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**THOUGHTS FROM THE CURATOR
ON THE BOOK ACCOMPANYING
THE *KINGS AND SAINTS –
THE AGE OF THE ÁRPÁDS*
EXHIBITION: THE GEOPOLITICAL
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE
CARPATHIAN BASIN IN THE AGE
OF THE GRAND PRINCES AND
KINGS OF THE HUNGARIAN
HOUSE OF ÁRPÁD AND IN THE
PRECEDING PERIOD**

The exhibition entitled *Kings and Saints – The Age of the Árpáds* opened in Hungary's historical sacred capital, the coronation town of the kings of the House of Árpád, on 18 March 2022. The archaeological artifacts and historical documents on display at the exhibition reveal the history of the Hungarians from Árpád's arrival in the Carpathian Basin to the extinction of the House of Árpád upon the death of András III in 1301. The exhibition presents the history and material culture of a ruling family which – having arrived as an equestrian people of the steppe and later making Christianity a state religion – gave the world not only an apostolic king but also the highest number of saints from

one family, and ruled the Carpathian Basin with a very strong hand for four hundred years, influencing almost all of Europe through its extensive dynastic connections.

In my curatorial introduction, I would like to highlight why Árpád's Hungarians – coming from the East – stopped in the Carpathian Basin, why they did not go further, and why they chose this area, where our nation has been living for more than 1100 years, as their homeland. I would like to draw attention to the exceptional strategic and geopolitical importance of the Carpathian Basin and why it has always been important to the Hungarians.

To understand the geopolitical significance of Hungary and the Carpathian Basin in the Árpád period, we need to go back to the distant past; at the same time, we need to clarify the historical significance of the House of Árpád itself, and to understand the purpose and geographical origin of the Hungarians who arrived in the Carpathian Basin, led by Árpád, to the territory of present-day Hungary.

The importance and role of the geographical location of the Carpathian Basin in each historical period

Let us start with the historical background, with the historical processes that led to the arrival of the Hungarians and why the territory of the Hungarian homeland is so important for both European peoples and Eastern peoples of steppe origin.

If we look at the map of Eurasia, we can clearly see that Western Europe is well separated from the areas east of the Carpathian Basin. In the East, there is a 7,500 km long east-west steppe belt, which has always been an easily accessible area for horse-riding peoples, whereas Western Europe is a region of mountains and river valleys, which is more difficult for the steppe horse-riding peoples to travel and inhabit. The last steppe station to the west is the eastern half of the Carpathian Basin, the Great Hungarian Plain east of the Danube, which

covers an area of 52,000 km² and has a difference in level between its lowest and highest points of barely more than 100 metres.¹

A similar endpoint of the steppe region is the Gobi Desert and its surroundings² in present-day Mongolia and Inner Mongolia, surrounded by mountains rich in wood and wildlife from almost every direction, just like the Carpathian Basin is surrounded by the Carpathians and the Alps. Between these two extremes lies a grassy steppe, very liveable with and accessible by horse and favourable for trade, which has been home to numerous equestrian and later equestrian-archer nations for thousands of years.

The steppe area has an additional important advantage. With almost 7,500 km between the two end points, it has many links both with the cultures of the Middle East, Iran, India and South-East Asia to the south, and with the wood and game-rich Siberian or European areas to the north, which are also home to the peoples known as Finno-Ugric. And the two most important steppe regions, the two end points, are bordered in the east by the Chinese Empire and in the west by Europe; moreover, the Carpathian Basin is a strategic location in the middle of Europe. It is worth noting that the Great Wall of China, which marks the border between the steppe trade zone and China, is only 90 km from Beijing, the capital of modern China.

This is why the territory of today's Hungary is geopolitically important, since the country is the western trade's commercial and cultural endpoint of the steppe region, or if you like, the interconnection point for wholesale trade, and on the other hand, the western bridgehead of the steppe zone. It is a cultural and commercial endpoint, a conduit to Europe not only of trade goods but also of steppe civilisation, art and culture.³

1 Kovács Gergelyné 1983

2 Yembuu 2021

3 For a better understanding of the relationship between the steppe civilisation and the Hungarians, see Csáji 2017.

Steppe peoples in the Carpathian Basin before the settling Hungarians

We have described the geopolitical conditions of the territory of historical Hungary, and now we will briefly review what eastern peoples lived here in the course of history. To understand this process, we have to go back to surprisingly early times, all the way to the Copper Age, when the first definitely Eastern steppe people appeared in the Great Plain: a so-called Pit-Grave culture⁴, whose people buried their dead under kurgans. They came from the area dominated by the Yamnaya culture⁵ (from the northern shores of the Black Sea to the western shores of the Caspian Sea), travelling along the lower Danube to the Great Hungarian Plain during the Middle and Late Copper Age (between 4000 and 2800 BC).

