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Papers of the György Ránki Hungarian Chair Conference on "Political Transitions in Hungary in Comparative Perspective", Bloomington, Indiana, April 1-2, 2000

Jack Bielasiak: Poland's Transition as Political Repolarization

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**NEMZETI KULTURÁLIS ÖRÖKSÉG
MINISZTERIUMA**

THE FIRST CHANGE OF REGIME IN HUNGARIAN HISTORY

DENIS SINOR

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USA

The fabric of history is almost seamless even though those who weave it may want it differently. Hitler proclaimed to lay the foundations of a new, a Third, Reich, one to last for a thousand years, but – though his actions affected the lives of countless millions all over the world – he built but a house of cards that stood only for a dozen of years. It was an event rather than an epoch in German history. The First, Second, and Third German Reichs – and I am ready to add to them the Federal German Republic – represent but a continuum of German history. The situation is not very dissimilar in neighboring France now living under her Fifth Republic. Years ago the billboards in the Paris Metro – pasted there by the manufacturer of a wall-paint – could justifiably declare that *Les Républiques passent mais la peinture Soudée reste*. Yes, the republics come and go, and to use again a French saying, *plus cela change, plus c'est la même chose*. In the course of history significant caesurae are few and rare between, and are seldom the works of any one individual. There is considerable difference between pre- and post-Napoleonic Europe but, as I see it, it was but a new game on the old chessboard. In European history, I submit, the rules of the game were changed for example by the Reformation, or the French Revolution, in Japan, the Meiji Restoration may have marked a decisively new epoch in the country's history. To the question whether the French Revolution had succeeded, Zhou Enlai is said to have replied "It's too soon to tell." Only time will show whether, on a world scale, the Leninist Russian revolution was really the watershed Lenin and Stalin wanted it to be. Yet I have no doubt about its significance for Russian history. This paper would like to express some thoughts on a change of regime which, while it may have had little effect on European history, constitutes, without any doubt, the decisive watershed in the history of Hungary. Without it, it is safe to say, there would be no Hungary today.

In this millennial year of 2000, Hungary is celebrating another millennium: that of the founding of the Hungarian state. A few years ago, in 1989, Hungarians were proudly remembering the eleven-hundredth anniversary of the Conquest of their land (though, for reasons of political correctness the term was seldom used in texts destined for foreign readers). Thus, apparently 111 years were needed to

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transform a de-facto occupation into a legitimate state, recognized as such by contemporary Europe. Today, a thousand years later, Hungary once again knocks on the door of a European Union.

In the course of Hungarian history I see but two instances of a definitive change of direction. The second of these was reached in 1945 and marked the end of a continuum.

It was a definitive break with a political construct which lasted for about 950 years, from the founding of the kingdom of Hungary by Stephen I, or, as he is called, St. Stephen, to the probably definitive creation of a Hungarian republic.

To assess the role of St. Stephen in Hungarian history one must compare the state of the land in the second half of the 10th century with that prevailing after the end of Stephen's reign. The transformation was enormous. In seventy years a weak, militarily battered tribal organization, destined to be absorbed by the preponderantly Slavic population of the region, and to be integrated into the neighboring Germanic world, became an independent regional power to be reckoned with by both the Byzantine and the Holy Roman empires.

In Hungarian historiography more pages have been written on St. Stephen than on any other person, so it may be presumptuous for me to attempt to say anything new about him.¹ Yet, speak I must, since his activities cannot be left unmentioned in a symposium dedicated to political transitions. However, it is most important to remember that the big watershed in Hungarian history was negotiated not by Stephen alone; his oeuvre could not have been accomplished and, today, cannot be understood, without examining the policies followed by his father Géza.

Géza is undoubtedly a ruler of what I like to call the "precursor" type, such as Louis XIII of France or Friedrich Wilhelm I of Prussia, whose work made possible the more spectacular reigns of Louis XIV and Frederick the Great respectively. Géza became head of the Hungarian confederacy probably in 970. He was the great-grandson of Árpád, head of the Magyar tribe under whose leadership in 896 the conquest of the land that was to become Hungary took place.

