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## EARLY ROYAL POWER IN THE CARPATHIAN BASIN AND SOME INTERESTING CONNECTIONS

It is common knowledge that the victory over Koppány brought about the establishment of the Hungarian Christian kingdom, which also finalised the cultural direction change of the Carpathian basin that played a key role in the region. The power setting in which the Hungarian elite found itself – headed by its ruling clan – was a structure already in a hegemonistic situation in Europe, and Christianity was an inevitable part of it. However, this power model underwent a significant change by the time it reached the Vistula-Carpathians line, and from the collapse of the Western Roman Empire until the turn of the millennium.

The early Christian power underwent significant changes in the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries. After the Carolingians rose to power, a new variant of legitimation had to be established, since the most significant power in the West at that time had undergone a dynastic change. The Carolingians did not have royal ascendants or lineages that went back to pagan chief deities. The ruling family had an increased need to legitimise their power. The Franks, who were successful against the Muslims, were also to be an important supporter of the Papacy too. This is why it is not surprising that they could deservedly rely on the church in consolidating their power. Therefore, the belief in being chosen by God and suitability came to the fore as opposed to being of royal descent.<sup>1</sup> This model

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1 This is well summarised by Richárd Szántó (Szántó 1997, pp. 150-157).

change resulted in the development of a new type of sacrality in the Christian empires, and this new approach is what the Hungarian elite encountered at the start of the millennium.

The Hungarian situation was peculiar in the sense that it was not a small pagan elite of different ethnic and language backgrounds that settled on a Romanised base population, but rather, what was typical of the Hungarian tribal structure is that most of the nobles as well as the common people belonged to the same cultural and language environment. And in this milieu there was continuity.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the princely family of the Hungarian, nomadic tribal structure, the Árpáds, had sacrality right before the establishment of the Christian kingdom (we have no information on when this developed, but probably in the 10<sup>th</sup> century). This independent development could have offered a serious competitive advantage in building an empire, if only the pagan power model had not been forced out of the area in the meantime. So a new type of legitimation was needed to establish a new type of order. This is what Grand Prince Géza prepared for his son, Vajk, since Christianity had already gained ground in the area, and it had to be taken into account that this would have an impact on dynastic relations as well.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, nomadic Hungarians knew and understood the means and symbols of the steppe peoples' legitimacy they encountered in the East.<sup>3</sup> The legitimacy of the princely rule was also ensured by aptitude and by divine (or spiritual) blessing, while the fortune and special skills of the ancestors were transferred to the ruler thanks to the legendary ancestors. The Prince was considered to be the embodiment of the heavenly, cosmic order.<sup>4</sup> The demands of the vertical Hungarian society<sup>5</sup> had to be taken into account during a ruler

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2 See a summary of this in the work of Jenő Szűcs (Szűcs 1984, pp. 84–91).

3 In nomadic empires, sense of duty, designation for a task as well as suitability were all considered indispensable characteristics of a ruler. These rulers had to bear the traits of a hero as well as of a sage. It is through them that the laws of heaven were enforced, and they were also directly responsible for the wellbeing of the people (Zimonyi 2012, pp. 42–45).

4 Márton, 1997, pp. 72–79

5 For more on the structure and operation of the contemporary Hungarian society c.f.: Kovács 2021, pp. 111–128.

election, and local traditions were still strongly present among common people even in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> So although in the pagan cultural setting the Hungarian society of the millennium thought along other legitimacy norms,<sup>7</sup> this, of course, did not mean that they rejected the Christian forms of legitimacy. Traditionally, the nomads had a flexible relationship with the different religions. That is, the pagan Hungarian elite interpreted an inauguration based on Christian rites as an affirmation of suitability according to pagan traditions.

By supporting Vajk/Stephen on the issue of throne succession, the newly baptised Hungarian nobles used Christian legitimation alongside the contemporary pagan one to prove the legitimacy and suitability of their chosen ruler.<sup>8</sup> Vajk was still a pagan successor of the prince when he clashed with Koppány.<sup>9</sup> According to sources, Vajk was girded before the battle of the opposing armies.<sup>10</sup> Opinions diverge on the reasons why he was girded. According to some, he was appointed commander-in-chief of the army in line with western (knight) traditions, while according to others, he was declared of age in line with eastern traditions.<sup>11</sup> From the perspective of our topic, it is of paramount importance that we know Árpád-descendants were fighting for the contemporary title of the Hungarian prince and not for the subsequent title

6 Kornél Szovák mentions in particular that the customary law and system of beliefs were still going strong even after the elite had changed religion (Szovák 2015, pp. 145–148).

