

LÁSZLÓ KOVÁCS

DEPICTIONS OF SAINT LÁSZLÓ IN UPPER HUNGARY

The memory of Saint László

We can say with absolute certainty that Saint László is still a living figure of our history, for he has surely survived his death more than nine hundred years ago through his foundations, institutions, relics, customs, chronicles, legends, folk tales, hymns, and in the inspiration he has given to artists, poets, writers, historians and philosophers.

The author of the legend of Saint László, created at the time of his canonisation in 1192, places him alongside Saint Stephen and assesses his historical role in the following manner: “When he reigned, all of Pannonia flourished with such order and prosperity that never since the time of Saint Stephen has it sparkled so wonderfully. Hungary began to surpass almost all other countries in rank and glory.”¹

If we call Saint Stephen the founder of the country, it is all the more deserving to call Saint László the preserver of the country. With Saint László's accession to the throne, the most turbulent period of the state established by Saint Stephen, which had experienced constant throne disputes, pagan rebellions, and attacks from the west and especially from the east endangering our sovereignty, ended. While still a prince, László defended the country from

1 Érszegi 2004

the invasion of the eastern Pechenegs. The story of saving the Hungarian girl from a Cuman raider is connected to one of these victories, the Battle of Kerlés (today: Chiraleş, Romania).

He consolidated the economic life of the country mostly by what today would perhaps be considered strict laws against theft. It was under his reign that the organisation of the church, shattered by pagan rebellions (think of the martyr death of Bishop Gellért), but also religious life were solidified. In this activity, it was significant that in 1083, by his decree, “the bodies of those who had sown the seeds of faith in Pannonia and led the country to God through their sermons and deeds were elevated”² – wrote the chronicler about the canonisation of Saint Stephen, Saint Imre, Saint Gellért, Andrew Zorard and Saint Benedict. But he also consolidated religious life with his laws and was a mediator of the cult of the Virgin Mary to the West when he added three Marian feasts to the list of festivities at the Synod of Szabolcs. He founded dioceses and monasteries, and tradition has it that the establishment of the collegiate chapter and provostry of Pozsony (today: Bratislava, Slovakia) was also inspired by him.

The canonisation of King László took place 97 years after his death, in 1192, at the initiative of King Béla III (with the approval of Pope Celestine III) who honoured in László the ideal of a chivalrous king. László was not a martyr, so it was not his death but his life that earned him the grace of sanctity. He became a Christian ideal owing to his true Christian way of living.

The miracles that occurred after his death and canonisation, were preceded by wondrous events that happened to him or through him during his life. These were not only preserved in the saint’s biography, but also in folk tradition, in legends and folk tales about him, almost up to the present day. Many of these were already recorded in the text and images of the Anjou Legendarium of the early 14th century.

The most characteristic motifs of the Saint László legends can be incorporated in one central narrative: the enemy invades the country (Cuman,

2 Bollók 2004

Tatar, Ottoman) and as they are overwhelming in number, the king (and his army) has to flee. However, the pursuers are hot on his trail, and are about to catch up with him, when, by divine inspiration, László scatters his money, and while the enemy soldiers are busy picking up the treasure, he escapes. Afterwards, the discarded coins turn to stone. But the pagans continued with their pursuit of the king, and again are closing in dangerously, when László again prays to God and his appeal is heard: the mountain behind him splits in two and his pursuers plunge into the opened chasm. However, his vicissitudes persist: the Hungarian army finds no food on the barren land, but at the king's prayer, God sends gentle deer to feed them. The thirsty army needs water too though, and a life-saving body of water either spurts out from under the horseshoe of László's horse, or the king himself breaks the rock with his sword and draws water.³

Saint László memorial sites in Upper Hungary

Saint László spent the majority of his life in Upper Hungary (today: Slovakia), and some of the miraculous events of his life occurred here too, so it is natural that this is where most of the memorial sites associated with him can be found. Three sites in particular should be highlighted.

