

*A Concise History  
of Hungary*

MIKLÓS MOLNÁR

*Translated by Anna Magyar*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, United Kingdom  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

Originally published in French as *Histoire de la Hongrie*  
by Hatier Littérature Générale 1996  
and © Hatier Littérature Générale  
First published in English by Cambridge University Press 2001 as  
*A Concise History of Hungary*  
Reprinted 2003

English translation © Cambridge University Press 2001

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Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*Typeface* Monotype Sabon 10/13 pt *System* QuarkXPress™ [SE]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

ISBN 0 521 66142 0 hardback  
ISBN 0 521 66736 4 paperback

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# I

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## From the beginnings until 1301

### HUNGARY BEFORE THE HUNGARIANS: AN OVERVIEW OF THE TERRITORY

From the conquest of 895 up until the First World War Hungary's history unfolded in the Carpathian basin; then it was confined within a smaller territory, that of today's Hungary. This is a land situated at the same latitude as central France and the same longitude as its Slovak and Slav neighbours to the north and the south. Its western boundaries follow those of Austria, with present-day Ukraine to the north-east and Romania further to the east.

The oldest known inhabitants date back 350,000 years and traces of several successive prehistoric cultures have been found, from the Palaeolithic to the Bronze and Iron ages. Among the most important civilisations to have crossed the Danube were the Celts. They dominated Pannonia and a part of the plain which lies between the Danube and the Tisza in the third century BC. Meanwhile, further east, the Dacians, Thracians and Getians left behind their heritage in Transylvania as did the Illyrians in the south.

In the middle of the first century BC, a Dacian empire, led by Boirebistas, occupied vast expanses of the lower Danube region. This power was probably at the root of Rome's expansion towards Dacia and Pannonia. Initially under Augustus and Tiberius, Roman conquest brought civilisation and imperial forms of governance to the two provinces for nearly four centuries. The first stone bridge across the Danube was erected in 103 in what is today Turnu-Severin-Drobeta in Romania

(Szörény in Hungary). Hungarian Pannonia/Transdanubia (Savazia – Pécs, Sophianum – Szombathely and Acquinicum at Budapest) are dotted with rich remains of Roman settlements.

The two Danubian provinces – separated by the great plain – experienced prosperity and relative peace throughout the reigns of Trajan, Marcus Aurelius and Caracalla until the decline of Rome. But by the second half of the fourth century, the rump of the Roman Empire was under attack from a number of peoples: Sarmatians, Quadi and Goths. The Roman army suffered a series of major defeats, the worst of them at the hands of the Goths in 378 near Andrinopolis (Edirne), where they were decimated. Within a few decades the Romanised ‘two Pannonias’, along with the whole of the region south of the Danube, had become a transit zone for new migrations and a collision point for warring Germanic, Turkish and other peoples.

The Huns, a nomadic people from Asia, were to leave an indelible mark on the collective European memory. Attila’s people invaded the Balkans, the future Hungary (Attila’s headquarters), northern Italy and Gaul. Following his death in 453, this empire would disappear, leaving the way open to fresh invaders, among them the ancestors of present-day Hungarians, the last and the only people to establish a state and to fend off subsequent invasions. Before them, during the sixth century, the Avars did succeed in establishing themselves for a relatively longer period before being absorbed into the ethnic fringes of Charlemagne’s oppressive Frankish Empire.

The origins of the Avars are relatively unknown. Probably Turks from Central Asia, driven out by other Turks, they arrived in the lower Danube around 562, and under the *kagan*, Baian (Bajan), fought the Byzantine Empire. By 567 they had occupied a large part of the Carpathian basin. Over the next 230 years, the Avars fought numerous battles, but after the 620s, they began to suffer setbacks generally inflicted by the Byzantine Empire that forced them to retreat into the territories of future Hungary. Archaeological findings nonetheless reveal a new cultural flowering during the years after 670. Among the greatest finds is the fabulous Nagyszentmiklós treasure (named after the place of its discovery in 1799), a collection of gold artefacts, twenty-three of which are held in the Museum of Art History in Vienna. They were probably buried around 796, just before the collapse of this ‘second Avar Empire’, under attacks by Kroum Khan’s Bulgars on its



Plate 1. Hungarian warrior (?) on the Nagyszentmiklós golden goblet.

south-eastern front and by Charlemagne from the west. From 796, the Avars were forced to submit to the Frankish Empire's occupation of Western Pannonia. The entire eastern and Balkan part of their empire was conquered by the Bulgars and further pressure came from the Moravians under Prince Moimer and his successors.