7 A later but rather detailed description gives account of the aspects of legitimacy in connection with nomadic peoples, which provides a good analogy for the earlier power perspective of the Turkish peoples. The book entitled *A Dzsingisz-legendá könyve (The book of the Gengis Legend)* gives account of the expectations made by steppe peoples of their rulers. There were six such criteria: they had to be charismatic, they had to expand or protect their empire, they had to follow and enforce the laws of the nomadic society, they had to be just/useful, they had to be ruthless towards their enemies but also exercise mercy, and finally they had to be good organisers (Ivanics 2001, pp. 161-171).

8 An initial manifestation of the change in legitimation can be observed among Hungarians at this time (Dobrovits 2011, pp. 100-102).

9 István R. Kiss draws attention to a special opportunity of succession, treating the closeness to the dynasty-founding ancestor as a subvariety of the principle of seniority. Accordingly, the specific age was only decisive in the hierarchy of adult male descendants within a given lineage (R. Kiss 1928, pp. 733-765).

10 “Then he collected his army and went to face the enemy. The first time they girded him with a sword was next to the Garam river;” (Geréb 1993, p. 22).

11 For a summary on this topic see Sándor László Tóth (Tóth 2010).

of king. So we should primarily give way to nomadic power symbolism in the context of the story. This means Vajk had to be declared of age for his succession to the throne to be legitimate in opposition to Koppány. Nevertheless, from the perspective of western supporters, it must have been important that the ruler proved his suitability as commander of the army, and that he appeared as the chosen one of Christ as head of the Christian-led armies immediately before the battle with the pagans. We have already briefly explored the nomadic power attributes. To ensure he could support pagans composing the majority of contemporary Hungarian society, Vajk had to present criteria of the ruler which were legitimate from the perspective of the nomads. By being declared of age, Vajk became entitled to rule, since similarly to his challenger, he was a member of the Árpád dynasty. So now he could legitimately confront Koppány, although due to the principle of seniority, Koppány still had legal grounds to the throne. By leading the armies (even if this was only symbolic), Vajk met the criteria of courage too. With his victory, Vajk also testified that he was God's chosen one, and he also proved the criteria of being valiant as a future ruler. These indicators not only signified the legitimacy of his rule among the elite, but also among the common people. József Deér noticed that after Vajk/Stephen rose to power, there were no pagan uprisings for the entirety of his reign.<sup>12</sup> I believe this follows from what is described above. The principality, for which Vajk had to seriously fight, had to be converted into a Christian kingdom. King Stephen demonstrated extraordinary organisational skills when he took over Transylvania, which not only brought peace, it also helped our Christian neighbours and relatives on a dynastic basis. Thus he also protected/expanded the country (growing the inland area under Stephen's reign), which was also strong feedback and a clear indication of his divine blessedness. King Stephen was one of the rare rulers who never lost a single battle during his reign. It was well known that, unlike other contemporary rulers, he could read and was skilled in other things as well. His preserved laws and admonitions paint a picture of a literate, insightful, suitable and consolidated ruler, which

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12 Deér 2007, pp. 84–86

means he also complied with the nomad term of being a wise ruler. One event, preserved in sources, proves the ruler's generosity/graciousness as well as that he enforced laws with a firm hand and without any partiality.<sup>13</sup> During his reign, King Stephen not only strengthened the borders of the country, but his church organisation work was also significant. In addition, he competently handled the distribution and utilisation of the country's resources (salt, fur, ores). He also minted independent money, and in his legislation, he endeavoured to Christianise contemporary Hungarian customary law, then insert it into the rule of law securing the operation of the empire, which at that time was a combination of Greek-Roman law and Germanic customary law. At that time, the Church was not only responsible for nurturing people's souls, it was almost entirely responsible for public administration too. In addition, it also influenced international relations. Furthermore, the Church ensured sacredness within the dynasty, which converted to Christianity.<sup>14</sup> Due to his Bavarian relations, King Stephen actively participated in the German-Polish conflict (embodied in the Kievan struggle for the crown). As head of his armed forces, he launched a successful military campaign to help the Byzantines in the Balkans, which was a serious gesture to his powerful and strong neighbours, and ensured a good long-term relationship with the Byzantine Empire. In this context, it should be noted that he did not launch a separate military campaign abroad. Over our borders, he fought battles strictly as part of international cooperations, which