Pozsony (today: Bratislava)

Saint László's cult in Pozsony has been continuous since the Middle Ages. Many chapels and churches were dedicated to his memory, and he was portrayed on murals and sculptures. The most important memorial sites in Pozsony:

3 Magyar 1998

Old Town Hall

The earliest Saint László relics can be found in the Old Town Hall building. The underpass next to the tower and the Gothic chapel of Saint László were built around 1350. One of the keystones of the vault depicts the crowned head of Saint László. One of the figures on the frescoed ornaments under the vault of the sanctuary is Saint László. It is assumed that the full-body statue of Saint László, which now stands on a console on the outside wall of the town hall, was also made at this time. The statue depicts Saint László as a knight king with the orb in his right hand, and his left hand resting on the escutcheon with the double cross. Originally it could have stood indoors, because the statue is much smaller than a human, and the lower part of the leg is not finely carved.

Church of St László

The classical building of the church erected in honour of Saint László and the so-called “polgári árpolda” [civil nursery home] next to it stood on the corner of Kórház or Ispotály utca. At the end of the 11th century, a xenodochium of the Augustinian order summoned by Saint László stood at the site of the present-day building, to which the Saint László Chapel was later added. This building was demolished in 1529. However, in 1543 a new xenodochium was built to which the new single-nave Saint László Chapel was attached. But by the early 19th century, this too had fallen into such a state of disrepair that it had to be completely demolished.

The present-day classical Church of St László and the civil nursing home was built on the site in 1830. Behind the classical facade lined with towers, the church nave has an oval floor plan with chapels adjoining on each side. The altarpiece of the high altar was painted by Ferdinand Lütgendorf. The picture depicts the apotheosis of Saint László, with the building of the hospital and church building below.

Primate's Palace [Primaciálny palác]

Relics of Saint László can be found in one of the most famous buildings of Bratislava, the Primate's Palace. There was already an ecclesiastical building on this site in the Middle Ages, the so-called "Püspökház" [Bishop's House]. In 1454, Dénes Széchy, Archbishop of Esztergom had a chapel built here dedicated to Saint László. The Primate's Palace of today was built by Archbishop József Batthyány between 1776 and 1781. The octagonal Saint László Chapel, built in the new building, stands on the site of the old one on all three floors.

The altarpiece of the high altar was painted by András Zallinger and depicts the apotheosis of Saint László. The ceiling fresco of the dome was painted by Maulbertsch in 1780 and it depicts the scene of László drawing water. In the multi-figure picture, three figures from among Saint László's soldiers wearing special clothing represent three Hungarian social groups: the nobility, the clergy and the serfs. The Hungarians of Bratislava hold their annual Saint László commemoration here.

Nyitra (today: Nitra)

The castle and town of Nyitra played an important role throughout the Árpád era. It is already known from the time of St. Stephen that Vasul, Saint László's grandfather, was kept then blinded here. As the centre of the Duchy, it was the seat of his father Prince Béla, then of Saint László during Géza's time. According to the chronicles, he died here in 1095.

The cult of Saint László had increased significance in Nyitra from the very beginning. The high altar of St. Emmeram's Cathedral has magnificent statues of the kings Saint Stephen and Saint László, and the relief above the bishop's chapel also depicts Saint László.

The Episcopal Seminary was originally named after Saint László, but its title was changed to Saint Gorazd in 1990. The altarpiece of the chapel of the seminary also depicts Saint László.

A “plague statue” erected in 1739 stands in the square in front of Nyitra Castle. On the four corners of the column are the figures of Saint Stephen, Saint Imre, Saint Adalbert and Saint László.

The Piarist Monastery and the Church of Saint László can be found in Alsóváros [Lower Town] in Nyitra, and the King Saint László Secondary School of the Piarists also operated here from 1698 until 1919. The present-day Baroque Church of Saint László was built in 1741 on the site of the Chapel of Saint László, next to the monastery. The high altar picture shows Saint László drawing water from a rock, sitting on a white horse with the Holy Crown on his head.

In the historic coat of arms of Nyitra county, Saint László is depicted in armour striking down on the Cuman fighter with an axe in his right hand and his left hand resting on a shield decorated with the Hungarian coat of arms. In the current coat of arms of Nyitra county the colours have been changed, and on the escutcheon there is only a double cross instead of the Hungarian coat of arms.

