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# HUNGARIAN STUDIES

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## BYZANTINE EMPEROR CONSTANTINE VII PORPHYROGENITOS AND THE SAGA OF THE HUNGARIAN CONQUEST

PÉTER VÁCZY

Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos (†959), who inherited the love of literature from his father, Leo the Wise, appears to have delighted in collecting the legendary material of foreign peoples. In his well-known book entitled *De Administrando Imperio* there are many passages that illustrate his interest in all kinds of popular manifestation. The tone and terminology of chapters on various peoples reveal that Constantine's informers came from the rank and file and that their words were often recorded in a rough and unrefined fashion. These passages of his book differ substantially from those where the author draws upon texts of Byzantine chroniclers which display literary elaboration. If we read, for instance, the material collected on Dalmatia – divided into two whole chapters (29, 30) – or the narrative on the origin, language, customs etc. of the coastal Croatians (31), the Serbs (32) and other minor Slavic people of the Adria seashore, we would agree with the Emperor that this material deserved to have been recorded, even if uncritically, at such great length.

Bearing this in mind, we are bound to see the chapters on the Magyars (13, 37–42, line 18) from a different angle. For the Hungarians, just as the Croatians and other peoples living in a pristine community, when asked by the Byzantines to speak about their origin and past, did not enumerate the bare historical facts, but transposed these facts into the realm of myth, as they had heard them from their minstrels. As every genre, the heroic song too had its particular rules sustained by the force of a living tradition. Of our heroic songs dated from the age of the Conquest only a few fragments have survived in our Latin chronicle literature, but none has been preserved in its original language form. From these fragments, however, it is possible to establish, that our heroic songs cannot have been much different from the compositions and rendering of the Eurasian Turkic–Mongolian peoples. On the strength of certain traces it may be said that the bulk of our songs from the age of the Conquest was composed not in the Hungarian language, but in accordance with the requirements of the princely courts in Turkish, in plain Turkish or Bulgarian–Turkish.

It is precisely through the work of Emperor Constantine cited here that the role of the Pechenegs in the history of the Magyar Conquest has become familiar. Regino, who writes in Latin, also imputes to the Pechenegs – gaining information from elsewhere – that the Magyars had left the Black Sea coastline and migrated to their present homeland (in the year 889). The Pechenegs attacked when the Hungarian warriors were far away in Italy staying there for one year (from August 899 to August 900). When they returned, the

sight of the perished homeland (“Etelköz”) caused the Magyars — late in the fall of 900 — to take possession of Pannonia which was occupied by the Franks, but which they had plundered in transit not long before. This, I think, is the reality that may be gleaned from the data.

Let us now see how this historical reality has grown into a mythical narrative. We should be glad that it is precisely this initial part of the saga of the Conquest that has survived in a less revised form, though in Latin abstract and in prose. “As soon as the Magyars left the town of Kiev they crossed the Snowy Mountain at a region where they found innumerable eagles. They could not stay on for long here, as the eagles descended from the trees like flies and devoured and killed their cattle and horses” (Chron. s. XIV c. 26. *Scriptores rer. Hung. I.* 286). In this manner did the Pechenegs, agents of the destruction of the old homeland, become eagles in the saga. Another mythical element is that the passage through the Snowy Mountains took *three* months according to the account. As the Hungarians had to flee from the eagles, the figure three is clearly intended to denote a small quantity. This number was used in the same sense by the Hungarian who informed Niketas (the commander of the fleet, and presumably the envoy of Leo the Wise sent to Árpád Kurszán) “of the three years” spent by the Magyars in Lebedia (894). It would be a mistake to take this dating literally. The envoy’s report was employed as a source by Emperor Constantine in his work cited here (c. 38).

