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HUNGARIAN-BYZANTINE RELATIONS IN THE ÁRPÁD ERA

Towards the Carpathians

Even before they settled in the Carpathian Basin in the 9th century, the Hungarians had already been in contact with the Byzantine Empire. This is evidenced by sources written mainly by Christian authors, which commemorate our ancestors in the context of a single episode. In all likelihood, Hungarians first encountered Christianity through Byzantine contacts from the East. The role of Byzantine culture as a bridge between Europe and Asia was clearly visible. Byzantium became the main source of a culture built on Roman statehood, the Greek language and Christianity, a culture that gave it its essence throughout the Middle Ages.

In Greek Byzantine sources, Hungarians are most often referred to as Turkics (οἱ Τοῦρκοι) and thus are considered one of the Turkic peoples. Only the Hungarians are referred to as ‘ungroj’ or ‘ungaroj’ (οἱ Οὔγγροι, Οὔγγαροι), but other ancient peoples also have the Magyar name behind them, such as the Pannonian, Paionian, Sauromatian, Getaean, but especially Scythian (οἱ Σκύθαι).¹

In the ninth century, the Byzantine Empire was in what is known as the Middle Byzantine period. In addition to the iconoclastic ideological infighting,

1 Moravcsik 2003, p. 30; AMTBF, p. 10.

it launched its Christian missions to neighbouring peoples such as Great Moravia and the conversion of the Bulgarians also established Constantinople's religious hegemony (868-870). The accession of the founder of the Macedonian dynasty, Emperor Basil I (867-886), brought a new boom, ushering in a period known as the "Macedonian Renaissance" both in politics and culture.

According to Byzantine sources, the military and inter-state relations of the Hungarians began with their involvement in the Bulgarian-Byzantine War. Fortunately for us, the succeeding emperors recorded important information about neighbouring peoples. The two most important imperial authors even had personal contact with the Hungarians. Both Emperor Leo VI the Wise (886-912) in his *Tactics* and Emperor Constantine VII (Porphyrogenitus) (945-959) in his work *De administrando imperio* (abbreviated as DAI), a work containing internal state information, already reported on the Hungarians settling in the Carpathian Basin. Leo VI the Wise wrote down his observations on the military systems of various peoples, including the Hungarians.

The official Byzantine contact with the Hungarians was therefore military in nature and related to the Byzantine-Bulgarian war. The instigator of the war was Simeon, son of Boris, the Bulgarian Khan, who, having been baptised and brought up in the Byzantine capital, was well acquainted with Byzantine culture. According to the successor of Byzantine source, Georgius Monachus Continuatus, Leo VI the Wise, who was busy with the Arab war at the time, entered into an alliance against the Bulgarians with Árpád and Kusál (Ἀρπάδη καὶ Κουσάβη), who were then appearing at the Lower Danube.² The Hungarian success was swift and devastating, Simeon had to turn to the Pechenegs to help him out against the Hungarians. The Byzantine emperor would have allied himself with the Hungarians against the Pechenegs as well, but the Hungarians were not prepared to do so. The Hungarian settlement into the Carpathian Basin was accelerated by the Kangar-Pecheneg invasion from the east.

2 Kristó 1998, p. 48; AMTBE, Vol. VIII, p. 59.

War and peace: Hungarian-Byzantine relations with changing omens (917-970)

Taking advantage of the infighting following the death of Emperor Leo VI the Wise, Simeon also aspired to the imperial throne, but was forced to halt his army outside the walls of Constantinople. In the battle of Ankhialos in 917, which ended in a Bulgarian victory, the Hungarians and the Pechenegs fought together in a Bulgarian alliance against Byzantium. Simeon took the title “Emperor of the Bulgarians and Greeks” to emphasise his equality with the Byzantine emperor. From then on, an anti-Byzantine period followed in the history of Hungarian-Byzantine relations. We do not have much data on these. For example, in 934 a joint Pecheneg-Hungarian attack took place that reached as far as Constantinople. The empire was even willing to pay an annual sum (tax) in exchange for peace.

A major turning point in this was the appearance of Hungarian leaders in Constantinople, which may have taken place during the reign of Emperor Constantine VII, presumably in 948. At the end of chapter 40 of the scholar emperor’s *De administrando imperio* (DAI), he recalled that during the reign of Chief Fajsz (Falicsi), Tormas (Termacsu) of Hungary came to the Byzantine imperial court with Bulcsú: “It is to be known that Teveli had died, and his son is our friend Termacsu, who came the other day with Bulcsú, the third Prince and karcha of Turkia.” (original translation into Hungarian by Gyula Moravcsik). In addition, Kál, the father of Bulcsú, held the office of ‘horka’ (ὁ καρχᾶς).³ Among the Byzantine sources, the 11th-century Byzantine historian Ioannes Scylitzes gives a more extensive account of the events. The author reports on the visits of Bulcsú and Gyula of Transylvania to Constantinople, the latter around 953.⁴ “Bulcsú [...] was baptised and Emperor Constantine became his godfather, and, being honoured with the title of patrician, returned

3 Bóiborbanszületett Konstantin 2003, pp. 178–179; AMTBE, Vol. VII, p. 49

4 Bréhier 1997, p. 140; Szabó 2012

to his country as the lord of much money.” (original translation into Hungarian by Gyula Moravcsik).⁵ Apart from the fact that, according to him, Bulcsú had accepted the Greek rite of baptism, another major effect of Bulcsú’s visit would have been to root Christianity in Hungary, since Gyula had brought with him Bishop Hierotheos of Constantinople, whose task as bishop of “Turkia”, i.e. our country, would have been to convert the Hungarians to the Greek Christian faith. The Hungarian state became a Byzantine missionary target area.⁶