This first demonstrable presence of an Eastern people is interesting because the Pit-Grave culture is the first “elite” kurgan-building culture in the Carpathian Basin, and they are most likely to have introduced the horse as a domestic animal into the area; this is also the time when goldsmithing began to flourish, in addition to copperwork, and the first carriage models appeared in the Carpathian Basin, which indicates the use of the four-wheeled carriage. The steppe culture essentially arrived in the Carpathian Basin with this people, characterised so markedly by the use of horses and carriages, copper and goldsmithing, along with the construction of earthen mounds, or kurgans, over the tombs of chiefs. It is worth noting that these kurgans are still among the highest mounds in the Carpathian Basin, sometimes reaching a height of 15 metres, and sometimes as old as 6,000 years.

Just try to imagine how many cubic metres of earth were needed to build such a kurgan, and who built them over the tombs of a leader or prince! The people belonging to the Pit-Grave culture were very few in number compared to the

4 Ecsedy and Bökönyi 1979

5 Most recently see: Jarosz, Koledin and Włodarczak 2022

local population (the Bodrogkeresztúr culture in the Middle Copper Age and the Baden culture in the Late Copper Age). We have to consider the possibility that the kurgans may have been built with the help of the local population for the eastern horsemen, who brought innovations to the Carpathian Basin that changed life in this region forever. These included the introduction of horse-keeping, the culture of horsemanship, the use of carriages, and the bringing of certain innovations in copper- and goldsmithing to the Carpathian Basin.

There is evidence that the domesticated horse, and presumably horse-riding itself, appeared in the Carpathian Basin at the same time, in the Middle-Late Copper Age,⁶ but it is also worth mentioning that a type of ceramic statue depicting “centaurs”, i.e. four-legged creatures with human bodies, appeared as early as the Middle Neolithic age (around 5500 BC). This type of sculpture bears such a striking resemblance to horsemen and to the first early Greek descriptions of early horsemen (mainly Scythians) that one cannot help but wonder whether people who domesticated horses and could ride them may have been worshipped as gods on the eastern steppes as early as around 5500 BC, and their fame may have spread as far as the Carpathian Basin.⁷

Despite the early centaur statues, it is also important to note here that the first evidence of horseback riding dates back to around 4000 BC in the Botai culture of the Southern Urals (a culture that evolved from the Yamnaya culture), where archaeologists have found what is probably a horse tooth worn by a leather tongue-bit, and the first horse tombs date from the same

6 Although there is no concrete evidence of horseback riding from the Carpathian Basin at this time (tongue-bits for example), it is certain, based upon the animal bone material unearthed at archaeological sites, that the horse as a domestic animal appeared in Hungary at this time. And since in the East, in the eastern branch of the Yamnaya culture (Botai culture), horse teeth worn by a tongue-bit are known from around 4000 BC, it is safe to say that the people of the Pit-Grave culture in the Carpathian Basin could already ride, since they belonged to the same eastern horse-keeping cultural unit as the Botai culture. For the first horse riders, see Anthony 2010.

7 There is no archaeozoological or archaeological evidence for such an early appearance of horse-riding, but the “centaur” sculptures that appear at this time are clearly human-headed but four-legged depictions that involuntarily remind us of a rider. Of course, there is also the opinion that these are not people on horses, but possibly on bulls, or bulls with human heads. Kalicz and S. Koós (2000), pp. 45–76.

period.⁸ Horse-keeping and horse-riding were probably already established in the Carpathian Basin at this time, at the beginning of the 4th millennium BC; nevertheless, the first evidence of horse-riding, i.e. the first leather harnesses with bone sides, became widespread only from the Middle Bronze Age, around 1500 BC.⁹ But of course, this date does not exclude the possibility that several peoples had lived in our country preceding this time who could ride horses; it is only that the horse harnesses of these peoples were all made of leather, and unfortunately, not many archaeological traces of these survived to our times. Furthermore, indirect evidence of horse-riding in the Carpathian Basin is that the peoples of the Great Plain always maintained good contacts with the peoples of the Eastern steppe since the time of the Pit-Grave culture. This is proven by the fact that after the Yamnaya culture the trade goods and folk artifacts of the Strednij Strog, Catacomb Tomb and then the Bronze Age Timber Frame culture also appeared in Hungary, pointing to a continuous equestrian presence in the Great Plain and Eastern Hungary even before the appearance of the first bone side-plated tongue-bits.¹⁰