There is less favorable material for us in the fragment of the Conquest saga recorded in the 14th century Hungarian chronicle concerning Árpád (c. 28, cf. also c. 23). Undoubtedly, the saga in this form bears the marks of a late, scholastic revision. “In the middle of the country”, on the Great Plain, reigns Svatopluk, a prince with a historical name. He is the adversary of Árpád, the Hungarian hero of the Conquest, or rather — and this is important — his sole adversary, from whom Árpád wants to obtain the future Hungary not in a duel, but through cunning and gift. When ultimately a fight breaks out Svatopluk flees from the Magyars and “throws himself into the Danube and gets drowned in its swift waters”. The revision is of a later date because Svatopluk’s name occurs in it in its later form as *Zuatapolug*. This is all the more striking as in the later chapters of the Hungarian chronicle (122, 140) there appears a Czech prince of this name in the story of king Salamon and the princes, but under the name *Sentapolug*, *Sentepolug*, which is a transitory form between the newer and the original old Moravian *Svetoplk*. The Hungarian chronicler does not claim his hero to have been the renowned Moravian prince Svatopluk (870–894), apparently because he himself is not aware of the connection. Indeed, he states that Svatopluk started his rule after Attila’s death “in the heart of Hungary”, *circa partes Danubii*.

That the original name of the hero was changed by the later chronicler in the name of historical authenticity is clear from a remark to be found in our chronicle literature (*Kézai*, *Gesta* c. 23 and *Chron. s. XIV* c. 23). “There exists a tradition that the Magyars returning to Pannonia for the second time found there not *Zuatapolug* but Marót (*Norot*) as ruler.” This is followed by an involved genealogical explanation which need not be discussed here. Later, more “erudite” ages attempted to bring the saga of the Hungarian Conquest closer to historical reality, but without much success. All the same, sure,

Árpád's adversary was a Moravian in the saga, because, as we all know, Marót is the ancient Hungarian form of the name Moravian.

At this point in our inquiry we should take a closer look at the work of King Béla's clerk entitled *Gesta Hungarorum*. He belonged to the type of conceited scholar who, looked down upon the popular, "peasant" tradition labeling it *fabula*, no matter how much delight he took in the performances of professional minstrels wandering from manor to manor. It would be more appreciated today if Anonymus had recorded the Magyars' saga of the Conquest in its pristine form. What he — as well as others — did, however, was to glean from the saga only those parts he considered compatible with historical reality. But while most of the chroniclers had come by their erudition at school, our Anonymus exploited his office in the chancellery to acquire information from foreigners visiting the royal court and from the local traditions of those clans with a rich past. On the whole, the view he had obtained in this fashion of the political conditions of the Danubian and Tisza region prior to the Conquest is surprisingly accurate.

In the saga Árpád the conqueror encountered only a prince called Marót. Anonymus realized that the saga had extremely simplified the events when recounting the Conquest as the struggle of two princes. The promised land was, in effect, divided up between several major and minor potentates. What Anonymus called the "pascua Romanorum" covered the same territory the Franks used to hold in Pannonia. On either side it was marked off by the Danube. To the north, on the other side of the Danube as far as the river Garam, our author knows of the existence of a Slavic country whose prince had his seat at Nyitra and which fell under the sovereignty of the Czech prince. Although it is the Czechs and not the Moravians who are referred to here, the description also applies to the empire of the Moravians. Indeed, Cosmas' Czech chronicle covering the years up to 1125 states that Svatopluk's empire reached as far eastwards as the Garam (Vol. 1.14). Here the Moravians' immediate neighbors are the Bulgarians under whose reign there arose feudal principalities of varying sizes not only in the region between the Danube and the Tisza, but beyond the Tisza as well. Anonymus in this respect could even have cited the account of the so-called "Bavarian Geographer" (Descriptio 844–862), in which the Czechs (*Bethemare*) are followed by the Moravians (*Marharii*), who in turn are followed by the "enormous territory and population" of the Bulgarians (*Vulgarii*). Reliable data attests to the fact that the mining region of Transylvania was also under Bulgarian rule. (Fulda Annals a. 892). What Anonymus writes about Gyalu's reign in Transylvania is therefore pure invention.

The basic texture of the saga may still be detected occasionally in Anonymus' work. He too locates the region between the Danube and the Tisza as the "middle of Hungary" where the Bulgarian Salan, the mightiest of princes has his seat. By ruse, Árpád asks the same sample of water and grass of him as he does of Marót, alias Svatopluk, in the saga. This scene from the saga is reproduced in the *Gesta*, but the characters are changed. Thus Marót had to move, if only temporarily, beyond the Tisza into Bihar. In Chapter 11 of the *Gesta* we learn that he started to rule "after Attila's death", just as Svatopluk had done according to 14th century chronicle construction. This Marót had therefore entered the work from a version of the *Gesta* which still used this name for Árpád's adversary.