The occupation of the Carpathian basin met with little resistance. The Hungarians moved into a sparsely populated region with a mixed population, which certainly contained an important Slavic segment, but also remnants of the Turkic or Mongol Avar population, which survived the destruction of its state by Charlemagne. In my *History of Hungary* I put the number of conquering Hungarians at about 250,000, but in light of recent research this figure should be adjusted downward to about 100,000, about half as many as the local population.

Here I must make a short detour into the fog-bound regions of Hungarian proto-history. The great, unsolved puzzle of Hungarian ethnogenesis can be summarized as follows. Hungarian is a Finno-Ugric language, yet, their linguistic affiliation notwithstanding, in the earliest written sources in which they are mentioned, the Hungarians appear in a Turkic garb, as a warlike people of mounted archers.

Although, in principle, military tactics cannot be linked to the race or the language of the people that make use of it, the specificity of Hungarian comportment firmly places them in the world of Inner Asian nomads. In the second half of the first millennium, on the eastern approaches of Europe, the nomadic population of the steppes lying north of the Black Sea was essentially Turkic and, in their general comportment, the Hungarians do not seem to have differed from them in any significant way. The Hungarians are called Turks not only by some Arab writers such as Ibn Rustah (early 9th century) but also by the Byzantines who were in direct contact with many of their leaders. Interpreters were needed for the negotiations and the Logothete of the Course in charge of their services could not have made a mistake in their choice. To this must be added the fact that most of the Hungarian chiefs had Turkic names and that in Byzantine sources the land of the Hungarians is called *Tourkia*. We are thus bound to assume that the social stratum that sent envoys to Constantinople, was Turkic speaking. As of now, no satisfactory explanation exists of why the Hungarians speak Hungarian, and it cannot be of my concern here to offer some relevant theories. By the end of the 10th century the name by which the Hungarians were referred to in western, Latin or Greek, sources was changed to *Ungri*, *Ungroi*, the basic form from which all the western variants with an initial *h*-, such as English *Hungarian*, derived. That this name, too, is ultimately of Turkic origin and passed to the West through Slavic intermediaries is, from our present point-of-view, irrelevant. *Magyar*, the Hungarians' self-appellation, though known to Arabs, appear in the Latin sources only much later. The contorted efforts to give the ethnonym *magyar* a Turkic, Finno-Ugric or Turkic/Finno-Ugric etymology have remained fruitless as witnessed by the still ongoing debate that surrounds the question.

In the course of the first half of the 10th century, important segments of the Hungarian tribal confederacy appear to have been reluctant to abandon their pre-Conquest way of life. Hungarian incursions plagued their neighbors. It is safe to say that, to this day, the reputation of the Hungarians has not fully recovered from the constant reviling of which they were the objects in medieval chronicles. *Gens ferocissima* or *crudelissima* belonged to the milder adjectives used to describe them. Marauding Hungarian troops went as far as France and Spain and plagued northern Italy. In 949 King Berengar II of Ivrea had to pay a huge sum to Stephen's grandfather Taksony to obtain his withdrawal. The aim of these forays was not conquest but booty. Hungarian mercenaries also served various rulers of Italy and of Bavaria.² In these military campaigns the Hungarians appear as typical mounted archers as witnessed by the oft-cited *Carmina Mutinensia* in which the inhabitants of Modena pray to their patron saint St. Geminianus to save them from the arrows of the Hungarians. During this period of "adventures" the dominating personalities were the great war-lords, Bulcsu, Lél, and Gyula, while the descendants of Árpád, theoretically still heads of the Hungarian confederation, lived in relative

obscurity and the influence of the Magyar tribe does not appear to have been preponderant. It is worth noting that the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus expressly states that the first leader of the Hungarians is of Árpád's tribe, but they also have other leaders. According to the Emperor, Bulcsu was the third prince of *Tourkia*, and in a Latin source he is even called *rex*. Bulcsu and Gyula had both been admitted by the Emperor to the dignity of a Roman patrician. At the same time the two great warlords were also baptized in the Byzantine rite. An alliance with the Hungarians played an important part in the Emperor's policy.

Lél and Bulcsu overplayed their cards. In 955, at Lechfeld, near Augsburg, a federation of German armies organized by the German King Otto I the Great (from 962 Emperor) annihilated the Hungarian forces; the two Hungarian leaders were taken prisoner and hanged. Even by the standards of the time the procedure was shocking but it served its purpose. Dead men do not fight. For the Hungarians the so-called "era of adventures" was over.