This presence did not cease later on either: in the second half of the Bronze Age the descendants of the eastern Timber Frame culture formed a cultural unit (the Gáva-Noua-Holíhrad cultural circle), of which the Great Plain Gáva culture was an integral part; the ceramic art of this culture survived almost intact beyond the beginning of the Iron Age, when the first truly equestrian-archer people, the pre-Scythians, arrived in the Carpathian Basin at the beginning of the Iron Age, in the 9th century BC.¹¹

The pre-Scythians represent a real turning point, as they were the first equestrian people to possess iron commodities, iron swords and iron weapons, and to demonstrably attack with reflective bows; also, they clearly did not massacre the people of the Gáva culture living on the Great Plain, given that

8 Anthony 2010

9 Kovács 1977

10 Anthony 2010, pp. 160-467 provides a good basis for an overview of eastern Copper and Bronze Age equestrian cultures.

11 Visy 2003

the pottery of this people survived almost unbroken until the Scythian period.¹² The pre-Scythians are also unique in that they are the first people proven to have come west from Inner Asia, from Lake Baikal around the region of Mongolia, and are therefore the first “eastern” people, who, after having migrated eastwards since the Copper Age, turned back and rode across the entire steppe zone, conquering the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin, bringing with them new types of tongue-bits, weapons and fighting styles developed in Inner Asia. In fact, they managed to cover this distance of 7,500 km in less than a few years or a decade, given that the objects existing in the area of Tuva in the 10th century BC were already spreading throughout the Carpathian Basin by the 9th century BC.¹³ This people is therefore the first to show that such a distance, which would be incomprehensibly long on foot, can be covered without any problems in no more than a generation – but more likely even in 2-3 years.¹⁴

The beginning of the Iron Age thus brings to the Carpathian Basin the first people to return from the East, the pre-Scythians, whose direct descendants are the Scythians, who in the 7th to 6th centuries BC overlaid the pre-Scythian peoples, reached the Hungarian Great Plain and became the unprecedented dominant rulers of the steppe. The Scythians are the people who, in the 5th century BC, both physically and culturally dominated the steppe belt from present-day northeast China to the Danube. Admittedly, this vast empire was divided into several cultural units (from east to west: North China Scythians, Pazyryk culture, Tagar culture, Tuva Valley of the Kings, Sakas, Sauromatians, Caucasian Scythians, Royal Scythians and finally the Carpathian Basin Scythians: the Szentes-Vekerzug culture), but culturally, in terms of their fighting style and material culture, these cultures form a single entity. Its art, in gold, silver, bronze, wood and stone, is characterised by the Scythian animal style, its fighting style by the culture of the equestrian archer shooting backwards while sitting in the saddle, and its culture by a free equestrian lifestyle, which fundamentally differs from the Greco-Roman, Mesopotamian,

12 Kenenczei (2007) pp. 41–62

13 Fodor and Kulcsár 2009

14 Parzinger, Menghin and Nagler 2007

Indian or Chinese urban slave-owning societies, previously also called “high cultures”. The Scythian steppe civilisation is fundamentally different – it is a steppe equestrian culture that relies on the mobility of the equestrian way of life, is unbeatable in combat using the advantages of the horse’s speed, has an organic culture and system of signs and, last but not least, its few surviving written artifacts belong to the family of runic writing.

The Scythian Empire¹⁵, as we can safely call it, was therefore the cultural unit, the civilisation that 2500 years ago united the steppe and the peoples who lived there. It is no wonder that many of the steppe peoples living today consider the Scythians to be their oldest ancestors. This is also true of the Hungarians, whom the Hungarian chronicles trace back to the Scythians (or to the Huns). In his chronicle, Anonymus also writes that the Hungarians started their journey from Scythia and then arrived in the Carpathian Basin.¹⁶ So it is clear that the Scythians played a decisive role in the life of the peoples of the steppe, that this was the heyday, or the golden age if you will, which all descendant peoples looked back on with pride. It is safe to affirm that this period was the first and perhaps the brightest in the six-thousand-year history of the steppe civilisation. This civilisation also had a huge impact on Western Europe, as the Celtic culture that would determine the fate of Europe as a whole was born about a hundred years after the Scythians’ arrival in the Carpathian Basin. The chronology of this cultural development is obviously not a coincidence; in fact, the Scythian animal style arriving from the East must certainly have played a decisive role in the development of the Celtic animal motif.¹⁷

But just like all empires, the Scythian empire declined at one point (2nd and 1st centuries BC); the disintegration of the great unity, however, created a series

15 The Scythians are not usually regarded as an empire in the archaeological sense; instead, the “Scythian cultural koine” or the “Scythian peoples” are the scientifically accepted terms. However, it is a fact that the Scythians ruled the entire steppe from northeast China to the Great Plain in the 5th century BC, and even though they were made up from territorial groups, they basically formed a cultural, commercial and military unit. So in my opinion, they can be called an empire, even if their state organisation differs fundamentally from that of the Greek, Roman or Chinese empires.