However, not all Hungarian tribes may have complied with the above agreement, as we have data on this as well. Forcing the payment of taxes was not always successful. The story of the Botond legend indicated this, as captured by the 14th century *Illustrated Chronicle*. A warrior in Chief Apor’s army, Botond defeated the Greek in vain, but “[...] when the Hungarians asked for the tax, for which the duel was staged and fought, the Greek emperor laughed at the demand for the tax” (original translation into Hungarian by János Bollók).⁷ Another possible Byzantine aspect of the Botond legend is linked to a Hungarian children’s game. Before the duel, Chief Apor ordered Botond to show his strength at the gate of the city. “And when he came to the gate, legend has it that he struck it so hard, and opened such a gap in the gate that a five-year-old child could comfortably walk in and out through that opening.”⁸ This episode was based on tradition even in the 14th century *Illustrated Chronicle*. Anonymous (in his work, *Gesta Hungarorum*) called this ore gate a golden gate: “Botond also cut open the golden gate of Constantinople (“portam auream”) with his axe.” He also mentioned tradition as his source: “I could not find this in any of the books of the historians, but only heard it from the false tales of the peasants.” (original translation into Hungarian by Dezső Pais).⁹ We know it was possible to pass the walls of the Byzantine capital through 13 gates, the most famous of which was indeed the Golden Gate (Χρυσή Πύλη), through which important guests, ambassadors or the emperor himself arrived

5 Moravcsik 2003, pp. 53–54; AMTBF Vol. XVI, p. 85

6 Ostrogorsky 2000, p. 239

7 Képes Krónika 2004, p. 40

8 Képes Krónika 2004, p. 40

9 Anonymus 1977, p. 116

in Constantinople. Its iron gate was covered with gold plates, hence its name. Passing the golden gate through the opening reminds us of our folk song with the opening *Hide, Hide Green Branch, Little Green Leaf...* which, in my opinion, has preserved an episode of Constantinople in its ranks for centuries, and which has survived in folk tradition.

The defeat in Augsburg in 955, which ended the Hungarian campaigns in the West, not only resulted in the cruel execution of Bulcsú, but also in the foreign policy change of Grand Prince Taksony. Instead of Byzantium, he began to approach the rising Kingdom of Germany, then the Holy Roman Empire and its creator, Otto I (962-973). A change in religious direction came from the Pope. In 963 Pope John XII ordained a converting bishop by the name of Zacheus. Byzantium also recovered, and after the Hungarian failure of 955 in the West, Byzantium presumably cancelled the payment of the peace money (annual money, tax) paid to the Hungarians.

Bishop Hierotheos also left the country. The Byzantine attempt to push the Greek Church to the Hungarian people seemed to have failed.¹⁰ However, besides Constantinople, a closer religious centre was being formed at that time, which later had a great impact. In 963, St. Athanasius founded the Megisti Lavra of Athos, which became the oldest monastery of the Athosian monastery.

The years following the reign of Constantine VII brought an eventful period in the Byzantine Empire with a series of warlord emperors who were the legal guardians of the underage royal successors. When the Bulgarian-Byzantine war broke out again, the alliance with the Prince of Russia brought success to Byzantine Emperor John I Tzimiskes (969-976). However, the prince conquered Bulgaria of Danube, but Sviatoslav asked too much of the emperor.

The year 970 brought the war against Byzantium to an end for Hungarians. The Hungarians joined the Bulgarian-Byzantine conflict and joined the Russian, Bulgarian and Pecheneg armies as part of a large coalition. At Arkadiopolis, however, the Byzantine emperor John I Tzimiskes destroyed the joint army. In 971, he also drove the Russian prince out of Bulgarian territory.¹¹ From this

10 Bréhier 1997, p. 140

11 Bréhier 1997, p. 155; Makk 1996, pp. 24–25

point on, Byzantine power was a real threat to our country. Hungarian foreign policy then entered the path of balancing and navigating between the German and Byzantine great powers until the end of the 12th century.¹²

Rome and Byzantium? – Grand Prince Géza and the Age of St. Stephen I

Géza, the son of Grand Prince Taksony brought an eastern orientation with his marriage. His wife Sarolt, daughter of the Gyula of Transylvania, was raised in Eastern Christianity. In foreign policy, however, Géza stopped the southern campaigns against Byzantium. Out of the two great powers, i.e. the Holy Roman Empire and Byzantium, he took a very bold step and approached the former. Otto I gladly accepted this and sent a converting bishop in the person of Friar Bruno of Sankt Gallen. He baptised Géza, who was named Stephen. And his brother received Michael in baptism. Sarolt may have brought Greek priests with her. In any event, a monastery of nuns with Greek rites was founded in Veszprémvölgy, which according to the Greek-language charter, known and maintained in the Latin transcript, was founded by “the Christian Stephanus himself, king of all of Ungria” (Στέφανος χριστιανός ὁ καί κράλης πάσης Οὐγγρίας).¹³ In the debate among researchers, it was also questioned whether this name meant Géza, or rather his son, the Christian King Stephen.

In Byzantium, the new ruler of the Macedonian dynasty, Basil II the Bulgar Slayer began his reign (976-1025), who initiated the conversion of the new power, the Russians, to the Christian faith in the east of Hungary. After his baptism, Grand Prince of Kiev St. Vladimir the Great married the sister of the Byzantine emperor. This is why it was important where Grand Prince Géza was guiding his country. By shifting the Hungarian Principality towards Greek Christianity, the religious centres of the people of the Kievan Rus and the

12 Makk 2011, p. 112

13 AMTBF Vol. XV, p. 80

Balkans would have pointed towards Constantinople. The main objective of the Byzantine Emperor in the Balkans was the final destruction of the Tsardom of Bulgaria. Samuel regained the title of Tsar of Bulgaria, and turned against the Byzantine Emperor. But he had a dangerous edge not only in this, but also in that in 982 the crown was sent by Pope Benedict VII. And with that the western orientation of the Bulgarian Ohrid-based church was a real possibility.