The habitats of Bulcsu's tribe lay in what is now western Hungary, near Lake Balaton. The proximity to the Germanic world facilitated the hostile incursions. With the ignominious death of Bulcsu his greatly weakened tribe inevitably lost its influence and allowed the Magyar tribe to emerge from the shadows. Géza, realizing that no heathen people would be admitted into the European community, embarked on a wholesale conversion of his people. For Géza this was a purely political decision and his own conversion was formal.

By that time Christianity, both in its eastern and western forms, was well known to the Hungarians. It should be remembered that parts of the local populations had already been converted before the arrival of the Hungarians. In the Transdanubian, i.e. the western part of the Carpathian basin, the missionary activities of the episcopal see of Salzburg introduced Roman Catholicism already in the second half of the 9th century. At the same time, Method and Constantine, the great missionaries of the Eastern Church were also active in the region. Ultimately the influence of the Western Church prevailed and the invading Hungarians found in their new land a partly christianized, in the western regions mostly Catholic population, closely linked with the bishopric of Salzburg. The earliest missionaries active among Hungarians came from Byzantium, but following the Hungarian defeat near Augsburg at Lechfeld Constantine VII lost interest in sending missionaries to what he considered a doomed nation and Latin missionaries entered into the vacuum thus created. A request to Rome for Catholic missionaries had been presented already by Géza's father Taksony.

The land occupied by Árpád lay at the crossroads of Germanic, Slavic and Byzantine influences. Different as these might have been, they were all Christian, so there was no real external challenge to the religious development of the new kingdom. In all other spheres there were examples of different types to follow, and it does seem as if Géza, perhaps with the ultimate aim of securing independ-

ence, deliberately chose what seemed to him the best in the institutions of his neighbors. As his closest neighbors were Roman Catholic Germans, Géza staked his fortune on collaboration with the German Empire; and he won, a fact which had immense consequences not only for the Hungarians but for Eastern Europe as a whole. Whilst some of the most aggressive Hungarian tribes had bled to death at Lechfeld or elsewhere, the Magyar tribe that occupied territories west of the Danube, acquired a certain stability and prospered in comparative peace.

The chief apostle of the Hungarian conversion was St. Adalbert, bishop of Prague. Géza himself saw in the conversion only a means of securing the confidence of Hungary's neighbors, and chiefly that of Otto I, the Holy Roman Emperor. In 973 a Hungarian delegation appeared in his court at Quedlinburg and, shortly after, Géza and some five-hundred Hungarians were baptized by a monk of St. Gallen, the very monastery visited by marauding Hungarians in 926. Probably on Adalbert's recommendation, Géza's show of goodwill secured for his son the hand of the Bavarian Princess Gisela, daughter of Henry II, duke of Bavaria.

The death of Géza in 997 led to a conflict between Turkic and western systems of succession. Chief Koppány, a senior member of the house of Árpád, following the system of levirate practiced among steppe peoples, claimed for himself Géza's widow Sarolta – and the leadership of the Magyars. With the help of the Bavarian knights brought in by Gisela, Stephen, Géza's son, defeated him and dispatched his quartered body to various parts of the country. His German ties and sympathies notwithstanding, Stephen defended the independence of Hungary against German encroachments. Thus, for example, in 1030 he successfully resisted the wanton attack of the Emperor Conrad II, and in a counteroffensive Hungarian troops even occupied Vienna. Though a saint, meekness was not Stephen's strongest virtue.

The nomadic political structure under which the conquering Hungarians had lived had no firm rules for princely succession, but in this instance, quite clearly levirate was replaced by primogeniture. Koppány's murder was not the only ruthless action undertaken in defense of the new state and a new system of succession. To secure the throne for his son Imre (who was to predecease his father), Stephen, or Gisela, caused Vazul, son of Stephen's uncle, and thus a likely candidate for the throne, to be blinded. As it happened, after a period of turmoil following Stephen's death, Vazul's son Andrew, returning from exile, occupied the throne (1047–1060). The kings of the Árpád-dynasty, which ruled over Hungary until 1301, were the descendants not of Stephen but of the blinded Vazul.