Let us, however, read further into Anonymus' work. By contrast, the grandson of the Marót of Bihar "was named Mén-Marót by the Magyars, and the reason for this was that he kept more women (*amicas*)". In connection with our heroic songs we have already noted that Anonymus must have become acquainted with this name-variant from a Bulgarian-Turkish version of the saga of the Conquest. He had, however, misunderstood the name. As is also confirmed by the former city-name *Men-Kermen* near Kiev, the Bulgarian-Turkish word *men* means in Hungarian *nagy* (great) and is used mainly in compounds like the Hungarian *nagyhét* (Holy Week), *nagyapa* (grandfather), *nagynéni* (aunt) etc. That the Magyar, prior to the Conquest and for a long time thereafter, were a multilingual people is borne out by Emperor Constantine VII's remark concerning the joining of the Kabars (c. 39). The Magyars' knowledge of Turkish, however, had certainly been lost by the age of Anonymus, while the heroic songs and legends had preserved the Turkish word-stock, primarily in the names of characters. Neither Anonymus nor anyone else could any longer grasp the meaning of these words and phrases. His only mistake was to interpret the Turkish word *men* meaning in Hungarian *nagy* (great) as identical with the Hungarian word *mén* (stallion).

The Magyar conquest of Hungary was depicted in the saga as the combat of two heroes, Árpád and Marót, or Ménmarót. The word Marót, however, means Moravian, and actually embodies the Moravian people itself. It is known from the sequence of events of the Conquest that Moravia was the last territory to be occupied. This may perhaps account for the fact that Árpád's mythical foe was none other than the representative of the Moravian people. Consequently his princely seat was in the heart of the country, *in medium Vngariae*, as the chronicler put it, and his empire, of course, covered the entire territory the conquerors came to possess. The attribute *nagy* (great) in the names Ménmarót, in the Hungarian *Nagymarót*, does not refer to the size of this empire, (although it can also be interpreted in this way) but rather to the person who epitomizes the Moravian people. It is a common practice among Turkic-Mongolian peoples to derive the etymology of the ethnic name from the personal name of a ruler. In this case the name-giver is at the same time the progenitor of the people. If the people should subsequently divide into several branches, the new branches will derive their names from the sons of the prince-progenitor. The name and person of Marót or Ménmarót should be conceived in this manner.

The eponym of the Moravians is, in actual fact, the river Morava which flows into the Danube from the north, and around which they had once settled. They appear as *marvani* among the tax-paying Avars and Eastern Slavs at that imperial assembly in Frankfurt which was summoned together by the East Frankish king Louis the German in 822. From then on their name can be found in the Frankish annals. Conspicuously, their country is never mentioned by the name Great Moravia, neither in the Frankish sources, nor in works like the Slavic legend of Cyril and Methodius or Cosmas' Czech chronicle.

There is, however, one exception, and this is Emperor Constantine VII's book on "the administration of the empire". Of the five to the country of the Moravians, only three use the denomination Great Moravia, while in the two other passages it is simply called Moravia. By means of a close textual analysis of the passages in question, the following



conclusion may be drawn. The entire 41st chapter of the book is about Moravia's archon, Svatopluk, recounting how the country disintegrated due to the discord of Svatopluk's sons. Here a foreign saga is narrated whose material is not of Hungarian origin. In the subsequent 42nd chapter, where the country's name is again simply Moravia, the emperor determines the place of residence of among others, the Turks, i.e. the Magyars, within the framework of a geographical description (line 19). This does not rely on a Hungarian source either. The name of Great Moravia, on the other hand occurs only in texts which are closely related to Hungarian history and obviously stem from Hungarian informants (13, line 5; 38, line 58; 40, line 33).