The Bulgarian case also polarised Hungarian foreign policy relations. Grand Prince Géza's opposition to Byzantium was marked by his German orientation and his turning towards Rome. In 973, he settled his political relationship with Otto I in Quedlinburg. A peaceful relationship began, which kept Byzantium's power aspirations at bay. From then until the end of the 12th century, there was competition for the Hungarian state in the struggle of the two great powers.¹⁴

Géza pursued a Bulgarian-friendly policy in the Byzantine-Bulgarian struggle. He married one of his daughters to the Bulgarian heir, Gavril Radomir. In 996 Géza had his son Stephen marry Gizella, the sister of Prince Henry of Bavaria. Although, according to a remark by Bruno of Querfurt, the Greek Christian Princess Sarolt managed Prince Géza and the foreign relations of the country at that time, this did not lead to a rapprochement towards Byzantium, the Western orientation and the beginning of Christian conversion from there remained definitive. As a topos, Prince Géza's semi-Paganism and semi-Christianity were also presented in scientific works, according to which he was rich enough to sacrifice to two gods at once. Perhaps we could also think of this as referring to the Western and Eastern rituals, not just the Christian and pagan gods. However, all such interpretations are based on an inaccurate translation of the relevant Latin sentence in the chronicle of Thietmar of Merseburg.¹⁵

14 Makk 1996, p. 38

15 For the accurate translation, see Makk 2011, p. 114. Quote: "He made sacrifices to God the Almighty and various imaginary gods. When his high priest reproached him for it, he replied that he was rich and powerful enough to do so." (original translation into Hungarian by György Györffy). "He sacrificed to God Almighty, but also to various vain ideas of (other) deities, and when he was reproached by his high priest for this, he asserted himself to be rich and powerful enough to do so." (original translation into Hungarian by Gábor Thoroczkay) *Államalapítás* 1999, p. 113

After the death of Géza, the consolidation of power by Grand Prince Stephen was well indicated by the acquisition of the royal title and the episode of sending the crown. In 1000, Stephen asked for a crown not from the German ruler, but from the Pope of Rome. The Kingdom of Hungary thereby joined Roman Christianity, not the Byzantine one, in canon law. Or, using the notion of the famous Byzantinologist Dimitri Obolensky, the country did not become part of the “Byzantine Commonwealth”. This was taken into account and supported by Pope Sylvester II (999–1003) as well as German Emperor Otto III (983–1002), who was also in Rome at the time. Historians emphasise that despite the German orientation the country did not become subject to the German state.

The new and first Hungarian king also faced tribal states of Greek Christian interest in his struggle for territorial power. However, the Gyula (Prokuj) of Transylvania and Keán heading its South Transylvanian area of Bulgarian interest, were allies of the Bulgarian Tsar Samuel, who fought against Byzantium. We should not only look at the foreign policy of King St. Stephen I from the point of view of the German orientation, as the continuation of the Byzantine war prompted the king to take a new view. With a shift to the east, in 1002 he made an alliance with the Emperor Basil II. The victories of Chief Ajtony and Stephen prevented the territories of Gyula and Keán from falling into Bulgarian hands. The simultaneous good relationship with the German and Byzantine empires was also made possible by the fact that the king’s brother-in-law became the German ruler under the name Henry II (1002–1024). However, the alliance with the Byzantine emperor could also bring with it the Byzantine recognition of Stephen’s royal title. The marriage of his son, Prince Imre, to the Byzantine princess (around 1023) also fit into this plan. Returning from his wars in Asia, Emperor Basil II launched a decisive strike against the Bulgarians in 1014, resulting in the complete destruction of the Bulgarian state. At the same time, King Stephen led an attack on the Transylvanian Chiefs Gyula and Keán. In 1015, Stephen’s troops left the country and participated in the siege of the Bulgarian capital Ohrid.¹⁶

16 Makk 1996, p. 60

Chief Ajtony, ruler of the areas along the river Mures, adopted Eastern Christianity in Viddin and received Byzantine support.¹⁷ With his defeat around 1028, this tribal state also ceased to exist, and the king established a new episcopate with Csanád as its centre in 1030. At the headquarters of Ajtony, in the old town of Marosvár, there were Greek monks in a monastery consecrated to the name of St. John the Baptist.¹⁸ Therefore, it is worth examining the church organisation of Stephen's era from a Byzantine point of view. Not only in foreign policy, but also in the church organisation, the West and the East could live side by side.

The rebirth of Byzantine influence was well illustrated by church history. Byzantine ecclesiastical seals bearing the inscription "Bishop of Turkia" have been found. The file of the Council of Constantinople in January 1028 was also signed by "Ioannes, the metropolitan of Turkia" (... μητροπολιτ .v... .ωάννου Τουρκίας).¹⁹ All this raises the theory that a newly established metropolia existed on the territory of the country in 1028, which may be related to the establishment of the archdiocese of Kalocsa.²⁰ The legend of St. Stephen tells us that the king had a church built in Constantinople too.²¹ We also know that Hungarian soldiers served under the Byzantine flag and settled in the Byzantine territories of southern Italy. For example, we know about a person called Ungros living around 1050. One of the parcels of today's Reggio di Calabria retirement home was "the suburban estate of Ungros, which includes a vineyard, about the size of 2 modios" (original translation into Hungarian by Terézia Olajos).²²