Thus, by the second half of the ninth century, at the time of the Magyar conquest, the country was a kind of crossroads of peoples and military marches, divided between the eastern Franks, the Moravians, the Bulgars and what was left of the Avars.

The territories encircled by the Carpathians were therefore neither empty nor abandoned. They were soon to be repopulated with the arrival of the new Magyar conquerors. Contrary to certain legends, the 'last of the Avars' were not 'wiped out without a trace' by the Franks. A significant Slav population also remained in the region with numerous other tribes to the east and south-east under the feeble rule of a declining Bulgar regime. The end of the ninth century, by contrast, appears politically and militarily blank, despite frequent battles

between local armies – the Franks and the Moravian princes, in particular. The Hungarians, still established at Etelköz, were not entirely unaware of the situation since, in 862, they had made forays as far as the Frankish Empire, and in 894, just before leaving for their new homeland, had fought alongside the Byzantine emperor, Leo the Philosopher, against the Bulgar Tsar Simeon.

The Moravians, led by Svatopluk (replaced by Moimer II after his death in 894), more than any of the peoples of the time, represented – for a short period – a distinctive political and military identity called Great Moravia. As for the land of future Hungary, it offered numerous advantages to the steppe peoples from the Black Sea region and its environment turned them from nomads into settlers. The climate, continental and moderate, had been traversing a mild cycle since the early Middle Ages. The land, almost entirely covered with loess, was fertile and richly endowed with fish-filled rivers and lakes. Hydrographic maps show vast areas of intermittent flooding, covering more than one eighth of the country's surface. This was to be a key aspect in the eventual occupation and settlement patterns of the new conquerors.

In the meantime, however, they were still on their way to this new destination. It was the penultimate stage of a very long journey in both time and space, which will need to be retraced before the history of Hungary can begin.

#### DISTANT ANCESTORS: A LINGUISTIC ASIDE

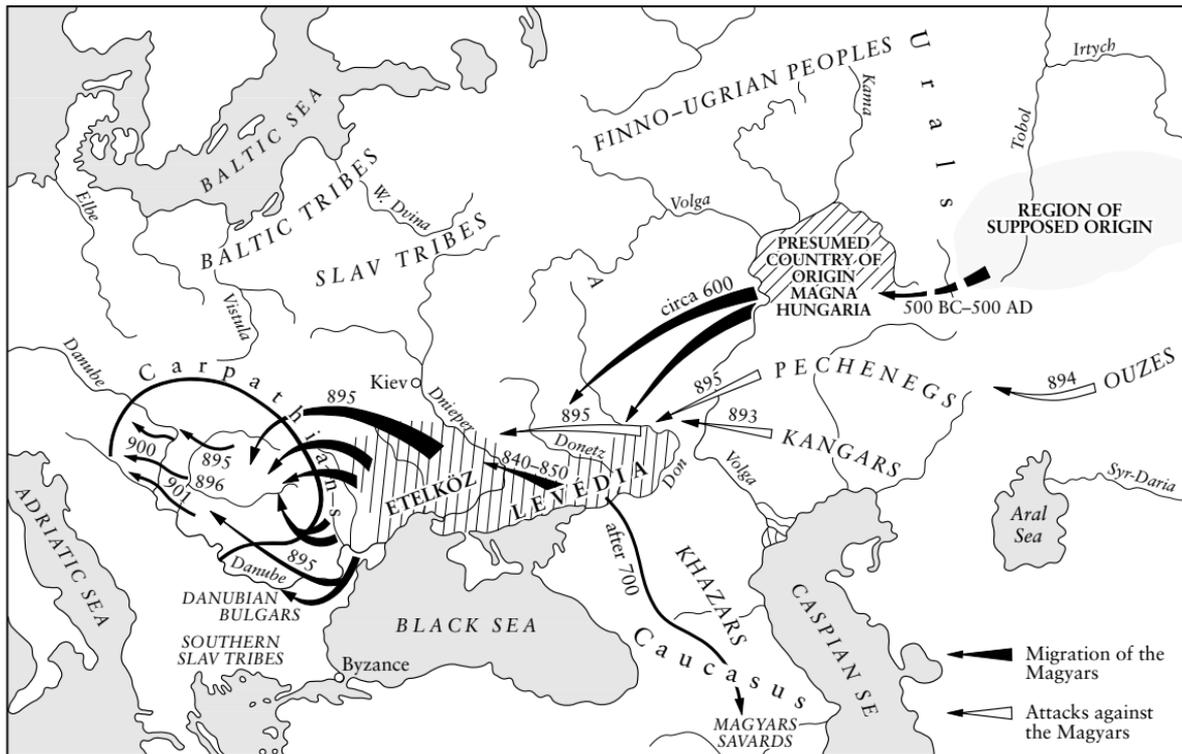
The prehistory of the Magyar peoples' distant ancestors begins several thousand kilometres further east and north of Hungary, in a time beyond memory, when a people speaking a language called 'Uralian' inhabited a vast region that probably straddled both sides of the Urals. It should be said at the outset that all we have is a hypothetical language matrix and that nothing is actually known about those that supposedly spoke it. Indeed, their geographical whereabouts also relies on hypotheses. What is scientifically certain is the existence of a language group originating in the area. Its evolution and diversification constitutes a golden thread tracing a path through history. It is important to point out the distinctive nature of this primitive Uralian language, unrelated to the Indo-European, Altaic, Semitic and other languages. Uralian constitutes the origin of several linguistic families. Finno-Ugric, one of its