Even more important than this observation is the statement that, according to Constantine, the Magyars in their new home "live on Moravian land". Where he does cite from a foreign source, Moravia – without the attribute "great" – invariably denotes only present-day Moravia, lying north of the Danube. We find the following in Chapter 41: "and the Turks came and utterly ruined them and possessed their country, in which even now they continue to live. And those of the folk who were left were scattered and fled for refuge to the adjacent nations, to the Bulgarians and Turks and Croats and to the rest of the nations." The emperor's phrasing is even more clear-cut at the relevant locus in Chapter 42: "The Turks live beyond the Danube river, in the land of Moravia, but also on this side of it, between the Danube and the Save river." Moreover, the emperor never tires of repeating that the Magyars, having left their home to the Pechenegs, "came and in their turn expelled the inhabitants of Great Moravia and settled in their land, in which the Turks now live to this day" (38, lines 57–60). Similarly, after defining the southern border of "Turkia" as ranging from Trajan's bridge to Belgrade, the emperor continues as follows: "and beyond lies Great Moravia, the unbaptized, which the Turks have blotted out, but over which in former days Sphendoplokos used to rule" (40, lines 33–34). The implication here is that the new home of the Magyars was identical to the territory of Moravia.

Fifty years after the Conquest the Magyars already presented the story of the Conquest as if they had had one sole enemy, the Moravian, and as if their whole country had formerly been the possession of the Moravians. Instead of listing facts, they recited the saga, their struggle with Ménmarót the Great Moravian and their settling down in the land of this mythical hero. The Greeks lent their ears to the Magyar informants, and Emperor Constantine recorded their account in his book as though it had been the authentic story of the Hungarian Conquest.

#### Notes

Constantine VII's book is cited here on the basis of the critical edition by Gyula Moravcsik. The English translation of the original passages is the work of R. J. H. Jenkins: *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De Administrando Imperio*. New, Revised, Edition, Washington, D.C. 1967.

On the heroic songs of the era of the Hungarian Conquest, see my lecture held in 1981, in: "Magyar vers" (Hungarian Verse), ed. Miklós Béládi et al., Budapest 1985. 51–56.

A contemporary, Regino the abbot of Prüm writes in the year 889 about the Magyars' migration



from "Scythia" and their taking possession of their present home: Chronicon ed. Fr. Kurze (Scriptores rerum Germanicarum), Hannoverae 1890 pp. 131–133. The Conquest actually occurred late in the fall of 900, following the Italian campaign, and not in phases, but at once.

Hungarian chronicle literature was employed here as edited by Imre Szentpétery and his fellow compilers in vol. 1 of the Scriptores rerum Hungaricarum (Budapestini 1937), with the exception of P. magister's (Anonymus) *Gesta Hungarorum*, which was cited from the edition of László Juhász (Budapest 1932).

On Niketas' legation of the year 894: Georgius monachus continuatus, version "A", ed. Gyula Moravcsik, Fontes Byzantini Historiae Hungaricae, Budapest 1984. p. 59.

The name Svatopluk in its original form (*Sventoplík*, where the *en* is a nasal e sound) caused difficulties of pronunciation for Germans and Hungarians alike. Concerning the German version we can refer to the data of the Annales Fuldenses a. 884 *Zwentibaldus dux Maravorum* (ed. Fr. Kurze pp. 111–113), and Regino's Chronicon a. 890 *Zuendibolch Marahensium Sclavorum rex* (ed. Fr. Kurze p. 134, etc.). The nasal variant of the name was borne by that Czech prince who took part in the battle of Mogyoród in 1074 in support of King Salamon and, wounded, was taken prisoner by the triumphant princes (Chron. s. XIV c. 122 and c. 140 ed. Szentpétery, Scriptores vol. 1. pp. 391, 140). The Hungarian chronicler writing in Latin rendered his name so as to avoid the cluster of consonants: *Sentepolug*, *Sentapolug*. If the name of the Czech prince was recorded in its ancient nasal form as late as the reign of the Hungarian king Saint Ladislas (died in 1095), it can safely be said that it was not the 11th century author of the "Ur-gesta" who substituted Svatopluk for Marót. The name of Svatopluk replacing Marót occurs in the form *Zvataplug* in Kézai, and as *Zuatapolug* in our 14th century chronicles (ed. Szentpétery, Scriptores vol. 1. pp. 163–165; pp. 281, 282, 288, 290, 304), which is in complete harmony with the changes that had taken place in the meantime in the sound development of Czech. In compliance with the new requirements, Cosmas of Prague in his chronicle running to 1125 amends even the name of the legendary Moravian prince Svatopluk to *Zuatopluk* (Lib. I c. 10, c. 14), so his name does not in any way differ from the *Zuatopluk*, *Zuatoplík* name-form of the Czech prince figuring in the 11th–12th centuries (Lib. II c. 43, etc.). This very same name-form is encountered in the records related to Czech history of the Annales Gradicensis a. 1107, a. 1108, or Vincentii Pragensis Annales a. 1164. The edition used: B. Bretholz, Die Chronik der Böhmen des Cosmas von Prag, Berlin 1955 (2nd ed.) p. 22, 32, and concerning the Czech annals Mon. Germ. Scriptores XVII p. 648, 681. The name has a nasal form in diplomas issued between 873 and 900 numbered 14; 22; 24; 26 and 30 in Vol. 1. of the "Codex diplomaticus et epistolaris regni Bohemiae" (ed. G. Friedrich). To be sure, the change must have taken place early in the 12th century. cf. *ibid.* the diplomas no. 115 (post-1131) and no. 227 (dated at year 1165), where the name-form is already *Suatopluc*.