The new order had asserted itself; all that was needed was a recognition by the outside world of the *fait accompli*. As tradition has it, this came in the form of a crown sent to Stephen by Pope Sylvester II with which he was crowned either on Christmas Day 1000 or on January 1, 1001. The symbolism of the act, recalling the crowning of Charlemagne on Christmas Day 800 by Pope Leo III, is obvious.

The importance of papal recognition of temporal power lasted well into the 16th century as witnessed by the coronation of Charles Quint by Pope Paul III.

Let me mention here that recent research has convincingly shown that, contrary to the belief generally held by the Hungarian public and by earlier historians, the so-called Holy Crown, venerated symbol of Hungarian statehood, is of a later date, made probably for King Géza I around 1074. The crown sent by the pope was lost.

We know very little of the gradual disintegration of the original Hungarian tribal confederacy, but the result of the process was an autocratic system that showed no great difference from the political structures prevailing in contemporary Europe. However, while the Germanic world was held together by a common religion and a common language, one just cannot know whether there was an emotional integration among the people living in Stephen's country. To create one, Stephen had to impose on the people a common ideology, to wit Roman Catholicism, of which, unlike his father, Stephen became a convinced and zealous follower. His missionary activity was directed almost exclusively towards his own, Hungarian people since, as said before, Christianity was widespread among the conquered populations. In this respect it is interesting to note that the Hungarian religious vocabulary is mostly of Slavic origin. So are the names of the days of the week that are not of a descriptive nature, such as *vasárnap* (lit. "day of the market") for Sunday. In this connection it should be recalled that there is no evidence to show that the conquering Hungarians were familiar with any calendar. On purely speculative grounds and in view of the fact that people generally have a method of counting the years, one may surmise that the Hungarians were familiar with the twelve year calendar of the animal cycle. But, while known to the Bulgars with whom the Hungarians had many connections, there is no evidence to show that the Hungarians were acquainted with, let alone used, this cyclical calendar. Interestingly enough, so far as I can see, in the vast scholarly literature dealing with 10th century Hungarian history, no one seems to have emphasized the all-important step that at some moment, perhaps under Stephen, the Hungarians, or at least their leadership, had to adopt the Christian calendar. Yet this, indeed, was the decisive step taken towards integration in the western community of peoples. By taking it, Stephen, and through him the Hungarians, recognized as their own the common, Christian heritage.

Within the Carpathian basin the populated settlements were separated by uninhabited forests and – between the Danube and the Tisza – by swamps that greatly hampered communications. The efforts of generations of Hungarians notwithstanding, the ethnic mosaic of Stephen's land showed many lacunae. For example, the ethnicity and language of the "black Hungarians" mentioned in the written sources remain the subject of speculation. There were also some Turkic elements who entered the country with or after the Hungarians, among them the

Turkic Pechenegs. The very people whose attacks caused the Hungarians to move west into the Carpathian basin appear as auxiliaries in Géza's service. Géza's mother was Pecheneg.

Notwithstanding his reliance on German knights and the strong influence of his wife Gisela, Stephen was not a servile copier of Bavarian administrative practices. He adopted the Carolingian monetary system, but the Hungarian administrative terminology used for the new Hungarian state is almost entirely Slavic: *nádor*, *ispán*, *tárnok*, *udvarnok*. In Hungarian, the very title of the king, *király*, and the word designating the royal court, *udvar*, are Slavic. Social and administrative structures do not spring up like mushrooms after a rain. The Slavic technical terms of the Hungarian administrative vocabulary bear witness of a very strong influence of the sedentary population, much of which must have been inherited from the Moravian state. Particularly surprising is the absence of Turkic or Latin words among the designations of the various dignitaries of the state. In view of these undisputed facts, it defies understanding how in 1935 Bálint Hóman, a medievalist of great distinction, could have written of the backwardness of the Slavs (of the Carpathian Basin) in matters of political organization.³

