wanted to write about the papacy in the 15th-16th centuries, about Roderic Borgia and the legends surrounding him. In Rome and in England it was very well known that there were great scandals at the papal court; I was curious whether this was also well known in Kraków, where there was such respect for the papacy. Then I got interested in the links between Rome and the Polish church. I wrote my PhD thesis about Frederick Jagiellon, the son of Casimir Jagiellon who became a cardinal in Poland. He never went to Rome, but he was a very important figure in the Polish church. My first book was also about him: "Church, State and Dynasty in Renaissance Poland: The Career of Cardinal Fryderyk Jagiellon (1468–1503)." And so the word "dynasty" was already there in the title, but in that book I did not question what the word really meant. It turns out that in sources from the period, no one actually used the word. I recently wrote about Sigismund I the Old, and I am now finishing a book about the early reformation in Poland. But this project is the first chance I have had to really consider who the Jagiellonians were. That is what we now call them, but when was that name first used for them in Poland? Quite late, as it turns out.

### In Poland there is now a debate underway, with one side objecting to work about Polish humanities being published in English, and the other arguing that otherwise it will never have wider impact. Which side would you support?

As far as research dialog with historians from the United Kingdom or United States is concerned, one needs to write in English. Articles definitely, books perhaps less so. Not many people outside Poland read Polish. Moreover, for people to understand something about the Jagiellonians, we can't just write about them in Polish, they need to be presented in comparative light. If someone here at Oxford has been writing about the Tudors for 10 years, they will need a convincing explanation for why they should care about the Jagiellonians. That's difficult, of course, because the national historiography, likewise in England and in France, is not comparative. People generally write about the history of their own country.

### Who will read the books you plan to write? Do they stand a chance of reaching out to broader audiences like the books of Norman Davies, which are read by many non-historians?

The books we prepare collaboratively will be for historians. I hope that they will contain things interesting

not just for researchers in Poland and Hungary, but also those in the United Kingdom and United States who may be less familiar with the Jagiellonians. My own book will be addressed to a broader audience.

### The television series about "The Tudors" is very popular in Poland, and books about the dynasty are being widely read. Is it possible for our Jagiellonian dynasty to become such a discovery for people in the English speaking countries?

I think the topic could spark interest in readers in England. I can see that already now, among the small community in Oxford. Five years ago, when I told people at conferences, at my college, or at lunch that I was writing about the Jagiellonians, no one knew what I was talking about. But a lot has changed since then, not least because our project has been described in newspapers. And so students are starting to say: aha, the Jagiellonians, that's the dynasty no one knows anything about, but there's a project on them!

People love royal dynasties and families, and so they are always a good topic for more popular history. The story of the Jagiellonians also includes some magnificent personalities. For English viewers of the series "The Tudors," it would come as a revelation that there existed a similar, or even more important family, where one king, Sigismund II Augustus of Poland, had three wives, and another, Vladislaus II of Hungary, even had four.

### What other topic of Polish history, aside from the Jagiellonians, might be attractive outside Poland?

Anything that is well known in Poland but little discussed elsewhere. For instance, how many peoples and religions there were in the country, from as far back as the 15th century to the 18th. We always talk about the "golden age" of Polish tolerance, but Polish scholarship on it is isolated from the very robust study of tolerance in other parts of Europe. There is no dialog here. Poland is an excellent example of what religious tolerance was like: in the 16th century it was home to so many Jews, Tatars, Muslims, Italians, and Germans. Of course, it is harder to talk about this after WWII, but this medley of different peoples and languages should be interesting not only for English historians and readers, but also for politicians. In the UK, people continually describe the great mixing of religions and nationalities as a great 21st-century experiment, looking for ways of coping with it. Yet it is in fact nothing new. For hundreds of years, it was the reality in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. And so I think this is something we need to talk about more vocally. In English.

INTERVIEW BY  
KAROLINA SHAPLAND



NATIONAL MUSEUM IN KRAKÓW

Portrait of Barbara Radziwiłł, the second wife of Sigismund II Augustus. Part of a 16th-century diptych