On the Svatopluk name, see the fundamental study of János Melich, Magyar Nyelv, vol. XVIII. (1922), pp. 110–114.

The romantic narrative titled *Gesta Hungarorum* of the "Hungarian Anonymus" (P. magister) is reassessed from a historical standpoint by Gyula Moravcsik, Der ungarische Anonymus über die Bulgaren und Griechen (Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes VII 1969 pp. 167–174), which is also a critique of Györfy György's concept.

The edition of the text of the so-called Geographus Bavarus: B. Horák and Trávníček, Descriptio civitatum ad septentrionalem plagam Danubii (Rozpravy československé Akademie věd, Rada společenských věd 66/2 1956 pp. 19–21; Magnae Moraviae Fontes Historici III Brno 1969 287 with a map which erroneously marks the country of the *merehani* in the place of the Moravians. Originally the description in the south ended with this people: *Istae sunt regiones, quae terminant in finibus nostris*. It intended to give an over-all picture of the peoples living on the border of the Frankish empire from the Danes down to the Adria. The original part is dated by W. Fritze as falling within the period from 844 to 862: Die Datierung des Geographus Bavarus und die Stammesverfassung der Abotriten (Zeitschrift f. slav. Philologie XXI 1952 326–342). The Magyars (*Ungare*) are represented only in the appendix, in their present home.

On Ménmarót: Péter Váczy, *The Diction and Presentation of our Heroic Songs of the Era of the Hungarian Conquest*, p. 55.

A different explanation of the name of Nagymorávia (Great Moravia) is attempted by R. Dostálová in the Prague-based journal *Byzantinoslavica* XXVII (1966) pp. 344–349.

It is at the imperial assembly in Frankfurt (822) that the Slavs living along the Morava are called Moravians for the first time. Cf. *Annales Regni Francorum* a. 822 ed. Fr. Kurze p. 159.

It is generally overlooked in the specialist literature that apart from Constantine VII's book written in Greek there is not one relevant source which calls Moravia "great".

In Chapter 41 of the "De Administrando Imperio" the emperor elaborates on a Svatopluk saga of non-Hungarian origin. Here, where one would most expect the attribute "great" to precede the name of the country, the country is simply called Moravia, and the title and rank of its renowned ruler is simply *archon*, that is, prince. Concerning this chapter see: V. Tille, *Svatopluk et la parabole du vieillard et de ses enfants* (*Revue des études slaves* V 1925 82–84).

It is generally assumed that Chapter 42 is based upon a Byzantine land-description, supplemented in several places by Constantine, with, e.g., the history of the building of Sarkel's. Cf. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio* Vol. II. Commentary ed. R. J. H. Jenkins, London 1962.

Constantine VII knows only one Moravia, over which Svatopluk used to reign. In his book cited here he calls this Moravia great only on the basis of Hungarian information. When he draws upon other sources, however, the country's name, in harmony with the common usage of the age, is Moravia without the attribute great. Of the three data cited (13, 5; 38, 58; 40, 33) it is the description in Chapter 38 that exhibits most clearly the correspondence between the name of "Great Moravia" and the Hungarian "nagymorva" (Great Moravian or *Menmarót*) of the saga of the Hungarian Conquest. Indeed, this very chapter discusses Etelköz, Álmos and the election of Árpád as prince, which corroborates the Hungarian origin of the narrative.