Debrőd (Debrad)

The village is the most well-known place of worship dedicated to Saint László in Upper Hungary. The Debrőd of Abaúj-Torna county is today situated in the district of Košice. The village was an ancestral property of the Premonstratensian Provostry of Jászóvár. On the edge of a clearing on the village border, there is a spring, the creation of which is associated with the name of Saint László in the folk tradition. People attributed healing powers to the spring water through Saint László, and this led to a spontaneous pilgrimage. The Premonstratensian order were famous for their Saint László cult, thus the Chapel of Saint László was built near the spring during the time of Provost Domonkos Báthory around 1500. Hungarian *Simplicissimus*, published in the 17th century, reads: “They point to a spring in Jászó, which was created [by Saint László] on a high, rocky mountain, when on one occasion he and his army were driven up there and suffered from a lack of water. I saw it with my own eyes during a pilgrimage,

because it is customary to make a pilgrimage here every year, on the day of Saint László. He is said to have begged for water from God, in the following way. He was fervently praying on his horse when suddenly the horse jumped with him against the rock, and the water gushed out and the holy spring is still there today.”⁴

However, despite the regular pilgrimages, the state of the chapel deteriorated so badly that it was demolished. Although the number of visitors to the place of worship declined after the destruction of the chapel, the people of the village continued to hold the feast of Saint László for a long time. In 1952 there was also a Marian apparition at the spring.

Next to the Saint László spring, on the foundations of the old ruins, a Plant Church was consecrated in honour of Saint László, and the long-lasting tradition of the pilgrimage was relaunched in 2007.

Saint László churches in Upper Hungary

A manifestation of the cult of saints included appointing them as patron saints of churches, chapels and ecclesiastical institutions. In the Middle Ages (until the 16th century), many churches were dedicated to Saint László. Many of the churches built in the Baroque era chose Saint László as their patron saint, but several of those built in the 19th and even in the 20th century are also named after Saint László. The number of place names with patronage is quite significant, in addition to which, Saint László appears in the coat of arms of villages and towns too.

4 Túróczi and Trostler 1956.

Churches bearing the name of Saint László in Upper Hungary

Medieval Saint László churches still standing today

- **Bodafalva** (Bodice, today part of Liptószen tmiklós [Liptovský Mikuláš]) – the Church of Saint László already existed in 1360.
- **Csejte** (Čachtice) – its church is mentioned in 1373, its altarpiece is from 1787: Saint László worshipping the Virgin Mary – the coat of arms of the village also bears the figure of Saint László.
- **Csütörtökhely** (Spišský Štvrtok) – the former name of the village was *Szentlászló* [Saint László], its church was built in the 13th century, its carved altar statue depicts Saint László, and the town's coat of arms also bears his figure.
- **Dobóca** (Dubovec) – its church was built in the 13th century, its altarpiece from the 18th century depicts Saint László.
- **Kassaújfalu** (today part of Košice [Kassa]) – its church was mentioned in 1297, the present-day church was built in 1771, also bearing the name of Saint László, a colourful carved statue of Saint László decorates the altar.
- **Lévna** (Livina, Nitra county) – its church was already standing in 1332, and the coat of arms of the village also depicted Saint László.
- **Liptómattyasóc** (Liptovské Matiašovce) – its church was built in the 16th century, Saint László's statue stands on the altar, and the coat of arms of the village depicts his figure.
- **Lutilla** (Lutila) – its church was built in the 15th century, Saint László's carved statue decorates the altar, and the coat of arms of the village depicts his figure.
- **Nagypaka** (Velká Paka) – its church was built in 1317, the name of the village was *Szentlászlópaka*, on the wall of the shrine there is a modern Saint László picture, the village coat of arms depicts his figure.
- **Necpál** (Necpaly) – Saint László's church was built around 1250, it has a series of images depicting the Saint László legend in the sanctuary and the attic, and the village coat of arms depicts his standing figure.

- **Rajec** – its church is mentioned in 1332, the altarpiece is from the 18th century, Saint László prays in front of the Virgin Mary, on the coat of arms of the town Saint László is depicted with an axe and a shield.