16 Pais 1977

17 Szabó (1971) p. 11

of independent kingdoms and states, which, by forming a closer-knit alliance system, survived in many cases until the 1st to 3rd centuries as Scythian successor kingdoms.¹⁸ In the Carpathian Basin, the Scythians were overlaid by the Celts arriving from the west, but in more sheltered areas such as the Bodrogeköz, typical Scythian settlements with no or only occasional Celtic pottery could be found until the 1st century AD.¹⁹

However, the weakening of the Scythians in the Carpathian Basin was noticed not only by the Celts, but also by the Romans, who attempted to dominate the area, starting with the conquest of the Transdanubia region (Pannonia) in 9 AD. This military process seriously threatened the western bridgehead of the steppe civilisation, the Great Hungarian Plain, as for the first time in history a southern state cut off the east-west trade route to the west. In any case, it was not long before the East responded: in 19 AD, the Sarmatians, direct descendants of the Sauromatians, a Scythian tribe from the southern Urals, arrived in the Great Plain. This ensured the eastern military reinforcement of the Great Plain, which had almost lost its Celtic-Scythian leadership by the time of Christ's birth, as well as the maintenance of the western bridgehead.

The Sarmatians performed this task for a long time, under increasingly difficult conditions, as the growing expansion of the Roman Empire (establishment of the province of Dacia in Transylvania and Walachia, 106-271 AD) and the decline of the power based on the weakening alliance system on the steppe left the Sarmatians for a time on their own, in the grip of Rome. They survived, however, even in this situation, preserved their eastern identity and did not let the steppe's western trading centre, the Great Plain, fall militarily and politically, but kept it and traded actively with the Roman Empire.²⁰

18 Bánosi and Veresegyházi 1999

19 A good example is the Pácin-Alharaszt archaeological site in the Bodrogeköz, excavated between 2005 and 2007 by Gábor András Szörényi. Here, in a house with rich Scythian pottery the archaeologists unearthed Celtic graphite pottery supposedly from the 1st century AD, which reliably dates the building (the finds from this period of the large-scale excavation are still unpublished).

20 Havasy 1998

The Roman Empire was never able to conquer the territory of the Sarmatians and after 165 years the province of Dacia itself fell, thus the Lower Danube route to the eastern steppes reopened. At this time, another huge mass of people was arriving from the east to the Great Plain, as evidenced by the numerous traces of settlements from the 3rd and 4th centuries along the Tisza River. Once again, the East provided the western endpoint, and the Great Plain was once again united with the steppe. And when the Sarmatian state also weakened because Rome was constantly trying to bring the coveted Great Plain under its military and, failing that, economic influence, another steppe people appeared: the Huns!²¹

The Huns (meaning the Huns of Europe, Attila's Huns) can be identified – in light of recent genetic research²² and also based on archaeological finds²³ – with the Asian Huns moving westwards in the period from the time of the birth of Christ to the time of the first Huns in Asia. In the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, they fought serious battles with the Huns in the south, who were becoming increasingly Chinese, and were eventually forced to abandon their ancestral homeland, present-day Mongolia and Inner Mongolia, due to combined attacks by the southern Huns and the Chinese.²⁴ This westward-migrating Hun population spent two to three hundred years in the southern Urals, the suspected ancestral homeland of the Hungarians, before moving westwards, probably into the territory of the Sarmatians, who were losing their power, to conquer the western bridgehead of the steppe. Archaeological evidence suggests, however, that in the meantime they certainly mixed with a population that had been developing locally since the Bronze and Iron Age, possibly comprising the ancestors of the Hungarians.²⁵

The arrival of the Huns represented a turning point in the Carpathian Basin, as they did not stop at the Danube, the former natural border, but conquered the region of Transdanubia, defeating the Roman Empire and carrying out

21 Speyer 2007

22 Maróti et al. 2022

23 Botalov 2013

24 Jeong et al. 2020

25 Maróti et al 2022; Botalov 2013

campaigns in Western Europe, as the Hungarians did later in the 9th and 10th centuries. Recognising that Rome was a threat to the commercial interests of the steppe, the Huns secured political and military power in Western Europe through deliberate, pre-planned campaigns – just as the Hungarians did five hundred years later in their military campaigns against the Carolingian Empire in what were wrongly called “incursions”, but were in fact pre-planned and were performed with political purpose.

