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WAR EVENTS IN THE ÁRPÁD ERA

The development of a mode of warfare or weaponry is shaped by closely related, interacting factors. The primary determinant is the given historical period. Other determining factors are geographical, i.e. topography and climate. In hot tropical areas with high humidity, thick felt or leather armour cannot be worn. Here, a light, thin sword or sabre with a more flexible blade is sufficient to cut through or pierce thin linen cloth. These light weapons would bounce off stronger armour and would not have enough stability and stab torque. There are weapons and fighting techniques, however, that have been used for over a thousand years in a variety of battlefields and conditions.

Such is the case with the “nomadic” fighting style with steppe roots. A fighting style characterised by reconnoitring and quickly storming the enemy, feigning retreat and counter-attacking, and then relentlessly pursuing and annihilating the fleeing enemy, was the typical fighting style of the Huns, Avars, settling Hungarians, Turks and Mongols. In essence, the frontier castle warriors fought in a similar way: “hideaways by the roads are the scene of hard fighting [...] where pursuers are often faced and defeated”¹ by the Kuruc and the modern Hussars and Cossacks. This fighting style “survived” the heavy Roman infantry, the Crusades and the 14th-15th century Western heavy cavalry era, and became successful in the New World as well. The creator of the US cavalry was Karcag-born Hussar Colonel Mihály Kovács. One of the main virtues of this style of fighting and weaponry is that it is more adaptable to terrain and can overcome long distances more easily than other types of weaponry.

1 Eckhardt 1951, p. 143

In addition to these direct factors, the lifestyle and culture of the area or ethnic group of the historical period under study are important as well of course. Where there is a centuries-old tradition of martial arts, of warfare, it is easier to train and equip a troop or individuals. The way of life, the background culture and religion of a given area or ethnic group cannot be neglected either. These factors are not isolated, but continuously interact with each other.

The steppe fighting style has a centuries-old tradition among Hungarians. Oriental, Byzantine and Western chronicles and annals record the campaigns, weaponry and fighting styles of the Hungarians in the 9th and 10th centuries.² After the successful establishment of their homeland by Álmos and Árpád, the Hungarians fought 47 campaigns from their home in the Carpathian Basin. 42-43 were victorious, while 5-6 were unsuccessful.

In their battles, the Hungarians, both as allies and as enemies, reached distant parts of Europe such as the Ebro, the Danish border, southern Italy and Thessaloniki, crossed deep rivers (Danube, Rhine, Seine, Po, Brenta) and high mountains (Alps, Balkans, Apennines, Pyrenees).³ They were also able to fight in winter, a great achievement in itself: they conquered Basel in 917, fought in central Italy in 922 and fought around Worms in 937. They defeated various enemy armies in major open battles (899 Brenta, 907 Pozsony, 908 Eisenach, 910 Lechfeld, 919 Püchen, 923 Brescia, 942 Rome).⁴ On occasions when they were defeated, the foreign invading army did not win the battle in the Carpathian Basin, they stopped the Hungarian troops in some far-off foreign land. For more than 100 years, no enemy set foot in the Carpathian Basin. This allowed for continuous growth and development. The campaigns did not involve a central princely army or a ruling prince. Apart from the Hungarians, the Vikings were probably the only people in the 10th century who had a realistic knowledge of the geopolitical situation in Europe.

After 1000, during the reign of King St. Stephen, the Hungarian army changed in some respects. This not so much affected the way of fighting and