17 Moravcsik 2003, p. 56

18 Moravcsik 2018, p. 30

19 Makk 1996, p. 61. Excerpt published in: Olajos 2014, Vol. XIII, pp. 83-84

20 See in more detail: Baán 1995, pp. 19-26; Baán 1995a, pp. 1167-1170

21 Moravcsik 2003, p. 59

22 Olajos 2014, Vol. XV, pp. 90-92, p. 94

Byzantine policy of the Árpád dynasty from the Vazul branch: *pax Byzantina*

The struggles for the throne after the death of King Stephen were probably closely followed in the Byzantine Empire. After the death of Basileus II in 1025, which marked the end of the power of the Macedonian dynasty, the empire was no longer the same, and in the absence of a male heir, the age of the female lineage, the “husband emperors” began. The selection of Péter Orseolo, the Hungarian heir apparent to István’s succession, set a western path for Hungary to follow. The reign of Samuel Aba has shown an exciting direction and underpins the aforementioned duality. The cross-shaped, centrally arranged floor plan of the Feldebrő lower church also shows Eastern-style architectural elements. Excavations in Abasár, the centre of the Aba clan, may also yield important findings for Byzantologists. On the forehead of the Virgin Mary statue fragment, there appears to be a representation of an equilateral Byzantine cross.²³

We know that the sons of King Stephen’s relative, Vasul, were expelled from the country. András and Levente fled to Russia with its Greek rites. While Levente remained in the faith of his ancestors, in Kiev András was baptised with the name of Saint András. Returning home, King András I (1046-1060) continued the journey started by King Stephen to strengthen Christianity. His Russian wife, Princess Anastasia, was also responsible for the king’s favourable stance toward Orthodox rites. After all, in addition to founding the well-known Benedictine monastery of Tihany, he founded another in Visegrád in honour of St. András. In Zebegény, there was a hermitage run by Greek monks. In addition to Tihany, friars of the eastern rites settled in Oroszkő. As far as we know, András I was the last king of the Árpád dynasty to establish a basilite monastery. Many Greek monasteries probably existed in later centuries, which later fell

23 The excavation conducted by the Institute of Hungarian Research reached layers from the 11th century. M5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0JEqf3xfiE4> (0:30–0. 41.). Downloaded on: 29 January 2022.

into the hands of the Western orders. For example, Dunapentele dedicated to St. Panteleimon (commonly known as Pantaleon), monasteries dedicated to St. Demeter of Byzantium (St. Demetrius) in Szávaszentdemeter, and the church of St. Demeter of Szeged in Csanád County. As well as the previously mentioned Veszprémvölgy, which fell into the hands of the Cistercians in the 13th century.²⁴

Sustainable political relations under the pressure of the German and Byzantine great powers were also a serious difficulty for King András. One of the stated aims of the well-known German campaign of 1051 was to bind Hungarians to the “Christian faith”. After the campaign, a peace treaty entered into force, but an alliance was established with Byzantium, the Kievan Rus and Poland during the reign of the Hungarian king.²⁵ He had a closer foreign policy relationship with Constantine IX Monomachos (1042-1055), the husband emperor of the Macedonian dynasty at the time. Hungarians participated in the Byzantine fights against the Bulgarians, and the fortress of Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade) was under Byzantine rule. As a Byzantine border castle, the name Görögfehérvár (*Alba Graeca*) originated from here.²⁶ A very exciting issue not only from an archaeological aspect is whether Constantine IX sent the so-called Monomachos crown found in Nyitraivánka to King András I of Hungary? The Byzantine emperor and his two co-regents, his sister-in-law Theodora and his wife Zoe, are also featured on this excellent goldsmith work.²⁷ Also during the reign of King András I, in 1054, the great schism occurred, which permanently distinguished the Western and Eastern Christian churches, now organically separate. From then on, any position taken in favour of Byzantium also carried with it the rise of the different canon law of orthodoxy.

King András’ successor, Béla I (1060–1063) was raised in Poland in Western Christianity. However, during the reign of Solomon, the Byzantine relationship of the Árpád dynasty experienced a revival. At that time, however, Byzantium was once again engulfed in throne struggles, and the sons of Solomon and

24 Moravcsik 2003, pp. 60–61

25 Makk 1996, p. 93

26 Szabó 2015, p. 180

27 Obolensky 1999, p. 200

Béla, Géza and László, supported the conspiracy against the Byzantine emperor Constantine X Doukas (1059-1067) around 1066/67. However, in 1071, the incumbent emperor, Romanos IV Diogenes (1068-1071), suffered two fatal defeats of the Byzantine Empire. In 1071, the Normans conquered the last Byzantine city of southern Italy, Bari. With this, the former Byzantine authority in southern Italy was permanently terminated. In 1071, he suffered a defeat from the Seljuks in the Battle of Manzikert, in which he himself was taken prisoner.²⁸ Thus Hungarian military expansion was once again possible in Europe on the Byzantine-Hungarian border. In 1071-72, fighting broke out at the siege of the then Byzantine border castle, Nándorfehérvár.

After the Hungarian internal war and struggle for the throne with King Solomon, Géza I (1074–1077) contacted the current emperor of the Doukas family, Michael VII Doukas (1071–1078). Shortly thereafter he also received a wife, Synadene, from Byzantium, although not from the imperial family. This closed the tense period of Byzantine-Hungarian relations caused by the occupation of Nándorfehérvár.