Modern Saint László churches

- **Dluha** (Árva county) – its church was built in 1811, altarpiece: Saint László draws water.
- **Fülekkovácsi** (Filakovské Kováče) – its church was built in 1899, altarpiece: Saint László draws water.
- **Koszorús** (Kosorin, Bars county) – its church was built in 1803, it was renovated in 1926, altarpiece: a standing Saint László with an axe and a shield; coat of arms depicts Saint László on horseback.
- **Ógyalla** (Hurbanovo) – Saint László's church was built in 1718, altarpiece: Saint László draws water.
- **Pusztafödemes** (Pusté Úľany) – its church was built in the 18th century, altarpiece: Saint László draws water.
- **Szete** (Kubáňovo) – its church was built in 1737, its altarpiece is an 18th century Baroque work of art of Saint László drawing water; the coat of arms of the village depicts Saint László on horseback.
- **Sajószentkirály** (Kráľ) – according to tradition, it was Saint László's village, its church of St László was built in 1773, altarpiece: Saint László prays in front of the Virgin Mary; the coat of arms of the village features Saint László's crown.
- **Zsemlér** (Žemliare) – its church was built in 1806, altarpiece: Saint László draws water, the coat of arms depicts Saint László's figure.

Medieval Saint László churches which are derelict or have changed name

- **Bodófalva** (Bodovice, Túroc county) – the church of Saint László is mentioned in 1422, it is an evangelical church.
- **Hanva** (Chanava) – The Church of Saint László is mentioned in 1332, it is a reformed church.

- **Karaszko** (Kraskovo) – the church today is owned by the evangelical church, it is decorated with wall paintings of the Saint László legend.
- **Kecsó** (Kečovo) – The Church of Saint László is mentioned in the 14th century.
- **Kissalló** (Tekovské Lužianky) – The Church of Saint László was already standing in 1293.
- **Kövi** (Kameňany) – the Church of Saint László in the mining town is owned by the evangelical church, a Saint László mural decorates the church wall.
- **Pozsonyszőlős** (Vajnory) – its Church of Saint László was mentioned in 1278, its title from 1968 is “Our Lady of Sorrows”.
- **Szinyelipóc** (Lipovce, Sáros county) – the Church of Saint László is mentioned in 1299.

Depictions of Saint László in the churches of Upper Hungary

Like the Saint László cult, its artistic depictions as manifestations of the cult were at their peak in the 14th-15th centuries. The Saint László cult was reinforced by the Baroque era, which naturally resulted in Baroque works of art, particularly in the genres of altarpieces and altar statues, and Baroque ceiling frescoes. In more recent times, individual sculptural and other plastic representations also appeared.

In this brief overview, only the medieval works of art, murals, altarpieces, altar statues and other works of plastic art from Upper Hungary are presented.

Saint László on medieval murals

- **Cserény** (Čerín) – A Saint László picture can be seen on the southern wall of the church nave in Cserény, in Zólyom county. The king was depicted

with a bearded, crowned head and a halo around it. In his left hand he holds the sceptre, in his right, the orb. On the left side of the picture, the donor is shown as a much smaller figure.

- **Pónik** (Poniky) – In the church in Pónik, under the framed series of the images of the Saint László legend, the saint is depicted in a portrait-style votive image, also framed.

Saint László among the three Holy Kings

- **Csetnek** (Štítňik) – The three Holy Kings of Hungary can be seen in the intrados of the semi-circular transverse arch of the church nave in Csetnek, the picture on top depicts the crowned, haloed figure of Saint László with a shield and an axe.
- **Csécs** (Čečejevce) – The murals of the church in Csetnek are from the mid-14th century. On the inner wall of the triumphal arch is the figure of Saint László: a crowned head with long hair, a sword in his right hand and his left hand open.
- **Kövi** (Kameňany) – Saint Stephen and Saint László's larger-than-life figures can be seen in the shrine of the church originally dedicated to Saint László. Unfortunately, only a part of the figure of Saint László with a haloed head and a raised sword can be seen.
- **Zsigra** (Žehra) – In the church in Zsigra, Saint Stephen is depicted on the intrados of the triumphal arch with Saint László opposite him. In the picture, the king is shown wearing an ermine cloak and a long-sleeved robe in the French fashion of Lajos the Great. In his right hand he holds a sceptre, in the right a golden orb.
- **Gömörράkos** (Rákoš) – In the sanctuary of the church of Gömörράkos, the line of apostles also includes the three Holy Kings of Hungary in the same size. Saint László is depicted with a bearded, crowned and haloed head with an axe and orb in his hands.
- **Pelsóc** (Plešivec) – The frescoed images of the three Holy Kings of Hungary greet the visitors on the southern external wall of the church, above the

archivolt portal. In reality, the picture now only shows Saint László in armour, with an axe and orb, and Saint Stephen.