2 Recommended literature on the topic: Kristó 1996; Györffy 1975; Hidán 2018

3 Bóna 2000, p. 61

4 Ibid. p. 60

the weaponry, but rather the social composition of the armed forces. However, in the royal and aristocratic-papal centres, a type of force generally equipped with Christian-European weaponry also appeared. Yet the majority of the army may still have been armed with traditional old-style weapons. In the battle of Nagyósz, Csanád defeated the army of Ajtony deploying traditional steppe warfare. The following is the account of the battle given in the 14th-century *Greater Gellért Legend*: “After crossing the Tisza, they fought Ajtony and his army. There was a great clamour and uproar; the battle lasted until noon, and many fell wounded from here and there, from both sides. At the end, Csanád’s army set off on the run [...] while Csanád camped that night on a mountain which he called Oroszlános. Ajtony camped in the field called Nagyósz. And soon that night they fell upon each other. And Ajtony’s army, which was encamped on the plain, turned their backs and ran. And the army of Csanád killed Ajtony on the battlefield.”⁵ If we sketch the story on a map, we can see the following: Ajtony’s army arrived from the direction of Marosvár, with the fortress covering its rear. After the first battle, the royal army “took flight”, which was probably a tactical feint, luring Ajtony’s army away from Marosvár, which provided a secure defence. The second battle was at Nagyósz, 40 km from Oroszlános. It is very likely that another royal army, hiding in the reedy areas of the Tisza, cut off Ajtony’s return to the fortress and crushed the army, tired from the 40 km journey and the previous day’s fighting. Whether it was the royal army in hiding or the royal army that had retreated the day before that turned back and defeated Ajtony’s troops, the tactical retreat and “turning back to face the enemy” is a typical steppe fighting style that the king’s commander could hardly have fought back against with his heavily armed and armoured troops in the floodplains of the Tisza and Maros. While it is true that it is difficult to reconstruct the events of a battle on the basis of a legend alone, in this case the location and sequence of events do not contradict logic.

The Hungarians used a similar fighting style to defeat the invading army of Conrad II in 1030. The animals were driven off, the population fled before the

5 Blazovich 1996, pp. 27–28

invading enemy arrived, and the “scorched earth” tactic worked. The German army near the Rába was starving and soon the Hungarian army was on the offensive. Conrad was forced to retreat and, according to a German source, “he returned from Hungary with no troops and having achieved nothing, as the army was threatened by famine and was captured by the Hungarians in Vienna.”⁶

In 1044, Henry III’s army, which defeated Samuel Aba’s army, included Hungarians as well as Germans.

During the reign of András I, the Pechenegs were settled for the purpose of border protection and to strengthen the army. As early as the 10th century, the Pechenegs from the Talmács tribe guarded the entrance to the Vöröstoronyi Pass and the mountains to the west of it were called the Forest of the Pechenegs. The Pechenegs of the Talmács tribe can also be found settled in the border regions of Styria along the Mura, as well as in Moravia in the Morava Gorge, regions still under Hungarian rule in the 10th century.⁷ These Pecheneg settlements in the border defence region fit in with the idea of border protection at the time. In the interior of the country, around Székesfehérvár and at the crossing points of the Tisza, there were also settlements of Pechenegs. Written sources mention the participation of the Pechenegs in the battle in connection with the events of 1051. Although the 14th-century chronicle was written well after the battle and relied on several sources, it is likely that it tells the essence of the battle as it happened. “When the emperor invaded Hungaria and reached the burnt lands, he found neither food for his soldiers nor horsemen, nor did he know where his ships were, so he could not receive any help from them either. Crossing the forests, he reached the Bodokot mountains, though he was short of food of all kinds. In the meantime, Bishop Gebarth arrived at Geurinum and sent a letter to Emperor Henry asking where he should wait for him. But the bearer of the letter, God willing, was captured by King András’ raiders and brought to him. When they learned about the contents of the letter through the interpretation of Bishop Nicholas, they wrote a letter of reply to Bishop Gebarth and sent it to

6 Kristó 1986, p. 58

7 Havassy 1996, p. 14

him with a guest settler. The latter, pretending to have been sent by the emperor, took the letter to Bishop Gebarth, which contained the following: ‘Learn, good Bishop Gebarth, that the great and grave affairs of our empire compel us to return from Hungaria to Teutonia, for our enemies have invaded our empire. Come, then, make haste, destroy the ships as quickly as possible, and join us at Ratispona. It is no longer safe for you either to remain in Hungaria.’ Bishop Gebarth, taking note of the message, fled urgently to Teutonia. The emperor, disappointed in his hope of receiving help from the ships, almost starved to death; a miserable famine threatened his whole army, along with the horses and beasts of burden. Moreover, the Hungarians and the Pechenegs disturbed them incessantly from night to night, killing them with poisoned arrows, stretching ropes between their tents, and thus kidnapping many men who were doing some service. The Teutons, fearing the arrows that rained down on them and consumed them, buried themselves in the earth, and, covering themselves with their shields, lay alive in the same grave with the dead. For in the grave which they dug for the dead, the living lay by night, and that which they dug for the living by night was occupied by the dead by day.”⁸ Simon Kézai describes an event typical of the steppe way of fighting, concerning the Germans who fled at Bársonyos: “[...] and when the emperor’s sentries, with bewildered glances, saw the Hungarians galloping back and forth, they thought there was some trick in the agreement, and, informing the army of this, said that they had come in pursuit of them.”⁹