At the same time, the marital relations of the kings of the Árpád dynasty with the Byzantine princesses could begin. This was well suited to Byzantine foreign policy in Central and Eastern Europe. It was a renewed bond for the establishment of the Byzantine “Commonwealth” here.²⁹ This bond was already well demonstrated by the family relationship of Géza’s brother, King Saint László I (1077–1095). His daughter Piroška, who was probably born from his second marriage, was married to the Byzantine emperor John II Komnenos, and is still respected as a saint in the Orthodox Church under the name of Eirene. For the first time, the Hungarian princess of the Árpád dynasty became a Byzantine empress and later a saint. This Byzantine line was facilitated by the foreign policy and papal pressure, which we have already mentioned in the case of Géza. László did not accept Pope Gregory VII’s demand to become a vassal until the Pope finally acknowledged him as the Hungarian king. His relationship with Byzantium deteriorated at the end of his reign. On the one

28 Bréhier 1997, p. 291; Ostrogorsky 2000, p. 302

29 Obolensky 1999, pp. 200–201

hand because in the context of the resettlement of the Eastern English in Byzantium he also made a demand for the control of the area in Moesia, while on the other hand, in 1091 he occupied Croatia with the intervention requested during infighting there.³⁰

In Byzantium, with the rise of the Komnenos dynasty to the throne, an emerging era began (1085-1185). However, the fall of Jerusalem – the religious centre of the entire Christian world – to the Seljuk Turks in 1077 triggered significant changes in the life of Byzantium.

Under the threat of the Byzantine great power: Hungarian-Byzantine wars

The first crusade in Clermont proclaimed in the year of the death of King St. László in 1095, and subsequently the others, re-polarised the intricate relations of the European great powers, thus changing and shaping Byzantine-Hungarian relations as well. In turn, the Slavic peoples adjacent to the kingdom and living under Byzantine rule were encouraged to secede from Byzantium, either in alliance with Hungary or with the crusaders. The success of the first crusade (recapture of Jerusalem in 1099) and the creation of the Kingdom of Jerusalem and other independent states triggered by the crusades had to be accepted by Byzantium, even at the price of losing some of its own territories to these new entities. Emperor Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118) did not like that László's successor, Kálmán the Learned (1095–1116) once again conquered Croatia, which had already been independent of Byzantium and joined Rome, and crowned himself as King of Croatia. He also complained about it because he had already settled the Hungarian-Byzantine relationship with the above-mentioned marital relationship between his son John and Piroška.

30 Kristó 1998, p. 135

With the rise of Emperor John II Komnenos (1118-1143), Empress Pirooska/Eirene made gracious donations and founded the Monastery of the Pantokrator in Constantinople, the charter of which has been preserved.³¹ Her biographers highlighted, among other things, her “lack of resentment, that she was never angry, aggressive or abusive towards anyone.”³² In the Byzantine capital of today’s Istanbul, the Hagia Sophia’s mosaic still shows her image with her imperial husband. Nevertheless, the Emperor was already at war with the Hungarians (1127–1129) under the reign of King Kálmán’s son, Stephen II (1116–1131). Although this was a commercial conflict that affected the important Nándorfehérvár-Barancs-Nis-Sofia-Constantinople road, it ended with a peace settlement in 1129. The Byzantine Emperor also played a role in the conflict by giving refuge to Prince Álmos, who had been blinded by his brother King Kálmán the Learned and then settled in the Byzantine Empire. However, he received no armed assistance from the Emperor. However, Béla the Blind, Álmos’s son, did not follow his father into exile.

During the beginning of the Byzantine-Hungarian War, Serbian efforts to separate from Byzantium also gained strength in the Northern Balkans. For this reason, the Grand Župan of Raska oriented himself towards the Hungarians, and Uroš I sought a connection with Stephen II. Eventually Prince Béla the Blind, who stayed in Hungary, married his daughter Ilona. This was significant in relation to royal succession. For Stephen, having no son, had appointed Saul, his sister’s son to succeed him. But after the early death of Saul, he took Prince Béla the Blind to his royal court and after the death of Stephen, Béla could take over the crown (1131–1141). However, John II also took in Prince Boris, who was born from the Russian Princess Euphemia, who was sent away by her husband King Kálmán the Learned for infidelity, and Boris considered himself the son of the late king, so he laid claim to the Hungarian throne. He married a Byzantine wife, Princess Anna Doukaina. However, he did not receive any military assistance from the Byzantine Emperor for his purposes, and he eventually sought support in Poland. The instances above clearly indicated that

31 AMTBF Vol. XXIV, p. 109

32 AMTBF Vol. XXV, A, pp. 115–116

at that time, Byzantium did not want to intervene directly in Hungary's internal affairs by supporting a specific pretender to the throne. Also, the actions of the Hungarian king in the Balkans did not cause serious tensions.³³

Béla II the Blind nurtured the family tradition, had the body of his late father Álmos brought home from Byzantium, and buried in the basilica of Székesfehérvár. Bela had four sons, the eldest of whom, Géza II (1141-1161) followed him on the throne. In Byzantium, Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180), the most talented member of the Komnenos dynasty, the son of John II and Piroška/Eiréne, took the throne, who, after the Norman attack was launched against him, joined forces in 1148 with Holy Roman Emperor Conrad III. The golden age of the Middle Byzantine period began with the reign of the Byzantine emperor of half-Hungarian origin. In the second crusade (1143-1148) the emperor's authority was strengthened, but the new German ruler Frederick Barbarossa I no longer advocated the cooperation of the two emperors in a common war in southern Italy and the establishment of a restored, universal empire under Byzantine rule. Norman ruler Roger II, on the other hand, supported the Hungarian king and the Serbs against Byzantium. An axis of alliance was born to realign the whole of Europe in the face of the possibility of German-Byzantine-Venetian cooperation.

King Géza II, one of the Árpád monarchs with the most active foreign policy, fought against Byzantium among his many wars. His aim was twofold: on the one hand, he supported the independence of the Serbs in Raska and Uros II's struggle to increase the power of the Hungarian king there, and on the other hand, Géza II also intervened in the Byzantine infighting by helping Andronikos Komnenos' claim to the throne.