At the height of the Hun Empire, when it was clear that the Huns were militarily in the same league, or perhaps even surpassed the Roman Empire, Attila died unexpectedly – presumably of poisoning. This event shattered the fate of the empire; the Germanic peoples rebelling against the Huns, led by the Gepids, defeated Attila’s sons, and thus the Huns retreated eastwards to the southern Urals, from where they then headed south to found the White Hun Empire, better known as the Hephthalite Empire.²⁶ Meanwhile, a people originally subordinate to the Huns, the Gepids, and a western Germanic people, the Langobards, took over the Carpathian Basin for nearly a century. This period, lasting for roughly a hundred years, is the first one since 4000 BC without any demonstrable eastern presence in the Great Plain. However, after the fall of the Hephthalite Empire (roughly 561-565 AD),²⁷ a new powerful eastern people appeared in the Carpathians, the Avars (called *varhjon* in Byzantine sources), who, according to historical sources, were a combined army of the Var (=Avar, most probably identified with the Zhuanzhuan people of Inner Asia) and the Hjon, i.e. the Huns (most probably the Huns of southern Urals and the Hephthalites who migrated there, and possibly some elements of the peoples who could be regarded as Hungarians and Hungarians who lived there).²⁸ Within two years, this newer eastern people had recaptured the entire Carpathian Basin from the Gepid and Langobard rule, and the Langobards, who had occupied the western Transdanubia region, voluntarily surrendered the Transdanubia region and, in return for an undisturbed retreat, left for Italy

26 Csáji 2004

27 Bivar (2003) pp. 198–201

28 Csáji 2004

in the spring of 568, where they founded the Kingdom of Lombard in the territory of Lombardy, which still exists today.²⁹

The Avars took a hard-handed approach and seized the legacy of Attila's Huns – the entire Carpathian Basin – and established a solid power structure, a stable state formation, which in every respect is the predecessor of the Kingdom of Hungary founded by Saint Stephen of the lineage of Grand Prince Árpád, a kingdom that became the most significant state in Europe in the 11th century.

In the 6th century, the Avars established a state based on a strong central power and pre-planned foreign campaigns under Bayan I, which flourished until the mid-7th century under the leadership of Bayan's successors. Yet thereafter the state weakened, resulting in new elements from the East (Ogurs, Hungarians?) arriving in the Carpathian Basin, who, given their numbers, began to expand the central area of occupation to the whole Carpathian Basin. In the early Avar period, the occupied area was roughly the area of present-day Hungary; outside this area, Avar finds are rarely discovered. This area is essentially a grassland, as it was in the times of the conquest. However, an intensive expansion took place in all directions of the Carpathians from the middle of the 7th century onwards, and by the beginning of the 9th century almost the entire Carpathian Basin became populated with new peoples arriving from the east (e.g. the “griffin and tendril” culture) and the growth of the local population.³⁰ Yet one area “missed out” on this expansion: the territory of the present-day Zemplén and Bodrogeköz, where no Avar tombs and settlements have been found to date, although the Avar presence along the Hernád and Tisza rivers was continuous from the 6th century to the 9th century, and Avar expansion is well documented – for example, along the Hernád River northwards to the Carpathians.³¹ Why did the Avars not spread in Zemplén and Bodrogeköz, which were both rich in fish and game? There is no logical explanation for this other than what Gyula László has already suggested³² – that other peoples lived here at that time...

29 Bóna 1974

30 Visy 2003

31 Makoldi 2008

32 László 1978

But what peoples? Which people's artifacts can be found in Zemplén and Bodrogek? We have to conclude that the Avar presence south of the Upper Tisza and west of the Hernád River was very strong in the 7th and 11th centuries, with an extremely dense network of settlements and a series of cemeteries.³³ By comparison, Zemplén and Bodrogek seem to have been devoid of humans, apart from the poor finds and the negligible presence of what is considered to be Slavic sites.³⁴ In the 10th century, however, everything seemed to change very suddenly: a very dense Hungarian presence appeared in the area. In fact, it was not only dense, but also very rich in settlements and cemeteries, with tombs of chieftains ornated with metalwork plates and the chieftains' entourages.³⁵

It is worth reflecting on how it was possible that the Avars did not occupy the area in the 7th to 11th centuries, apart from the few Slavic populations that left behind difficult-to-date artefactual material and that are likely to have been present here. And what is the reason for such a dense presence of Hungarian artifacts from the 10th century in this area? Is it not as if the Hungarians lived here for several hundred years compared to the density of findings sites in other areas of the country? Could it be that we should take Gyula László's theory out of the drawer again and dust it down? What if the Hungarians really did arrive in the Bodrogek area earlier – as also pointed out by Anonymus?