In 1068, Hungary was attacked by a joint army of Pechenegs and Oghuz Turks. The Hungarian army pursued them and forced the Pecheneg army into battle at Kerlés. The chronicle composition also mentions advancing archers in the Hungarian army, led by Prince Géza: “Prince Geysa, who was always cautious, climbed the gentler slope and attacked the Cumans with arrows. His brother László, on the first attack, killed four of the fiercest of the heathens; the fifth wounded him severely with his arrow, but he killed him immediately. Divine mercy then quickly healed this wound. The heathens shamefully fled

8 Kristó 1986, pp. 117–118

9 Veszprémy 2001, p. 113

from the Hungarians who threatened them with horrible death. The Hungarians, however, pursued them still faster, and made their sharp, thirsty swords drunk with the blood of the Cumans. The freshly shaved heads of the Kumans were cleaved off with their sword strokes like unripe pumpkins.”¹⁰

In 1091, when King László marched against the Croats into the Capella Mountains at Tengerfehérvár (Biograd na Moru, today: Croatia), he reached the Adriatic Sea. At this time the Cumans invaded Transylvania and parts of the Bihar and Tisza regions. According to the 14th century chronicle composition, as soon as the king was informed of this, “he returned faster than he could, and with his soldiers he quickly went after the Cumans”. Although the Cumans were then retreating laden with booty, and therefore could no longer move as fast as they could without prisoners and stolen goods, the speed of the Hungarian army was admirable, since the distance between Tengerfehérvár and the river Pogács is about 530-550 km. Saint László defeated the Cumans in two battles.

The *Képes Krónika (Pictorial Chronicle)* separately mentions the battle of Olsava in 1116 between the Pechenegs and the Szeklers. The battle between Stephen II and Vladislav, Prince of Bohemia, ended with a victory for the Czechs, and the *Képes Krónika* reports on the events according to a chronicle of Stephen III’s time, which has since been lost.¹¹ However, Cosmas of Prague tells us that “even before the word of command was uttered”, some Hungarian troops “crossed the frontier river in front of them” and attacked the Czech camp. Their attack was so fast that the Czech prince was forced to flee.¹²

In April 1146, after Boris – supported by King Conrad III of Germany and Henry, Duke of Bavaria and Margrave of Austria – invaded Hungary and took Pozsony, Géza II quickly rushed to liberate the fortress. Pozsony was very quickly surrounded by archers and various siege engines.¹³ The battle along the river Lajta in 1146 ended in victory for the Hungarians. Although we read again in the interpolated part of the *Képes Krónika* that “the bad Pechenegs

10 Kristó 1986, p. 133

11 Györffy 1990, p. 119

12 Makk 2000, p. 46

13 Ibid., p. 84

and the despicable Szeklers all ran at once like sheep before wolves”, it is likely that their fleeing was a feint. It was their job to start the battle, to confuse the enemy troops, to lure them out of their positions, so that the Hungarian heavy cavalry could then intervene at the right time and place. At the end of the battle, however, it was once again the task of the light cavalry to pursue the enemy, as it had done in 1146, as far as the Fischa River. Ottó Freisingi, in his contemporary work *Gesta Friderici*, when describing the same battle, writes not of Szekler and Pecheneg troops, but of two Hungarian troops of archers at the front of the Hungarian army, led by two ispans.¹⁴ For foreigners, this is thus a characteristic of the Hungarian army. When Géza II sends help to Frederick according to his promise in 1157, the Hungarian army consisted of about half a thousand archers. The Hungarian troops, in the army of Henry Jasomirgott, Duke of Austria, took part in the battles around Milan together with the Czechs and distinguished themselves with their excellent archery.¹⁵

Byzantine sources also mention the Hungarian army in connection with the Hungarian-Byzantine War of 1167. According to these sources, the Hungarian army led by the Hungarian ispan Dénes consisted of fifteen thousand cuirassier cavalrymen, archers and light infantry.¹⁶ The Byzantine opinion on the outcome of the battle is interesting. They attribute the Byzantine victory in part to the fact that they were also equipped with maces, which they used instead of swords that had been chipped in the long battle.¹⁷