In any case, Manuel had to wage a war against the Serbs. There were two campaigns (1150, 1153) in which the former *status quo* was essentially preserved. One memorable episode of one of the campaigns was even included in the legends of the emperor, although the emperor himself wore its "mark" on his face. Comes Bágyon attacked the Emperor with his Hungarians and

33 Makk 1996, p. 173, 180

almost killed him in a duel. Greek sources depicted Ispán Bágyon (Βακχῖνος ὁ ζουπάνος) as a giant. Historian Ioannes Kinnamos described the famous duel fought with swords in great detail. Finally, “[...] Bakhinos struck the emperor on the jaw with his sword, but he could not cut through the face shield that hung from the helmet. Nevertheless, the blow was so powerful that the clips, which were pressed deep into the flesh, mostly left their mark on the emperor’s face.” (original translation into Hungarian by Gyula Moravcsik).³⁴ The situation was complicated even more by the fact that Boris, who destroyed the Temes region and was supported by the Byzantine Emperor and used against the Hungarian king, also fought in this Byzantine army. Serbia’s fight for independence failed, as did Andronikos’ action. The threat level was increased by the fact that German-Hungarian relations were hostile at that time, and in the spring of 1156 Manuel I made an offer to Frederick I to join forces and start a war against Hungary. The situation was saved by the German emperor’s reluctance to see Byzantine expansion into the Carpathian Basin. Géza also saw this threat, so he tried to normalise the relationship, and in 1157 he even helped the German ruler with a military unit in his war in southern Italy. This was the end of the active foreign policy engagement of the Hungarian king, after which the issues of internal division and succession became the focus of his efforts.

The king’s younger brother, Prince Stephen, finally sought refuge in Byzantium after his failed conspiracy due to the German indifference. Manuel secured a distinguished wife for him, his own niece, Maria Komnene. The elder royal brother, Prince László, also turned against King Géza II, but around 1160, after also failing, he chose Byzantium as his place of refuge. Manuel I – if he wished to intervene into the struggles for the Hungarian throne – immediately found two candidates. His chance to do just that arrived after Géza II’s death. Géza was followed by his firstborn son Stephen III (1161-1172), during whose reign Byzantine-Hungarian relations deteriorated more than ever. Emperor Manuel I now wanted to intervene directly in the succession to the Hungarian throne, and his aim was to conquer the country by helping to the throne a

34 AMTBF Vol. XXXVIII, p. 204

Hungarian king who paid him taxes. After his success on the eastern battlefields, the Emperor focused his attention on the west. The period between 1162 and 1165 saw the most violent Byzantine-Hungarian war. The emperor's troops marched all the way north to Nándorfehérvár, then in 1164 the Hungarians attacked in Dalmatia. Manuel got as far as Bács. In 1165, the Byzantine troops occupied Syrmia, invaded Bosnia, Dalmatia and Croatia. Only with clever diplomacy and with Czech and Halichi help was Stephen III able to prevent further advancement. Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I was content with not intervening.

In this situation, Manuel supported Géza's brother, László, as ruler, who held the power in his hands for a short period of six months (1162-1163), but Archbishop Luke of Esztergom refused to crown him, so the Archbishop of Kalocsa performed the ceremony. However, László soon died. The next candidate of the Byzantine Emperor for the Hungarian throne was Stephen IV (1163-1164), the younger brother of King Géza, but he could not consolidate his position either, and was defeated by the dethroned Stephen III at Székesfehérvár. He fled the country and tried to ask Manuel for effective help. However, the emperor realised that he could not achieve results with the anti-kings, and therefore he started negotiations with Stephen III.

He had already agreed in 1163 to take with him Stephen III's younger brother, Prince Béla, to Constantinople, and also the territories of Dalmatia, Croatia and Syrmia. In return, he agreed that the young prince would marry his daughter Mary, who was born to the Emperor's first wife of German descent. And so it happened. In the capital, Béla converted to Orthodox Christianity, was given the name Alexios and the title "despotes" (Ἀλεξίος δεσπότης), which was the second highest honour after the emperor. His name and signature are visible on official documents and treaties.³⁵ The Byzantine emperor made Alexios/Béla his officially declared heir to the throne. There was a legal opportunity for a prince from the Árpád dynasty to sit on the throne of Byzantium. Prince Béla was in a rather difficult situation, because in Manuel's Hungarian military

35 Olajos 2014, Vol. XXII, p. 143

campaign he had to participate on Stephen IV's side.

In 1164, the Hungarian-Byzantine war resumed, and the area near the border castle of Zimony was the scene of heavy fighting several times. After Stephen IV was poisoned in the castle in 1165, Stephen III succeeded. In 1166, the Byzantine Emperor no longer personally fought against him, but instead he sent his commanders. In 1167 at the "Battle of Zimony", despite the resistance put up by Dénes (Διονύσιος) Comes of Bács, the former fleet commander of Damietta and the relative of the Emperor and now Commander-in-Chief Andronikos Kontostephanos won the battle. The Byzantine emperor also included the entry "ungrikos" among his titles. According to some researchers, he thereby expressed that until the end of his reign, the Hungarian king was subordinated within the Byzantine "commonwealth".³⁶ Despite the Byzantine attacks, King Stephen III was able to hold on to power. However, the young Hungarian Árpád monarch did not have a son, and after his death his brothers Béla and Géza claimed the royal title in 1172.

The fate of Prince Béla had changed in the meantime, with the birth of a son named Alexios to Emperor Manuel in 1169. At the turn of 1170–1171, the Emperor broke up Béla's engagement, stripped him of the title of Despot and Crown Prince, and gave him the title of Kaisar (καῖσαρ, *caesar*). As a new wife, the Emperor married his new wife's older sister, Princess of Antiocheia Agnes Châtillon (Anna), to Béla. The crusader state of the Principality of Antioch was also important in the plans of Emperor Manuel. At the end of the 1150s, Manuel was able to force the principality under Byzantine rule and chose his second wife, a daughter of Châtillon Raynald from there, and even acquired the right to appoint a Patriarch of Antioch. The emperor was thinking of occupying Egypt in a Byzantine-led crusade in alliance with the king of Jerusalem. Prince Alexios/Béla also visited Antioch. In addition to the birth of the Byzantine Crown Prince, with the death of King Stephen III of Hungary in 1172 Béla became important in Hungary, and Hungarian-Byzantine relations took a different path.