Science must make use of its archaeogenetic and dating possibilities, and we should consider the possibility that the territory of Bodrogek, Zemplén and Transcarpathia may have been Hungarian territory from as early as the end of the 7th century – this being the reason why the Avars did not move here – and that is why most of the finds of grand princes or leaders of the conquest are concentrated in a relatively small area. And that is why Anonymus writes that the eastern half of the Carpathian Basin was conquered from the Bodrogek-Tokaj-Szerencs area. Since this is not contradicted by archaeological evidence, we must leave open the possibility that the early Hungarians had already reserved the Zemplén and Bodrogek areas as a strategic bridgehead for

33 cf.: Szentpétery 2002

34 For the finds considered Slavic see Pintér-Nagy-Wolf 2017, pp. 139–164.

35 See for example: Fodor 1996; Révész 1996; Horváth 2019

themselves – in alliance with the Avars as a brotherly people – even before the conquest, i.e. the settlement of Árpád's Hungarians. Of course, further research and scientific studies are needed to clarify this idea. However, it may be worth reconsidering the examination of archaeological chronology not only here, but also at other sites that were important in the early Árpád period in the country, namely in areas where the centres of power of the 10th and 11th centuries are surrounded by earlier Avar cemeteries. Research into possible Avar-Hungarian cohabitation or, in some places, direct continuity will be a very important task for future disciplines.

But let us return to the thread of history. So the Avars established a Central European state, which laid the foundations for the structure of the later Kingdom of Hungary. Yet the West did not take kindly to this, and the Carolingian Empire launched several attacks against the Avars, the most devastating of which was Charlemagne's campaign in 804, when a wing of Carolingian armies, bypassing the main Avar army, managed to raid the treasury of the Avar Kagan seat called the Hring, seizing and stealing several chests of gold from the country. It is worth mentioning that the Hungarian equivalent of Hring was Gyűrű (i.e. ring), a version of the name of Győr also meaning round castle.³⁶ This was a huge blow to the Avar state organisation, but did not cause its ultimate decline. According to recent research, the Avars most probably still lived in the area during the Hungarian conquest, not only as a scattered people, but in large numbers, possibly with existing power structures, i.e. a still existing and functioning system of military and power, but certainly considerably weakened.

So what happened when a steppe military power weakened in the Carpathian Basin? A new wave of Eastern peoples arrived from the East; according to archaeological evidence they did not occupy the Carpathian Basin by war, nor by conquest, but probably by simply taking over a large part of it from the Avars, the former main population. In this case, this newer wave of people were the Hungarians, i.e. Árpád's Hungarians, whose leaders, representing the royal

36 Szádeczky and Kardoss 1998

bloodline of the Turul dynasty, went on to consolidate Hungarian power in the Carpathian Basin with a royal dynasty that ruled for four hundred years and gave the world the most saints, and which has remained stable since Árpád's arrival, at least for 1127 years. Not to mention the presumably much earlier military presence in the Zemplén-Bodrogköz region.

To summarise what has been described so far: the Carpathian Basin is a geostrategic site of immense geopolitical significance, which was a major trading endpoint of the steppe region not only in the 9th to 11th centuries, but at least since the Copper Age, from the 4th millennium BC, and which the steppe peoples controlled continuously for thousands of years to spread the steppe civilisation, the steppe culture, and last but not least, the steppe trade goods westwards. The main lesson is that the western endpoint of the Eurasian steppe zone has always been a privileged location for the peoples of the East, including the Hungarians. This system always cooperated with the whole territory of the steppe, up to the eastern endpoint, present-day Mongolia, thus creating an alternative to a steppe trade route north of the subsequent southern Silk Road. This route was not only a bridge between East and West, but also connected the whole of Eurasia at that time via several southern and northern connection points. It is important to underline that the Hungarians were part of this system from the very beginning, and according to new genetic evidence,³⁷ it was the steppe zone where they became a people, a nation, and where they still live to this day, preserving its ancient culture, art, way of thinking and probably its language as well.

37 Maróti et al.

Árpád's Hungarians: the Turul dynasty and its people – what was the purpose and route of the Hungarian conquest?

We can deduce from the above why Árpád arrived: certainly to help the Avars – who were surely related – living in the Carpathian Basin against the combined assaults of Carolingian invasions and Byzantine influence, and also to save the Carpathian Basin, the territory of the steppe nomadic equestrian peoples, which had been occupied by them for thousands of years, and which was in a key geostrategic position in the heart of Europe. But do we know where they came from? Who were they? By what route did Árpád's Hungarians arrive – and how long did it take them at the end of the 9th century – in what is now the country of Hungary? Recent genetic and archaeological research may provide answers to these questions.

Let us return to the Hungarian chronicles, which state that the Hungarians arrived in the Carpathian Basin as descendants of the Huns from the Scythians' territory. In fact, until the rise of the Habsburg Empire in the 16th and 17th centuries, all Hungarians considered this as a fact, while afterwards, only the Kuruc, freedom fighters, revolutionaries, and then revisionists, system-deniers and “enemies” of the communist state thought the same.