In the late 19th and in the first half of the 20th century, Hungarian historians attached much importance to Stephen's choice of the Roman instead of the Byzantine branch of Christianity. I do not think that there is reason to see in this choice the proof of a singular wisdom foreseeing the development of European civilization. Stephen was Roman Catholic because he was baptized in that faith. Opinions vary whether this was done at his birth or later, but there is ample evidence to show that from his youth he was surrounded by Catholic clergy. His mother Sarolta nominally belonged to the Eastern Church, but there is no reason to surmise that this strong-willed, often violent woman paid much heed to her son's religious upbringing. Also, it should be remembered that while Eastern and Western Christendom were already two different cultures, they were not yet separated by doctrinal differences; the formal schism between the two churches was to occur only in 1054. We know of at least one Greek nunnery and one Greek basilite monastery functioning during Stephen's reign in Hungary. The two rites coexisted peacefully in Stephen's state. Imre, his son and presumptive heir, was betrothed to a Byzantine princess. Of paramount importance was the opening in 1018–19 of the road leading Western pilgrims to the Holy Land. It facilitated contacts between Roman and Byzantine Christianity and literally put Hungary on the map, made her known to thousands of all walks of life who passed along it.

Only a handful of documents dating to Stephen's reign have survived and they do not provide answer to many important questions. The fact is that we do not know which was, at the millennium, the numerically dominant language in Hungary, nor can we assess the extent of the magyarization of the previously Slavic population. Since the self-appellation of the Hungarians and of their language is

magyar, and since Stephen was a scion of the Magyar tribe, it is probably safe to assume that Stephen knew Hungarian, but it could be that his mother-tongue was Turkic, since both his father Géza and his mother Sarolta, bore Turkic names. It could be that Stephen's original name, the one he wore before his baptism, was also Turkic (Vajk). Projecting into the past the apparently general German inability to learn Hungarian, we may presume that Gisela had never acquired that language, surrounded as she was with German knights. Was then German the language used in conversation between Stephen and his wife? Or Latin? Perhaps, at this juncture, it may be helpful to recall that we do not know whether Charlemagne's mother-tongue was French or German.

Hungarians of the Conquest probably had a script of their own, an alphabetic system recalling but unconnected with the Germanic runes, but with clear connections with some Old Turkic scripts. Some late examples are extant, but there is no reason to suppose that its knowledge was widespread. Of all the innovations introduced by Stephen, the adoption of the Latin script for general use was probably the most important though, interestingly enough, this fact is seldom emphasized in the torrent of publications dealing with his reign. While the usage of the Greek alphabet is attested in the 11th century in Hungary, by linking his land to Western Christendom, Stephen was bound to adopt the script that was its vehicle, establishing thereby an unbreakable bond between Hungary and western Europe. All things considered, script was and remains the decisive criterion in defining the cultural identity of a population.

Clearly, for better or worse, from its inception, Hungary was a multilingual, multiracial realm. Place names seem to bear witness to this. For example, of the names of the nine bishoprics functioning in the realm, four were Slavic (Bihar, Pécs, Vác, Veszprém), two were Turkic (Esztergom, Kalocsa), and only three were Hungarian (Csanád, Eger, Győr). The simultaneous use of several vernaculars would explain the lateness of the first Hungarian text that has come down to us and which dates from the 13th century. Anthropological studies clearly show that the majority of Hungary's population in the 11th century were not the descendants of the conquering Hungarians. On a heterogeneous substratum the Hungarians built a powerful state mixing their own traditions with those of the autochthonous inhabitants and adopted from the western, Latin, world its script, its religion and the political structure of a medieval European kingdom. In this respect momentous importance must be attached to Stephen's legislative activity witnessed by two legal codices, the texts of which have survived. He created an administrative and legal system which provided the institutional and juridical bedrock of the state for about two centuries.

Even without any written evidence one could have surmised that such wide-ranging reforms might not have been to the taste of everyone. The cases of Koppány and Vazul clearly show that Stephen was ready to take drastic actions. During his

reign there was no need to suppress open popular discontent. However, resentment must have been strong as witnessed by the revolts of 1046 and 1060–61, that is, long after Stephen's death. These were directed against Christianity, the introduction of an alien legal and administrative system and, of course, against the German and Italian courtiers, knight-errants, who during and after Stephen's reign gained influence in the country's life. It should be noted that the revolutionaries did not come from among the conquered populations but from the ranks of the conquering Hungarians discontented with the changes introduced. The revolts represented a conservative backlash against innovations.

The *De instructione morum*,⁴ the instructions written by Stephen to his son Imre contain a much cited passage concerning the presence of foreigners in the land. In the spring of 2000 it was even cited in a special, paid supplement to the weekly *The Economist* calling for foreign investment in Hungary. Its relevance to our times is clear.