36 Obolensky 1999, p. 203

Hungarian-Byzantine relations under the reigns of Béla III and Imre

Emperor Manuel supported Béla in taking the Hungarian throne, and he let him go home with sizable support (money, large escort). He even deployed a Byzantine army on the Hungarian-Byzantine border. In Sofia, he took an oath from the future Hungarian king to represent Byzantine interests. In other words, not to take action against the empire, nor to support Serbian secessionist efforts.³⁷ The coronation, however, was delayed, and Archbishop Luke again refused to crown Béla for fear of the spread of Eastern Christianity. Literature also considered that Béla III was a vassal of the Byzantine Emperor. However, this can be disproved by his good relationship with the Pope. In the struggle between the Holy Roman Emperors and the popes, Béla supported Pope Alexander III against the anti-pope of the emperor, and recognised Alexander as the legitimate Pope. This way he reassured both the Pope and the Hungarian high priests, who were opposed to Byzantine Christianity. Thus, Alexander III authorised the Archbishop of Kalocsa to crown Béla. The new king maintained good relations with the Byzantine Empire as well. He also provided military aid to Manuel for the war against the Seljuk Turks in 1171 in Asia Minor, which ended in Byzantine defeat at the Battle of Myriokephalon.³⁸

In the second phase of his reign (1180-1196), King Béla III pursued a foreign policy of conquest, which also affected Byzantine interests in the Balkans. The death of Emperor Manuel II in 1180 gave him the opportunity. The empire was weakened by internal wars and throne struggles, in which Béla sided with the widowed Empress. The new emperor, the 12-year-old Alexios II Komnenos, was not in power for long, he was soon ousted. The elderly Andronikos I Komnenos (1183-1185) was no longer a friend of the “Westerners”; he was succeeded on the Byzantine throne by Isaac II (1185-1195) of the new Angelos dynasty. The

37 Font 2019, p. 81

38 Makk 1996, p. 208

Hungarian king retook the Croatian, Dalmatian and Syrmian territories that Manuel I captured. He occupied the areas between Nándorfehérvár and Sofia. He became a supporter of the independence struggle of the Serbs in Raska, during which Stefan Nemanja broke away from the empire. At the same time, it gave the Bulgarians favourable conditions for the anti-Byzantine uprising led by Petar and Ivan Asen, which led to the establishment of the second Tsardom of Bulgaria at the turn of 1186. The struggle for independence of the Balkan peoples was also fuelled by the intensifying German-Byzantine conflict, which materialised against Byzantium during the third crusade when Serbians and Bulgarians joining the crusaders made an alliance. The Hungarian king was not a partner in this.

In the summer of 1185, Byzantine emperor Isaac II made peace with Béla III, and they arranged a dynastic marriage. Emperor Isaac married Margaret, daughter of the Hungarian king. In his speech, Byzantine chronicler Niketas Choniates highlighted the beauty of the princess: “[...] she was the empress of all in beauty.” (τῷ κάλλει πασῶν βασιλεύσα).³⁹ Once again, a Hungarian empress of the Árpád dynasty sat on the Byzantine throne. The Hungarian king did not intervene in the Bulgarian fight for freedom, “thereby” supporting his imperial son-in-law. In 1189 he did not join the third crusade that marched through the country (1189–1192). He observed the tension closely between the crusaders, especially the Germans and Byzantium. Emperor Frederick I wanted to lay siege to Constantinople and occupy the city in 1190. In contrast, Béla managed to make peace between the two emperors in Adrianopolis, and Frederick I continued his crusade. The Hungarian King and the Byzantine Emperor discussed the Balkan situation resulting from the Serbian and Bulgarian wars in Syrmia in 1191. Upon the mediation of Pope Celestin III, Béla eventually renounced the conquest of the Serbian territories in favour of the Byzantine emperor. At the same time, it was also clear that towards the end of his reign, with the decline of Byzantium’s power in the Balkans, the Hungarian king wanted to take the place of the emperor himself. This was symbolically demonstrated by the fact that he incorporated the Byzantine double-cross into his coat of arms and even his money.

39 AMTBF Vol. XLIII, p. 261

At the same time, dissatisfaction with the intensified orthodoxy was also visible during this period, especially among the Hungarian clergy. In a letter in Greek(!), the Archbishop of Esztergom Jób had a dogmatic discussion with the Emperor, and with Demetrius Tornikes writing a letter on his behalf, rejecting the Orthodox origin of the Holy Spirit from the Father alone, which was the essence of the Filiôque canonical and dogmatic question. This also indicated a deeper knowledge of the Greek language in the archbishop's environment.⁴⁰ The same Tornikes also wrote a letter to the Pope complaining that, despite his oath to the Byzantine Emperor, Béla had attacked Serbian territory without permission.⁴¹ All this did not mean that King Béla himself opposed Eastern Christianity as he even had the relics of the Bulgarian warrior St. Ivan of Rila brought into Hungary for a while; and he donated the Basilian monastery of Szávaszentedemeter to the Lavra of Jerusalem.⁴²

Béla III was followed by his eldest son, King Imre (1196–1204) to the throne; Isaac II was deprived of the Byzantine throne by his own uncle, who then ruled under the name of Alexios III Angelos (1195–1203). The relationship between the two was defined by the Serbian infighting. In the war between the sons of Nemanja, the older son, Vukan, asked for the support of the Hungarian ruler, King Imre. The actual power, however, was exercised by Stephen Jr., who had a Byzantine wife. With the intervention of King Imre, he banished Stephen Jr., and made Vukan Grand Župan, who later had to acknowledge the supremacy of the King of Hungary, and included the title of King of Serbia among the titles of the King of Hungary.