But what do the latest findings of archaeology and archaeogenetics as a new scientific discipline reveal? According to archaeogenetics, the closest ancestors of the occupying Hungarians and the ruling House of Árpád, i.e. the Turul nation, are to be found among the Bashkirians, a present-day ethnic group living in the south-eastern part of the Urals.³⁸ Going further back in time, genetic ancestors of the Hungarians and the Turul nation can also be found in the area of present-day Mongolia, who can be identified both in time and age with the population of the Asian Hun Empire that existed there between

38 Nagy et al. 2021

the 2nd century BC and the 2nd century AD.³⁹ Furthermore, genetics goes back to even earlier times, demonstrating that the most ancient known ancestor of the Turul nation was first identified in the later Bactria, situated in today's northern Afghanistan, in a region of Central Asia considered to be one of the cradles of the Bronze Age.⁴⁰ The results of archaeogenetics therefore show that the earliest known ancestors of the leading ruling dynasty of the Hungarians went from Central Asia to the area of present-day Mongolia, from where they moved westwards as Asian Huns to the region of present-day Chelyabinsk, Yekaterinburg, where the present-day Bashkir ethnic group best preserves their genetics – and from there they came to the Carpathian Basin in a short time as conquering Hungarians – since, between the two areas, we have not yet found any people or archaeological culture whose genetics are related to that of the Hungarians.

The genetic evidence also shows that the eastern side of southern Urals shows a development of local origins, perhaps lasting until the Copper Age, but certainly from the Bronze Age through the Iron Age to the first millennium AD, which covers a substantial basic population, overlaid by the Scythians and Sarmatians between the 6th and 3rd centuries BC and then by the Asian Huns in the 1st to 3rd centuries AD.⁴¹ Later this local population, overlaid by the Scythians and Huns, representing one culture and living one way of life with them, arrives in the Carpathian Basin in the 9th century and, under the leadership of Árpád, takes possession of it, overlaying the Carpathian Basin population, which has always been superior in numbers and has been here since at least the Bronze Age and a significant part of which, incidentally, is made up of the earlier waves of people arriving from the East.

According to the latest results of archaeological excavations, it appears that the closest finds to the Hungarian occupation finds of the 9th and 10th centuries are to be found in the southern Urals, south of the present-day cities of Chelyabinsk and Ekaterinburg, on the Kazakh-Russian border, in and around

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Bashkiria. These finds are so Hungarian in character that their connection with Hungarian artifacts from the Carpathian Basin is undeniable, and some of them could almost have been made in the same workshop.⁴²

Furthermore, it is also evident that the rural aboriginal population of the southern Urals became archaeologically part of the Scythian empire in the 7th century BC, and was overlaid by the Asian Huns arriving from the east beginning with the 1st and 2nd centuries AD.⁴³

So what do all these findings suggest? That the new results of archaeogenetics and archaeology place the Hungarian conquest in a completely new context, and the results of the two disciplines are mutually supportive and parallel.

So let us ask the question again: what was the purpose and the route of the Hungarian conquest? The answer is becoming increasingly clear: its purpose was not to let the Carpathian Basin – a geostrategic site of such importance for the steppe peoples – which was the western commercial and military endpoint of the steppe zone, be lost to the hostile Carolingian and Byzantine attacks, but to come to the aid of the Avar Empire (its sister nation) that was on its last legs. This maintained the commercial and cultural network created by the peoples of the East, and the western bridgehead of the steppe civilisation was preserved in the land of the ancestors, the former Huns.

The other issue, the route, is also starting to become clearer. In my opinion, the Hungarians have never left the steppe belt since they became a people; they did not go up north like the Ob-Ugric peoples and they were not born in the north and came down from there, as science has thought until now, but have always been on the steppe. Its ancestors may have been there in the European steppe region occupied by the Yamnaya culture of the Copper Age, as briefly described earlier, then moving eastwards may have settled in the lands of the south-eastern Urals and northern Afghanistan in the Bronze Age, then to the state of the Asian Huns in Mongolia in the Iron Age, and finally moved back again to the lands of the south-eastern Urals in the migration period. It is apparent from archaeological evidence that the Hungarians are

42 Szeifert 2022

43 Botalov 2013

among the ancient peoples of the steppe civilisation, whose “conquest” carried out by Árpád’s Hungarians was launched from an area that has always been a key staging post for the steppe peoples: the region of the south-eastern Urals and northern Caucasus, where the Bronze Age cultures of the Sintashta and Andronovo and then the Iron Age Saragatska culture met the ethnogenic elements of the Scythian, Sarmatian and Asian Hun equestrian peoples. It was from this area that the predecessors of the conquering Hungarians set out and entered the Carpathian Basin.