13 “[...] Since his name has spread all over the world, and even his judgments were praised everywhere, the 60 [Pecheneg] men (whom I mentioned above) departed from the area of the Bulgarians and headed towards the borders of Pannonia with their carts loaded with all their cargo, gold and silver and all kinds of jewellery. However, a group of servants, whose souls may be inclined to evil, flared up from the fire of evil, and attacked them. They killed some of them with a sword, stole all their things, and left them there half-dead. Leaving the events and what they suffered to the judgment of the King, they continued their journey, hurried straight ahead before him, falling on their knees. [...] In accordance with the wisdom in his soul, the king did not threaten either with his gaze or with his words; instead [...] he called for the men who attempted to kill the Pechenegs. “Why did you violate the laws of God's ordinance and judged innocent men mercilessly?” [...] After the judgment was pronounced, they were led out, and they met their death by being hung in twos at crossroads all over the country.” (ÁKÍF pp. 310–311).

14 Sándor Domanovszky presented the patterns of western exercises of power and succession in Hungarian practice in detail (Domanovszky 1913, pp. 367–398).

was beneficial to the perception of him and the security of the country. After the birth of his son Imre, Stephen rightfully hoped that thanks to his connections as well as his personal charisma, the country, which had become powerful and strong, would not be considered as prey by its neighbours, but rather as a partner, which they should keep a peaceful relationship with by means of dynastic relations. However, the death of the highly talented Prince Imre completely changed the situation. The country not only had to face attempts of occupation from abroad, they also had to find a legitimate heir. After the death of Stephen, Peter Orseolo ascended the throne (1038–1041; 1044–1046), whose legitimacy was questioned from several sides.<sup>15</sup> On behalf of the elite, in addition to fear of German influence, Peter also managed to antagonise the Church with the changes in personnel he made in the dignitaries. In addition, in the eyes of the still mostly pagan common people, matrilineality was not considered legitimate as long as there was an adult male descendant in the line of the Árpáds.<sup>16</sup> During this unstable and temporary period, the Hungarians' devotion to Christianity was also questioned. The pagan uprisings raised doubts in neighbouring countries too, which posed an extreme threat to the Hungarians. This is because it could have created legal grounds for close and strong neighbours to intervene.

The following decades were turbulent with two pagan uprisings and external military interventions. The Kingdom of Hungary needed all its strength to avoid having a dependent relationship with the Holy Roman Empire or the Byzantine Empire, or even worse, having to face the dismemberment of the country. In this period, members of the Árpád dynasty had to strike a balance between the common pagan people, the Hungarian Church, and the neighbouring empires. This took place on two levels. At the lower level, well-being and security were basic conditions. If these were met, they did not have to fear an uprising since

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15 Teiszler 2021, pp. 537–549 <https://www.doi.org/10.53644/MKIE.2020.537>

16 In terms of royal succession, the dominance of the Church in legitimation issues was unquestionable in the 10–12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Besides this though, other aspects prevailed too, depending on the strength of local traditions. So seniority dominated the dynasty in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, while in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the emphasis was on primogeniture (Bartoniak 1926, 785–841).

the malcontent commoners would not incite the immediate relatives of the family for a coup. Also, if the hinterland was stable, they could successfully launch successful defensive or conquest campaigns. At the higher level, dynastic connections meant a network of contacts which they could rely on in case of serious conflicts. Sacredness had particular importance in the diplomacy toolbox when the powers of contemporary Europe were the ones who decided in the question of peace and war. Christianity was a fundamental but necessary minimum, its existence ensured a sort of moral/legal boundary in the conflict of the opposing parties. That is, during diplomatic machinations and wars there was a certain “from/to” boundary, the crossing of which could lead to serious sanctions. Those outside the Christian community could not count on such controlled aggression. But all of this only worked perfectly in theory. This is why sacredness had major importance, since strong legitimation was necessary in this system of power relations typical of Christian states. Strong legitimation presented significant security and scope for Christian dynasties.