- **Krasznahorkaváralja** (Krásnohorské Podhradie) – In a framed painting in the church nave, the three Holy Kings are shown standing in a colonnaded gallery. Saint László is depicted in armour wearing faulds and holding a striped shield in his left hand and an axe in his right.
- **Lelesz** (Leles) – In the St. Michael Chapel in Lelesz, the half-length image of the three Holy Kings of Hungary can be seen underneath the fresco fragment of Saint Elisabeth. Opposite, on the right, only Saint László's head is visible.

The biblical Three Kings – The three Holy Kings of Hungary

There was a Hungarian tradition that on wall paintings commemorating the Christmas festivities, the three biblical kings, the Magi, were depicted in the shape of the three Holy Kings of Hungary. The old king, Saint Stephen is kneeling before the Virgin Mary (the motif of offering the crown), the bearded, middle-aged king is Saint László, and the young king is Saint Imre.

- **Karaszko** (Kraszkovo) – In the church in Karaszko, under the sequence of images of the Saint László legend, you can see the picture of the *Adoration of the Magi*. The old king, Saint Stephen is kneeling in front of the Virgin Mary. In the centre of the image is the bearded King Saint László with his crown and a halo around his head. Behind him is Saint Imre. All three kings are depicted with haloes around their heads, which are not there on the depictions of the biblical three kings.
- **Pónik** (Poniky) – In the church in Pónik, the picture entitled the *Adoration of the Magi* can also be found under the sequence of images of the Saint László legend. Saint Stephen is kneeling before the Virgin Mary. On the right of the throne, the bearded Saint László is also kneeling with the crown on and a halo around his head.

- **Rimabrézó** (Rimavské Brezovo) – The sequence of images presenting the life of Mary includes a scene of *The Adoration of the Magi*. The three king figures: the old King Saint Stephen kneeling, and the two other kings, the bearded Saint László and the young Saint Imre facing each other.
- **Etfelva** (Turičky) – The frescoes of Etfelva in Nógrád county were painted around 1370. On the sequence of *The Adoration of the Magi*, the kneeling King Saint Stephen is depicted with the crowned Saint László and the young Saint Imre on his left.

Saint László on altarpieces and altar statues

The depiction of the Hungarian saints on altarpieces was common all round Upper Hungary, and not only in the churches whose patron saint was a Hungarian saint. Saint László is generally portrayed together with Saint Stephen and Saint Imre.

- **Pónik** (Poniky) – Saint Stephen and Saint László are depicted in the top right-hand picture of the winged high altar, made around 1520. Saint László holds an axe, his left hand resting on a shield decorated with the double cross and red stripes.
- **Gánóc** (Gánovce) – The winged altar of Ganóc was made in János Weysz's workshop in Košice in 1490. On the left-hand side of the altar, you can see the full-body statue of Saint László. The king is shown in armour with a large crown decorated with lilies, the sceptre and orb in his hands.
- **Szepeshely** (Spišská Kapitula) – In St Martin's Cathedral in Szepeshely, Hungarian saints decorate several of the altars. In the top left picture on the high altar, the three Holy Kings of Hungary are depicted in lavish, colourful clothes. On the left is Saint László in armour with a brown beard, an axe and the orb. In the lower left picture on the painted altarpiece on the wings of the Altar of Mary's Dormition, Saint László is shown in armour, with a pleated cloak above him, an axe in his hand and holding a double-cross shield. The Altar of the Coronation of Mary stands in the Zápolya Chapel,

the façade of which is decorated on the left with the carved, painted statue of Saint László, with an axe and a double-cross shield in his hands.

- **Bártfa** (Bardejov) – On the late Gothic altarpiece of the Basilica of St Giles, Saint László is depicted with an axe and the orb.