The fourth crusade (1202–1204) launched to overthrow the Byzantine Empire and accompanied by the occupation of Constantinople and the creation of the Latin Empire, took place during the reign of King Imre, and opened the period of the Late Byzantine Era (1204). Isaac II was deprived of his throne and blinded in the Byzantine infighting. His widow, the Hungarian king's sister

40 Bornemann and Risch 1999, p. 5 (Ritoók, Zs.: Előszó); Ritoók 2021, p. 12; AMTBF Vol. XL, pp. 249–251

41 AMTBF Vol. XL, p. 252

42 Makk 1996, p. 220

Margaret, was then married by Boniface of Montferrat. At the beginning of the crusade, King Imre was forced to tolerate even the Christian siege of the town of Zara, which had sided with the Kingdom of Hungary.

Hungarian-Byzantine relations in the late Byzantine period (1204–1301)

Divided and deprived of its capital, the Byzantine Empire's power was crushed, and this also reduced the strength of and potential in Hungarian-Byzantine relations. The main successor state of the Byzantine Empire was the Empire of Nicaea, whose ruler was Theodore I Lascaris (1204–1222), a relative of the imperial family. Relations of King András II (1205–1231) with both “Byzantine” states led to a dynastic entanglement. In 1215, after the death of his first wife, the German-born Gertrude, he married Yolanta of the Latin Imperial Courtenay family of Constantinople. When the throne of the Latin Empire became vacant, even the King, along with his father-in-law, became potential heirs to the throne. Pope Honorius III, however, supported Peter of Courtenay. King András II's fifth crusade was not in vain, although it was not by the power of his weapons that he achieved his objective. With an excellent diplomatic sense, on his way home András also visited Emperor Theodoros in Nicaea, whose wife was the sister of András' wife. He then engaged Theodoros's daughter, Mary Laskaris, to Prince Béla, his elder son. It was the first time that a prince (and later king) of the Árpád dynasty married the daughter of a Byzantine emperor. The engagement was followed by a happy and harmonious wedding in 1220, thereby providing a personal example of Hungarian-Byzantine relations.

The fighting of and also between the Byzantine successor states ended in 1261 by the fall of the Latin Empire of Constantinople and the return of the Byzantine capital without a fight. However, the power was not grabbed by Laskaris but by the Palaiologos dynasty. Related to the Laskaris family via his wife, the options of King Béla IV (1235–1270) were limited in Byzantine

matters. However, what we know from the Greek-language Chronicle of the Morea about the era is that Hungarian troops were also involved in the conflict between one of the Byzantine successor states, the Despotate of Epirus and the Emperor of Nicaea by fighting on the side of the latter.⁴³

Michael VIII Palaiologos (1259-1282), as the founder of the dynasty, built his power with a strong hand and maintained his relationship with the Árpád dynasty. The successor of Béla IV, King Stephen V (1270–1272), did not forget in his short but very active foreign policy the dynastic relationship with Byzantium during the period of Béla III, and on the Byzantine side the military aid provided to Emperor Michael. Against the states of the Balkans seeking independence, Hungary remained a potential partner for Byzantium, as it was back in the days of Béla III. Michael VIII was worried to see the gains of the Anjou family, Charles I of Anjou's successes with the Balkan Serb-Bulgarian Federation, and their land acquisitions in the Greek territories of Morea. He also saw that the anti-Byzantine policy of the King of Naples and Sicily was favourable for Pope Martin IV, who sought to re-establish the Latin Empire. Therefore, the Byzantine Emperor also contacted the Hungarian king. In 1272, the son of the Byzantine Emperor, Andronikos (II) Palaiologos married one of the Hungarian king's daughters, Ann. This was the third time that a Princess of the Árpád dynasty became the wife of a Byzantine emperor. Unfortunately, this connection ended with Ann's death in 1284, and the second wife of Andronikos II (1282-1328) became Eirene, daughter of the Marquis of Montferrat.⁴⁴

The emperor's reign started the last prosperous era of the late Byzantium, known as the Palaeologan Renaissance. Michael IX, the son of Emperor Andronikos II born to the Emperor's wife from the Árpád dynasty, would have been the next emperor but he died in his father's lifetime, though he was a co-regent already. Emperor Andronikos' second wife, Eiren, had a grudge against him, and would have preferred to see their own child as heir to the throne.⁴⁵

43 AMTBF Vol. XLVI, p. 318, p. 319

44 Ostrogorsky 2000, p. 417

45 AMTBF Vol. LI, p. 337

The changing international power relations were clearly indicated by the fact that the Hungarian king had already established a kinship with the Anjou family in 1270 with the marriage of his son, László to Charles I's daughter, Isabel (Elizabeth). During the reign of András III (1290-1301), the Anjou influence of Naples only intensified in the camp of those who opposed him. In 1300, King Charles II (the Lamb) of Naples sent his 12-year-old grandson, Charles Robert, to Hungary. In 1301, the Byzantine-Hungarian cooperation was also interrupted by the extinction of the Árpád dynasty on the male branch.

With the accession to the Hungarian throne of the Anjou dynasty, who were interested in the Mediterranean, a new era began and, for a while, the idea of helping Byzantium, which was oppressed by the strengthening Ottoman Turks, ended. With the loss of Asia Minor, the Byzantine state was already reduced to Europe and the period of small Byzantine statehood began.



Shepherd's staff made of walrus ivory, mid-11th century,
Dezső Laczkó Museum, Veszprém

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