The power relations of the ruler in the Kingdom of Hungary were not independent from the manners of investiture and the special local relations. The Rus were the closest relations, but the nature of their power was still different.<sup>17</sup> King St. Stephen was most likely crowned according to the *ordo* of Mainz. Thus according to the western approach (of Roman-Germanic tradition), the ruler was *rex et sacerdos*, so it was within his scope of authority to establish dioceses and the Pope only approved it. At the same time, coronation was not widespread in 11<sup>th</sup> century Rus. The investiture took place by enthronement.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, churches in the Kingdom of Hungary enjoyed independence in such a way that the anointed king could independently expand his organisation and the allocated economic assets (fish lakes, arable land, ferries, servants, etc.). The other pillar of power was accessible through the establishment of a unified system of lands and taxing. The implementation of Christian power could be achieved most efficiently by the establishment of counties. In light of this, the

17 The innovative approach to the genealogy of the Árpáds as well as its thorough literature/methodological research is provided by Péter Báling (Báling 2021).

18 For more on this see the work of Márta Font (Font 1998, pp. 10–12).

Hungarian king was able to create an order of loyal, secular (as independent from him) nobles, who had various obligations to their ruler.

There were two fundamental theories with regard to early royal power. According to one, the Hungarian royal counties were built on the former clan areas of occupation. This was achieved by creating new counties from two-thirds of the clan's occupation areas, with someone at the head who was only dependent on the ruler, not on the local clan. The remaining one-third was left in the hands of the clan, led by one of the local elites supporting Stephen.<sup>19</sup> The other theory outlined an entirely different organisational principle. In this other theory, the secular and ecclesiastical structure developed in parallel to each other during the reign of King St. Stephen and the kings following him. Each archdeaconry within the diocese corresponds to an area of county administration. The counties were led either by strangers who arrived from abroad, or by one of the king's (Stephen's) trustworthy, extended relatives.<sup>20</sup> The new power structure strongly affected what royal power would be like. This is why holding power and the uprising against the king – i.e. the attempt to seize power – was interesting in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, since it was based on power sharing and the Duchy system that grew out of it. Dániel Bagi conducted a thorough and in-depth analysis of the Duchy system, so we can refrain from a lengthier analysis of the topic. However, we should note that according to some, such a separation of power can be traced back to the reign of King András I and King Béla I (or even later), while others attribute it to a direct nomad antecedent, which can already be observed in connection with Prince Géza and Koppány. It is clear that the Duchy, whenever it was established, certainly had a military function besides its administrative and economic ones.<sup>21</sup> The intermediate position is represented by Márta Font and Attila Zsoldos, according to whom, the establishment of the Duchy as a form of power sharing that can be seen as an agreement within the (royal) family can be traced back to the era of

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19 Györffy 1977, pp. 192–227; 1983, pp. 366–388

20 Kristó 1980, pp. 436–490

21 Bagi 2017, pp. 39–74



King St. Stephen.<sup>22</sup> Of course, sharing power was important for the grantees and guardians since their position largely depended on the outcomes of these negotiations. However, within the royal family, seniority could have been a significant basis for legitimation.<sup>23</sup> This could have been particularly important vis-a-vis primogeniture, but only until one of the claimants to the throne rose to power. From then on, he himself had an interest in primogeniture to exclude any collateral relatives. So even if the brilliant idea of István R. Kiss cannot be proven directly in the case of the Árpáds, the existence of such a special type of primogeniture (the critical nature of being genealogically close to the dynasty founder, which enjoyed primacy within the principle of age appropriateness), contemporary Árpád descendants could still make efforts to maintain this tradition as long as it was in their best interest. Charisma played an important role in the argumentation of such heirs, who, in addition to the general and afore-mentioned special type of seniority, were older than their rivals (a good example of this is Koppány and Vajk), or were of the same age, but despite their younger age they could have still been genealogically closer to the dynasty founder or the previous ruler (see Boris's claim to the throne over Béla II (the Blind)). On the other hand, charisma could have been a good argument for many, because due to them being older they had had an opportunity to prove their suitability and divine blessedness (during battles, diplomatic events etc.),<sup>24</sup> against their sometimes still underage rivals (we can see this with Solomon and Béla I). So it is not the case (as some mistakenly assumed) that an extremely ancient and pagan customary law had a strong presence in an unchanged form. But rather, this special rulership argument prevailed through a lack of regulation in inheritance, not as a general legal principle based on consensus, but as one of the arguments of the current heir, as long as their case coincided

22 Font 2007, pp. 65–70; Zsoldos 2005, pp. 72–76

23 This was especially important in the era in question since international recognition of the ruler was mostly due to support from the Church. However, the primacy of legitimation and suitability in the question of throne succession was inconsistent in the Kingdom of Hungary, even in the 11-12<sup>th</sup> centuries. The divine origin of the king's power, though, was still well-established in the era (Thoroczkay 2020, pp. 95-109).