A noteworthy part of Anonymus’ *Gesta Hungarorum* is where the author writes about Árpád and the chiefs marching into the town of Attila. The presentation of the twenty-day celebration was probably based on a late 12th, early 13th-century war game, but it is worth mentioning that, in addition to describing the jousting tournament with spears and shields, Anonymus also writes that the young men played and had fun with bows and arrows in the old pagan manner.¹⁸

14 Gombos 1937, pp. 1766–1768

15 Makk 2000, p. 144

16 Kristó 1986, p. 92; Moravcsik 1984, pp. 242–245

17 Moravcsik 1984, p. 245

18 Kristó 1995, p. 332

The year 1230 marked the death of the Austrian prince Leopold VI, who remained on good terms with his cousins, the Hungarian kings Imre and András II for decades. His successor, Frederick, had a belligerent nature and as a result, Hungarian-Austrian clashes began along the border. In 1233, the Hungarians pushed into Styria, and after retreating, they suddenly turned around to face the pursuing Styrians and the ambushing teams also attacked the pursuers. The vast majority of the Styrians were killed in the battle.¹⁹

In the middle of the 13th century, the only threat to the existence of the Hungarian state came from the Mongol invasion. The Mongol invasion of 1241-42 caused terrible destruction and losses. The failure, which included military defeat, was not only of a military nature. Hungary was hit by this powerful attack at a time when the country was already in internal crisis and struggling to find a way out. The disintegration of the old fortress and court estate structure and the royal counties brought about social change. Despite this, it would be a mistake to attribute the defeat and destruction of 1241-42 solely to the internal crisis in Hungary and to faulty military action. The argument in classical military history that the small number of armoured soldiers in the Hungarian army caused the defeat at the Battle of Muhi is also a mistake. Besides, the Hungarian army had troops fighting in the old steppe way, just as the Mongols did. For a good sixty years after 1206, when Genghis Khan raised the flag featuring a nine-legged white yak at the source of the Onon, the Mongols were not defeated.²⁰ The Mongols conquered the entire land from Korea to the Carpathian Basin. The distance between the northern and southern Mongol armies (the Orda and Bajdar armies in the north and the Borundaj in the south) attacking and encircling Hungary was 850-900 km. The main army led by Batu and Subutai attacked almost in the middle. In view of the actual situation in Hungary in 1241, this army could not have been stopped by the river Sajó or by the wooden barricades of Dénes Tomaj, nor by any armoured western-type force. At Lignitz (Legnica), Silesian armoured forces were no match for Orda's and Bajdar's armies, just like the armoured forces of Khorezm were easily defeated by Genghis and Subutai.

19 Kristó 1986, p. 108

20 Ligeti 1962, p. 90

It is true, however, that a well-armed and well-led force with adequate offensive and defensive equipment could have fought the Mongols more successfully. It is worthwhile analysing the Mongol way of fighting and its possible countermeasures from contemporary Eastern, Hungarian and Western sources. In his *History of the Armenians*, Kirakhoz Gandzakeci (1200-1271), describes the destruction of the cities of Dumanis, Samsuilde, Tiflis and Lori.²¹ In addition to the usual reconnaissance, deterrence and feigned retreat, strategies by which the great towns of Central Asia were taken, we also read here of the undermining and blowing up of walls. Without exception, the fortifications mentioned had strong stone walls. The description of the Battle of Mohi by Sung Lien in the book Yuan Li is very interesting.²² According to the Chinese historian, at the bridge over the Sajó river thirty of Batu's cuirassiers and one of his lieutenants, Bakatu, fell. Even if the number cannot be verified, the very fact that the Mongol army included cuirassiers confirms other sources about the Mongols' use of scaled armour and cuirassiers.