Medieval sculptural representations of Saint László in the churches of Upper Hungary

Sculptures, including those of saints, were a complementary element of architecture in the Middle Ages, a period dominated by the Romanesque and Gothic styles. These were in fact stone carvings, which were used as ornamental elements for archivolt portals, keystones of vaults and consoles. The Gothic period created new genres: individual devotional statues, winged altar statues. In addition to stone carvings, wooden sculptures gained in significance too.

- **Pozsony (today: Bratislava, Slovakia)** – On the keystone of the vault of the Saint László Chapel above the Town Hall, Saint László is depicted wearing a beard and crown, and on the external wall, his statue holds a shield and the orb in his hands.
- **Egyházgelle** (Kostolná Gala) – Saint László's bust stands as the console under the Gothic tabernacle of the St. Peter and Paul Church. The king's crowned, bearded head bears the features of Saint László.
- **Besztercebánya** (Banská Bystrica) – The ribbed vaults of one of the chapels of the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Besztercebánya end in busts, including the painted, gilded busts of the three Holy Kings of Hungary among whom Saint László was depicted with the crown, an axe and the orb.
- **Eperjes** (Prešov) – Stone busts decorate the consoles of the Gothic vault of the St. Nicholas Church, which depict the three Holy Kings, among them Saint László with an axe and orb.
- **Kassa** (Košice) – The St Elisabeth Cathedral in Košice accommodates several plastic representations of the Holy Kings of Hungary. The painted

king statues stand on the pillars of the vault running under the gallery on the western side of the nave of the basilica. Saint László was depicted with the crown, his hair cascading down, and dressed in armour with the sceptre and orb. The full-bodied king statues are erected in the side chambers of the northern gate of the basilica. On the right, Saint László is seen with the sceptre, a sword in his belt and the double-cross shield, and on his chest the cross of the crusaders.

Depictions of the Saint László legend in Upper Hungary churches

The fresco cycle is based on the episode after the Battle of Kerlés (Cserhalom) in 1068, when Prince László saved a Hungarian girl from her abductor, a Cuman warrior. The fresco cycle usually comprises five or six pictures, or scenes: **Leaving** – László leaves Várad (today: Oradea, Romania) with his soldiers; **The Chase, The Battle** – László pointing his spear forward begins chasing the Cuman warrior galloping away with the Hungarian girl while shooting arrows backwards, this incident is often portrayed as part of a whirling battle scene; **Wrestling** – the girl drags the Cuman warrior off his horse, and László wrestles with the man on foot. (This is usually a visual representation of a metaphorical duel, the haloed, holy king is fighting to protect Christianity from the Cuman symbolising paganism. One explanation for the tongue of fire that shoots out from the Cuman's mouth is that this is also a symbolic battle between Good and Evil, which is usually emphasised by the fresco artist's use of the opposing light and darkness.) In the end, the girl comes to the rescue of the king and cuts the Achilles tendon of the warrior with an enormous axe; **The Beheading** – László grabs the defeated Cuman by the hair, and the girl strikes down on his neck with an axe or a sword; **Resting** – the king lays his head in the girl's lap, and the girl leans over him.⁵

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In various degrees of completeness, this series of images appear in the following churches in Upper Hungary: in Csallóköz (Žitný ostrov): Gútor and Szentmihályfa; in Gömör: Gömörrákos, Karaszko, Rimabánya; in Szepesség and Sáros county: Kakaslomnic, Szepesmindszent, Vitfalva, Zsigra, Veresalma; in Liptó, Turóc, Zólyom, Nitra counties: Liptószentandrás, Necpál, Pónik, Nyitrakoros.