derivatives, is in turn the common base for twenty or so languages, of which Finnish, Estonian and Hungarian are the best known. The closest linguistic relative to the latter is not, however, the Finno-Baltic branch but the Ugrian one, that is, the languages of the Voguls (or Manysi-s) and Ostyaks (or Hanti-s), small tribes that today inhabit western Siberia, to the east of the Urals. Other descendants of the Finno-Ugrians are to be found further south, on the other side of the mountains.

In contrast to the Germanic and Latin peoples of Europe, these Finno-Ugric-speaking peoples were geographically scattered. Out of the dozen or so that have been identified, all but the Hungarians and those of the Baltic region live in Russia. These include, along with the Voguls and Ostyaks already mentioned, the Komis and the Maris (or Cheremisses). These family connections, and indeed the entire linguistic network stretching back four thousand years, have been sketched out by comparative linguists, who are also responsible for suggesting the approximate period during which separation occurred. However, what still remains a mystery is both the ethnic composition of the groups who spoke these languages and the itinerary that was to lead them, on the one hand to the Gulf of Finland, and on the other to the banks of the Volga, the Ob and the Danube. Proto-Hungarians did not emerge from the nebula as a distinctive entity until the middle of the first millennium BC and their itinerary is unknown until the middle of the following millennium. A temporal desert of a thousand years or more remains, during which time the ancestors of the Hungarians, having parted company with their 'cousins', became a distinctive people.

#### *In the foothills of the Urals*

To anticipate the course of history in a few lines, separation took place in the mid- or southern Ural region, probably on the eastern side of the mountains, in other words in western Siberia. In the period that followed and during the first centuries of the modern era, a number of factors place the ancient Hungarians to the south of the Urals, in the region of present-day Bashkiria, or perhaps nearer to the Volga itself. Having left this region, they dropped south towards the Azov Sea, and then moved on towards the Black Sea. Another split then occurred for reasons that remain obscure. One of the Proto-Hungarian groups, the Savards, broke away, heading towards the Caucasus, leaving the majority to pursue their



Map 1. Migrations of the ancient Magyars

nomadic existence in the steppes and then to push west, through the lower Danube, ending up in the Carpathians and future Hungary. Map 1 traces these patterns of movement, diversions from them and settlements founded throughout this long journey.