24 Dümmerth 1986, pp. 117–121

with the old title. Of course, this was independent of whether the person still believed in the pagan rules or was already a Christian.

Thus a lack of regulation surrounding throne succession in the young Kingdom of Hungary left many questions unanswered. This provided leeway for both the members of the Árpád dynasty as well as for those on the lower, but still dominant, level of power to interfere with the exercise of power, and by doing so, increase their own assets and improve their position. Such a bending of power in the new system might substantially have modified the situation of the obligated/vassals and other allies. In the case of certain conflicts of interest, this created an opportunity for the opposing parties to continue their conflict at a lower level, indirectly, i.e. through their allies, subjects and confidants. Therefore, not all conflicts of power were handled at the highest levels, or they could be kept at a local level, so the conflicts which were not acute could be resolved. Of course, the Church played the lead role in this mediation.<sup>25</sup> This also contributed to power struggles not spreading across the whole country, so from the outside the situation did not seem as chaotic that it needed intervention from conquerors, unless it was a dynastic call for help. From the aspect of the common people – who were mostly still pagan – and the superficially Christian elite, the guidelines for forms of legitimation were important in the transitional period in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Within the new power structure, the Church was the point of reference, and international relations also took place based on the guidelines of Christian customary law. As a result, there was a certain duality in Hungary, which was simultaneously based on the inherited, pagan forms of legitimation as well as the legalising forms of the new organisation principle. These were irreconcilably opposed, since, as previously mentioned, the nomads

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25 As a result, world events were observed from the perspective of the Church in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Their view of history was only legitimate through Christian glasses, while the pagan past was only understood as an aberration of their ancestors. The motherland was also considered to be a terrible place, which weighed down on the shoulders of the ancestors due to the sins of paganism. However, the Carpathian Basin was given as a rightful claim to the successors by converting to Christianity (Mályusz 1963, pp. 4–8). The sole criterion of the Church temporarily overruled clan traditions, since not only legitimation but also public administration and diplomacy were almost entirely in the hands of the Church.

treated religion and politics flexibly. The legitimate and suitable ruler, who had divine blessing, tried to dispose of his rivals since they not only posed a threat to him, but to the country as a future bequest. There was a consensus that only the descendants of Árpád were eligible as legitimate rulers. The inheritance of power, however, was unregulated. Primogeniture and seniority could equally be considered a basis of reference for seizing power. As to which was dominant, that depended on which was more beneficial for the heir. In addition, it also carried a lot of weight which forms made it most possible to seize and stabilise power in the administrative/military/economic relations of early power. In light of this, it is interesting whether the ruler who recently came to power had to share his power or not. If yes, how did he do so? Which areas and assets within the country could satisfy the needs of the person holding the title of prince? And all of this while actively helping the ruler defend the Kingdom, if the ruler, in exchange for sharing power, expected the prince to do his part in defending the country. Therefore, the agreement had to be reasonable. This was decided upon by the current throne heirs, as close/distant family members, but it also had to be deliberated on by the officials of the established power. Namely, power positioning could substantially have modified the nature of an agreement as well as its compliance (attaining/retaining a guardian position or acquiring ecclesiastical assets and titles, as well as retaining or obtaining the title of ispan, chief baron and other titles), and leaving its mark on the functioning of the entire system of early royal power. It is through these we should observe dynastic power struggles within the Árpád dynasty.<sup>26</sup> We should analyse the lack or existence of pagan uprisings, the expulsion of Peter Orseolo, the renunciation of Levente in favour of András, the agreement between András I and Béla I, the struggles of King Solomon, Géza I as well as the accession to power of Saint László, Kálmán the Learned, already a clergyman, in place of his brother. The era is an exciting and important part of the history of the Kingdom of Hungary. The early relations of the Kingdom had a significant impact on the Hungarian power regime and thus also on the leeway of the Árpád dynasty.

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26 Teiszler 2021, pp. 552–555. <https://www.doi.org/10.53644/MKIE.2020.537>

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