- **Gútor** (Hamuliakovo) – On the northern wall of the nave of the Church of the Holy Cross in Gútor is a fresco cycle of the Saint László legend which could have been painted around 1370. One interesting fact is that the pictures of the given scenes are not positioned linearly, but one above the other. The Chase is visible most clearly.
- **Szentmihályfa** (Michal na Ostrove) – The series of scenes of the Saint László legend can be seen in the top row on the northern wall of the church of Szentmihályfa. Only three pieces of the series are visible: The Chase, Wrestling and The Beheading.
- **Gömörrákos** (Rákoš) – In the Holy Trinity Church in Gömörrákos, the linearly positioned frescoes of the Saint László legend can be seen in the top strip on the northern wall of the nave. In the various parts of the frescoes, Saint László is sitting on a white horse in armour with a halo around his head. The images of the Saint László cycle in Gömörrákos follow each other like scenes in a movie.
- **Karaszko** (Kraszkovo) – The Saint László legend in Karaszko was probably painted by a master from the royal court of Buda around the 1370s. The mural cycle is complete, it consists of six scenes. The sequence is interesting because of its white background and the extremely detailed, individualised faces.
- **Rimabánya** (Rimavská Baňa) – The 13th century church was painted a century later and includes a 10-metre-long depiction of the Saint László legend. The opening picture shows the town of Nagyvárad (today: Oradea, Romania) and a blond girl in a long dress standing in front of one of the towers of the castle wall, an image that does not appear in any other depictions of the legend. Saint László is shown on a white horse in a knight's armour, but without a helmet, wearing the crown. His hair is blonde, which

is rare in Saint László images, but matches the hair colour in the portraits of Sigismund of Luxembourg.

- **Kakaslomnic** (Velká Lomnica) – The Saint László legend in Kakaslomnic is one of the most well-known, owing to the fact that after its uncovering (1957) and restoration, it was found to be one of the earliest depictions of the legend. The series of images suggest that the master of the pictures in Kakaslomnic was in contact with the royal court. The fresco can be seen at eye level in the sacristy of St. Catherine’s Church. Three scenes are clearly visible: the figure of the abductor Cuman warrior on horseback, the two men wrestling without weapons and the beheading of the Cuman warrior.
- **Szepesmindszent** (Bijacovce) – The frescoes representing the Saint László legend in Szepesmindszent could have been painted around 1400. These ended up in the attic when the church was reconstructed. It survived in fragments only, but it is a very nice, stylistic depiction of the Saint László legend.
- **Vitfalva** (Vítkovce) – The legend cycle in the church in Vitfalva is unique among the Saint László legend depictions. The picture series from the 14th century is a folkloristically naive depiction, as the usual scenes are uniquely illustrated by the painter in the style of children’s tales. The Vitfalva fresco cycle contains elements not seen anywhere else. Such an element is the devil who has a spiked head, a three-pronged beard, and carries the human soul on his shoulders.
- **Zsigra** (Žehra) – The church in Zsigra was painted after its construction in around 1280, and the Saint László legend cycle was painted in the 14th century, partially covering it. In 1638, a depiction of the Holy Cross was found under the cycle, and as a result of it being uncovered, just a fragment of one of the most rarely depicted scenes, the dismounting of the Cuman from his horse, is visible now.
- **Liptószentandrás** (Liptovský Ondrej) – The western wall of the church in Liptószentandrás is decorated with the scene of the Saint László legend. On the right side of the rather ruined picture, you can see the departure scene from Nagyvárád. It is precisely this scene that is usually missing from the Saint László cycle painted in the churches of the Szepesség.

- **Necpál** (Necpaly) – The church dedicated to Saint László was decorated around 1380; the sequence of the Saint László legend can be seen on the northern wall. At the end of the 16th century the nave was given a new vault, so these frescoes ended up in the attic. They are in a relatively good state, but because of the covering of the vault only The Chase and two parts of The Battle scenes are visible.
- **Pónik** (Poniky) – The fresco cycle depicting the Saint László legend can be found in the top part of the southern wall of the nave in the church of Pónik. The peculiarity of this fresco cycle is that the individual scenes have painted frames.
- **Vörösalma** (Červenica pri Sabinove) – The 13th-century church received its fresco decoration in the 14th century. In 1733, the nave was covered with a new, lower vault, so most of the frescoes ended up in the attic. Unfortunately, a large portion of the pictures of the cycle are covered by the vault today; roughly four scenes can be identified in the remaining visible parts. It can be clearly seen, however, when the girl pulls the Cuman warrior off his horse.
- **Nyitrakoros** (Krušovce) – The fresco cycle of the Saint László legend in the St. Nicholas Church in Nyitrakoros was created in the 14th century, although part of it is now in the attic because of a lower vault subsequently installed. Most of The Chase scene survived, Saint László's figure on a horse is visible in its entirety.