Master Rogerius, like other sources, mentions a dense and continuous shooting of arrows as one of the Mongols' main battle strengths.²³ War machines are also mentioned several times by both Rogerius and Dean Thomas of Spalato. Only the latter author speaks in detail about tactical retreat, which can be strategic (from Pest to the Sajó river), and about war machines used in open battle.²⁴ Their equipment is also described in detail by Thomas of Spalato and Johannes de Plano Carpini.²⁵ In addition to the general questions of the Mongol invasion, and thus of homeland defence, he also mentioned the need for troops equipped and trained for battle on the plain. In Hungary, the insight of Béla IV and his advisers lay precisely in asking the towns to provide armoured troops, while also calling the Cuman back into the country and starting extensive fortress building.²⁶

21 Katona 1981, p. 77

22 Ibid., p. 83

23 Ibid., pp. 129-130

24 Ibid., pp. 174-181

25 Ibid., pp. 238-249

26 As early as 16 November 1242, he confirmed the privileges of Petrinja, Szamobor (today: Samobor, Croatia) and Varasd (today: Varaždin, Croatia) and adopted a new measure

The reform of the armed forces affected the entire armed forces of the country, from the “loyal barons” of the king, through the middle strata of society to the subordinate elements.²⁷ In 1249, in response to the border fighting initiated by the Austrians, Béla IV led a large army into Austria, in which the Cumans were involved. During the fighting in July, Hungarian and Cuman troops wreaked havoc on Austrian soil as far as Mariazell and Kirchsschlag.²⁸

In 1259, a total of 1500, or according to other versions of the text, 3000 or 13000 mounted archers, carefully selected, arrived from Hungary to assist the ruler of Nicaea.²⁹ In addition to the Hungarians, the Byzantine army also included auxiliary troops from Hungary, Bulgaria and Seljuk at the Battle of Pelagonia. These troops aimed to move quickly and exhaust the opponent, in typical steppe fighting style.³⁰

The Hungarians had already won a battle against Ottokar II in 1271 in the Rábca region (today: Rabča, Slovakia), where the Czechs were chased away by a dense barrage of arrows, but the big clash took place in 1278 at Dürnkrut. The decisive battle was fought on 26 August 1278. From the Hungarian side, the battle could almost be a textbook example of good cooperation between light and heavy armoured troops at the right time. Simon Kézai describes the preparations for the battle very vividly. From his chronicle we learn that

near Verőce. He ordered that the flourishing trading settlement of Zagreb-Váralja (ricus Latinorum) be moved to the “Gréc” (Gradec) hill and fortified with walls. He obliged the new community to send ten soldiers to the royal army in the event of a campaign, thus not only laying the foundations of the free royal city of Zagreb, but also revealing a new principle. The concept of the town as a legal-topographical unit of defence. Similar measures can be seen later concerning Buda Castle (1244), Körmend (1244) and Nyitra (today: Nitra, Slovakia) (1248). For more on the topic c.f.: Szűcs 1993, p. 11, pp. 24–25

27 Subordinate elements are to be understood as servants such as horse tenders, stewards, cupbearers and armour-bearers. Jenő Szűcs describes the case of a cupbearer named Milosz from the village of Dejter. If the two sons of the person concerned agreed to take part in the campaign against Ottokar in full armour (*in armis militaribus*), the family would be exempted from its conditional service. Milos’ two sons fulfilled this pledge and were elevated to the rank of royal warriors (*exercituoles regii*) in a charter of 15 June 1252. For more on the topic c.f.: Szűcs 1993, p. 22

28 Kristó 1986, p. 134

29 Lukinich 1925, pp. 225–240

30 Darkó 1934, p. 95

Rudolph's army moved very slowly because of its heavy armour, and when King László the Cuman became aware that Ottokar was preparing for battle, he quickly approached the Czech army and surrounded it on all sides. The text mentions Hungarian as well as Cuman archers.³¹ Thus the attack was launched by the Hungarian and the Cuman archers, and the Czech leader Milota Dedič's soldiers, who had suffered heavy losses from arrows, ran away, followed by the Polish soldiers. Then the heavy-armed fighters of the Hungarian army engaged the Czechs in close combat. On the other flank, Rudolph's German troops clashed with Czech, Meissen, Thuringian, Bavarian and Polish fighters. Rudolph's Germans, in a desperate situation, were saved by the intervention of the Hungarian army when they attacked the advancing Czechs from the side. Meanwhile, the Cumans, retreating from the close combat, captured the Czech king's camp. Ottokar attempted to turn the seemingly lost battle around by setting a personal example, but he fell from his horse in the clash. The fleeing Czechs were then pursued and the battle of Dürnkrut became a total victory for László the Cuman and Rudolph Habsburg. King László and the Hungarian army returned home with many prisoners and spoils of war, and the captured Czech flags and shields were hung on the walls of the cathedral in Fehérvár to commemorate the victory.³²