The advantage derived from the presence of immigrants and guests is so great that it should be called the sixth jewel of the king. The might of the Roman Empire arose through the influx of noble and wise men from everywhere. Guests coming from various countries and provinces bring with them a variety of languages, customs, skills, and arms. All these serve as decorations for the royal court, contribute to its splendor and frighten outside powers. For, a monolingual and monocultural kingdom is weak and frail. (*Nam unius lingue uniusque moris regnum imbecille et fragile est.*) Thus, I instruct you my son to treat [these men] with goodwill and honor so that they prefer to stay with you rather than elsewhere.

In our time and specifically in the United States of America such views are “politically correct” though history has shown that they ultimately lead to disaster. As Hungary's destiny in the millennium following Stephen's reign has clearly shown: a multicultural and multilingual state is bound to disintegrate. It is a cause for marvel that when, in the wake of World War I, it ultimately happened, it was due less to the spontaneous action of the various nationalities than to the meddling of foreign politicians, ignorant of the ethnic realities of the region. Without such intervention, for better or for worse, the Kingdom of St. Stephen would have had another lease on life. As a matter of fact – and I hold no brief to defend Stephen's views – these were applicable less to the non-Hungarian (Turkic or Slavic) populations of the realm than to the German or Italian knights and courtiers favored by his wife. Interestingly enough, in a subsequent section of his *Instructions*, the king seems to express some misgivings about the central, uniform governance of subjects of various ethnic backgrounds: “Who among the Greeks would govern Romans with Greek laws,” writes Stephen, “or who among the Romans would govern Greeks with Roman law? No one.”

It so happened that at the end of his life, Stephen, grieved by the loss of his son Imre, and plagued by ill-health did not follow his own precepts. He appointed his Italian nephew, Peter Orseolo to succeed him, a disastrous choice that plunged the country into internal and external conflicts.

Many factors have led to the success of Stephen but, in essence, the diverse and plural ethnic groups within his realm were held together as a single political entity by his ingenuity and determination. He negotiated successfully the last transition in European history of a nomad people into a sedentary state. In less than a century the *gens detestanda*, as the Hungarians were often referred to in the Latin chronicles of the epoch, became a *gens ad fidem Christi conversa*. Once in Europe, the Hungarians, as it were, closed the door behind them, changed their role, and became the self-appointed defenders of Europe. Hungary became in the word of her poets the “shield of Christianity.”

Notes

1. Not surprisingly the person and the rule of Stephen has been described, analyzed and discussed in hundreds of books and articles. Because of limitations of space and the genre of this essay, I had to forego justificative footnotes. I made good use of the recent publications by István Györffy and Gyula Kristó, both excellent scholars who, however, often disagree on important questions relating to Stephen. Let me just cite István Györffy: *István király és műve* (Budapest, 1977) and Gyula Kristó: *Levedi törzsszövetségétől Szent István államáig* (Budapest, 1980) and a very recent article by Kristó, “Magyarország népei Szent István korában.” *Századok* 134 (2000): 3–44. I liked Kristó’s thumb-nail sketch “Szent István (980k–1038)” on pp. 1–4 of *Nagy képes millenniumi arcképcsarnok* edited by Árpád Rácz (Budapest, 1999). A judicious one volume selection of the fifty studies published in the three volumes of the collective work *Emlékkönyv Szent István király halálának kilencszázadik évfordulóján*, edited by Jusztinián Serédi (Budapest, 1938) appeared without date (!) probably in the late 1980s. It is a treasure-house of useful information. I would not disown the portrait I gave of Stephen in my *History of Hungary* (London, 1959, several later editions).
2. There is now the excellent survey by Maximilian Georg Kellner, *Die Ungarneinfälle im Bild der Quellen bis 1150* (München 1997).
3. Bálint Hóman, *Magyar történet* I (Budapest, 1935), 78: “Legfeltünőbb a szlávok hátramaradottsága a politikai szervezet tekintetében.”
4. I know of no translation of this document into any of the European languages. The Latin text is available in Kálmán Eperjessy and László Juhász, eds, *Szemelvények a magyar történelem latinnyelvű kútfőiből* (Budapest, 1935), 3–6.