Saint László in Upper-Hungarian folk tradition

The figure of King Saint László has been present in our folk traditions from the very beginning, almost until today. The most important surviving stories of the Saint László collection of legends were gathered in the villages of Gömör and Abaúj, in the eastern part of Upper Hungary.

Saint László's money, Cuman gold

It is one of the most popular medieval tales of Saint László. In fact, it is an aetiological tale that tries to explain the strange shape of the fossilised remains of unicellular Nummulites.

The following version was recorded by József Mató in 1992:

“Saint László once waged war against the Cumans. He had already defeated them once, but the Cumans were preparing for another war. Saint László confronted them a second time and the Cumans began to flee. Saint László then pursued them, but they started to throw away a lot of money so the Hungarian soldiers would stop to collect it, and while doing so, the Cumans would turn back and attack them. Saint László realising the imminent danger prayed to God to turn the money into stone. God listened to his plea and turned the coins into stone. Saint László continued the pursuit of the Cumans, and for the third time won a glorious victory over them.”⁶

The legend of cracking the mountain in two

The legend of the Torda rift was recorded by Zsigmond Szendrey in 1925: the tale of how the Zadiel Valley was created was recounted by Ferenc Demeter from Méhész (Abaúj-Torna county) with the following words: “Our great king had often visited our land. And on one occasion the following happened. Once, while hunting, they failed to notice the approaching enemy. The king only recognised them when they were already close. Almost at the last minute, he jumped on his horse and rode away from his pursuers. He rode from one forest to the other. His horse was dripping with sweat, and was already showing signs of fatigue and exhaustion. His enemies were fast catching up. In his final desperation, the king looked up to the sky and cried out to God for help: “Lord, help me, save me from the enemy.” God heard the

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prayer of our gracious king, and a miracle occurred: Behind Saint László, the mountain cracked and a huge valley was formed. All his pursuers fell into the abyss to their death there.”⁷

The miraculous drawing of water

Along with the adventure at Kerlés (today: Chiraleș, Romania, the miraculous drawing of water is the most popular and widespread Saint László legend, and the mystical cult of the Baroque era made it even more well-known. It is known throughout the Hungarian language area.

Dénes Lengyel published the following story from Debrőd based on a folk tale from the Abaúj-Torna region:

“When King Saint László marched with his army past the villages of Jászó and Debrőd in pursuit of the fleeing enemy, they ran out of food and water. The soldiers were tormented by insatiable thirst, so much so that they began to cry out loud in agony. The leader of the Tatars heard this, and asked King László with mockery in his voice:

‘Do you hear this, King? Why are your soldiers wailing so much?’

‘Because they want to fight you so bad’ – replied King Saint László.

But before the battle began, the holy king started to pray to God to refresh his weary soldiers. God once again heard his begging, and behold, water bubbled up in the wake of his horse’s shoes, and an abundant spring burst. The spring refreshed the soldiers, and since then its gushing water has never run dry or dried up. This spring is still called Saint László Well.

The delicious water of the Saint László Well is still there at the border of Debrőd to quench the thirst of anyone passing by.”⁸

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The story of deer and buffaloes

The story appears in Saint László's legend, and has its origins in the Old Testament, where the Lord, upon the begging of Moses, sent the Jews in the wilderness manna and an army of quails. In the legend of Saint László, this is the story of the second miraculous act.

Mrs Beniczky from Debrőd told the story in her own words in 1995: "They had nothing to eat in the great forests. Then Saint László prayed to the good God to have mercy on him, otherwise his army would perish. At that moment, wild animals flocked out of the woods in such great numbers that they could catch enough without shooting at them. They immediately started to roast and cook, and prepared them the best they could."⁹

His horse was called a "Táltos"

The *Táltos* [shaman] horse of our folktales and the surviving wall paintings of the legend may have had an influence on the inclusion of the *Táltos* motif in the Saint László legends.

Gizella Dunajszky from Debrőd connects the *Táltos* horse motif with the story of Kerlés:

"Knights who protected the faith had horses like the *Táltos* horse. In battles, the *Táltos* horses were always at the front, they led the way. It was said that Saint László had a *Táltos* horse as well. So when the girl threw herself down, it picked her up. The horse. Yes, indeed."¹⁰

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