The battle of Hód Lake fought in 1280 or 1282 between the rebellious Cumans and László IV is interesting. The Hungarian chronicle dates the battle to 1282 and tells the story as if the country had been invaded by a foreign force. The battle ended with the king's victory and some of the Cumans left the country, while those remaining accepted the king's terms.³³ What is noteworthy in the description of the battle is the heavy and unexpected downpour of rain against the heathens, "who trusted in their bows and arrows, but because of the heavy rain, according to the words of the prophet, they became like the dirt of the earth." The quote from the *Book of Psalms*, whether describing actual rain or just a topos, is typical in every way. In the narratives of many medieval and

31 Veszprémy 2001, p. 218

32 Kristó 1986, pp. 144–146

33 Ibid., pp. 229–230

migration-period battles, the victory over the arrow-striking Eastern enemy is also attributed by the chroniclers to the rapid and heavy rain.³⁴ It is true that the compound, rigid-horned recurve bow sags when wet, but it is also true that heavy cavalry cannot charge adequately on wet and loosened ground either.

In 1285, Hungary was attacked by the Tartars. Under the fortress of Torockó, the Szeklers of Aranyosszék defeated the Tartars, liberated more than a thousand people and captured many of the Tartars. The Tartars who remained in the country, later joined the royal army and were called “nyögér” (*partners, servants, soldiers of the king*).³⁵ Between 1285 and 1290, both King László IV and Prince Albert of Austria and Styria, the son of King Rudolph IV of Germany, were increasingly troubled by the Kőszegi family, who were holding more and more castles in the western part of Transdanubia. Prince Albert attacked in 1285. According to German chronicles, the Austrians and Styrians living by the border warned Albert’s soldiers that the Hungarians could not be fought as if they were French knights, but by alternately fleeing and attacking, as the situation demanded. When the armoured Germans stood up, the Hungarians, shooting their arrows, sometimes fled and other times attacked. When the Germans contemplated sending a messenger to the Hungarians and asking them to stop shooting and fight like knights, the Hungarians even shot down the messenger. The many hours of shooting arrows had its effect, and Albert’s army surrendered. The written report specifically highlighted typically steppe-style warfare that was disadvantageous for the Germans³⁶.

Also German sources such as Ottokar von Steier, the *Annales Wormatienses* and the *Chronicon Colmariense* speak of typical Hungarian warfare and

34 The significance of rain, and more precisely of sudden showers, is not restricted to European chronicles. In medieval Chinese and Central Asian historical literature, a sudden downpour of rain, fatal for one of the combatants, is mentioned repeatedly. Researcher Ágnes Birtalan, an expert in Mongolian folklore and beliefs, has found a Mongolian belief about the fighting activities of rain-bearing shamans. In Si Naj-an’s book, entitled *Suj Hu Csuán* (Európa Könyvkiadó, 1961, translated by Barnabás Csongor) we find several spells to cast a storm and send rain, but also reverse such in the description of various battles.

35 Németh 1953, pp. 304–318

36 Kristó 1986, p. 149

weaponry in connection with the Battle of Gölheim in 1298. King András III had supported his father-in-law, Prince Albert, with a few hundred horsemen in order to win the German kingship. The battle on the left bank of the Rhine ended with Adolf's death and Albert's victory. The German sources record that the Hungarian army led by Demeter, son of Nicholas of the Balassa family, had no heavy weapons but bows and arrows, swam safely across deep rivers on their horses, and had their hair and long beards braided.³⁷

One of the reasons for Hungarian victories in the Árpád era was that the right troops were thrown into battle at the right place and time. In addition to the troops that traditionally fought with steppe equipment and in a nomadic style, a small but select force with European-style heavy weaponry was created. The country was also protected by a system of fortifications built over the centuries. The Szekler and Cuman populations, living under a special administrative system, were given special military tasks.

In the Árpád era, the Hungarian army successfully defended Hungary. Not only did the Hungarian state not suffer any territorial losses, it even managed to grow in comparison to the state of St. Stephen.

37 Wertner 1915, pp. 58–84

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