However, the archaeological and genetic data also show that there are no genetically identified related peoples in the intermediate areas; therefore we can assume the conquest was rapid, i.e. the arrival from the Southern Urals, Caspian Sea and the Caucasus lasted not hundreds but only a few years, since the archaeological finds from the East and the Carpathian Basin are so similar that they could have been made by the same hand. Consequently, Anonymus’ chronicle is much closer to the truth than the archaeological and historical research of the second half of the 20th century, which suggests that the process took roughly 300 years.

Contrary to the earlier position, the scientific position that can now be stated is that the settlement of the Hungarians took place over only a few years, perhaps a decade, just as Anonymus describes it. This is confirmed by both the archaeological and archaeogenetic evidence presented earlier.

What conclusion can we draw from this? The Hungarian invasion was a deliberately organised military operation carried out over a short period (1-15 years), aimed at preserving the Carpathian Basin – of exceptional geostrategic importance – for the steppe belt of interest (or civilisation in earlier archaeological periods). Furthermore, by maintaining the territory of present-day Zemplén and Bodrogeköz, the Avars may have been allies of the Hungarians, probably a fraternal people – another archaeological sign of conscious military empire-building in the history of the steppe peoples.

For these reasons, it is important to note that there was probably no “Khazar supremacy” in Hungarian history, and no 150-year oppression between Levédia and Etelköz. The people of Álmos and Árpád entered the Carpathian Basin as part of an organised military and migratory campaign and the accompanying

background activity, deliberately taking over its administrative, political and cultural power from the existing Avars and the remaining power structure of the Avars.

According to the new research, the conquest was therefore a conscious series of actions aimed at taking possession of the geostrategically important area of the Carpathian Basin for the steppe peoples; as a result, the Hungarians, under the leadership of Árpád, took possession of a country which, by transferring the power structures built up by the allied Avar people, also formed the basis of the state of Árpád and later of Saint Stephen.

St. Stephen must therefore have been well aware that, as the ruler of the Turul ethnic group ruling over a steppe civilisation with very deep traditions that had existed for at least 5000 years, he had to protect the Carpathian Basin from the continuous hostile occupation and power pressure of the Western and Southern powers, which dated back thousands of years. Therefore, respecting Eastern traditions, he established his then and still unique apostolic kingdom, independent of the German-Roman Empire, Rome and the Pope as well as of Byzantium, thus preserving the sovereignty of the Carpathian Basin and its links with the peoples of the East, which was only ended by the Tatar invasion. St. Stephen was the first of the Eastern peoples to make Christianity a state religion – seeing that there was no other way to build dynastic relations in Europe – but he did so without committing himself to any Western power, without giving up his independence and without breaking his traditional ties with the East. Indeed, he would be the only ruler of Europe to be canonised by the Church in the West and later in the East. St. Stephen thus laid the historical foundations for the establishment of Hungary, the first Christian steppe state in the world, which would have a crucial influence over the destiny of Europe for centuries to come.

So if I would like to describe the geopolitical significance of the Carpathian Basin in the era of the Árpád grand princes, St. Stephen and the subsequent rulers of the Árpád House in a few sentences, I could summarise the results in light of the new archaeogenetic and archaeological findings described above by stating that Prince Árpád, when leading the Hungarians into the Carpathian Basin, knew exactly which route he was taking and where he was going. The

princes of the Árpád dynasty knew exactly how to protect the interests of the country, how to secure them through military campaigns, and how to assert their interests. St. Stephen knew exactly why he was making Christianity – already known to the Hungarians – a state religion, and why he was creating an apostolic kingdom independent of the West, Byzantium and, in part, the Pope, which he offered to the Virgin Mary as possession of the Holy Crown. Also, it is no coincidence that the descendants of St. Stephen, the Árpád dynasty kings and their families, gave the world the most saints and blessed from a single family – as recognised by the pope in Rome.

The geostrategic position of the Carpathian Basin is therefore clear: it is located “on the border between the West and East”, i.e. in the middle, it is still the heart of Central Europe, despite the attempts of the world powers to break it apart in 1920. But the proof is right here that in four hundred years, Árpád and his successors created a reign during which the monarchy not only gave Hungary and the world the most saints, but was able to remain the ruler of a geostrategically vital area of the world, which all the great powers have fought for throughout history, and yet since 4000 BC it has been part of the steppe civilisation’s predecessor, main line or last western bridgehead.

This is the key geostrategic role of our country, not only in the Árpád era, but also in the 21st century. So we should appreciate the unparalleled archaeological and historical artifacts that the public can see together for the first time in Hungary at the *Kings and Saints – The Age of the Árpáds* exhibition, which opened in March 2021.

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