Such landmarks are approximate and remain so until the ninth century. We must therefore turn to linguistic matters and to what little other data exists in order to draw historical conclusions. As we have seen, the linguistic thread enables us to follow these peoples through their various separations. But when and where did they take place? Historians believe that there is enough evidence to support cohabitation until the beginning, perhaps the middle, of the first millennium BC. As regards the geographical origins of these people, these are far more uncertain. Were they Asiatic or European? Their most identifiable cradle is in the vicinity of the Urals, but on which side?

To resolve these problems, scholars have turned to a number of sciences other than linguistics: archaeology whenever possible, historical geography, musicology too, since the pentatonic scale common to the popular songs of some of the peoples in this family seems to indicate certain mutual connections, though often rather tenuous ones. For quite some time, scholars even took to following the flight of bees, based upon the hypothesis – which turned out to be false – that bees, in those faraway days, had not crossed the Urals into Siberia in pursuit of plunder. And since the words ‘bee’ and ‘honey’ appeared in their basic vocabulary, the deduction seemed logical: the origin of these peoples was European. This anecdote illustrates just how difficult it is to follow the geographical movements of a people without written evidence.

The other hypothesis situates these populations either in western Siberia or in Europe, the only certainty being their transmigration to Siberia. In any case, their descendants are found on both sides of the Urals and nothing suggests that they have not been there since time immemorial. Moreover, since the Urals are far from impassable mountains, it would have been perfectly possible for them to move from one place to another more than once, from east to west and back again.

### *In search of lost languages*

Separated from the other Ugrians who travelled north, the Proto-Hungarians were able to survive in western Siberia and for quite some

time (half a millennium?). While coming under the influence of other neighbours, notably Iranians, they nonetheless took on the distinctive characteristics of a people who were later to be known as the ‘Magyars’ and by the various other forms of the name ‘Hungarian’ (*hongrois*, *ungar*, *hungarus* etc.) used by other language groups. And yet, apart from the hypothesis concerning their having settled to the west of the Urals, the thousand-year period that followed, until the appearance of Hungarian tribes identified as such in the early Middle Ages, remains blank. The only evidence of any continuity is language, but in order for language to be useful in the generation of historical knowledge, the evolution of the Finno-Ugric languages and the Ugric branch, to which Hungarian belonged, required investigation. It was a task undertaken by comparative Finno-Ugric linguistics, initially developed in Germany (at the University of Göttingen), and from 1770 in Finland and Hungary, linked to a publication by János Sajnovics on the relationship between Hungarian and Lapp idiom. Then, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Hungarian Antal Reguly and the Finn M. A. Castren collected invaluable linguistic data in the field in Russia, in those regions inhabited by the descendants of the Ugrians.

One of the basic linguistic propositions establishes the existence of a grammatical structure particular to these languages. One of its characteristics is agglutination, in other words suffixes are juxtaposed with the root word. Seventy-five per cent of the words used in present-day spoken Hungarian come from basic Finno-Ugric. This linguistic theory has, however, been fiercely disputed. From the nineteenth century onwards, Hungarian public opinion was reluctant to accept the family connections between their language and that of poor, primitive fishermen, finding the possibility somewhat humiliating. Hungarians nurtured more glorious dreams: some connection with Attila’s Huns or Sumero-Babylonian culture would have been more acceptable, just like the mythical Trojan origins of the French! Although such fantasies continue to feed the collective imagination, the Finno-Ugric theory is unanimously accepted by scholars and is taught in schools.

#### COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: MIGRATIONS FROM THE URALS TO THE DANUBE

And so the Proto-Hungarians, while subject to the influence of neighbouring Scythian and Sarmatian cultures, became an autonomous

people of western Siberia. They discovered the use of iron and led the lifestyle of horsemen, semi-nomadic shepherds and primitive farmers. This is evidenced by the existence of Iranian loan-words from that time. The Proto-Hungarians then reappear during the first millennium of our era to the west of the Urals, close to Bashkiria, between the Kama and the Volga Rivers. Was this due to climatic change? Or perhaps an assault from Attila's Huns, on the move at the time? We do not know. Written sources, dated much later, support this approximate location. Between 1232 and 1237, King Béla IV of Hungary, upon hearing news of the Tatar invasion of Russia, sent a number of Dominican monks in search of those Hungarians who had remained in the 'homeland of the ancestors' when the other tribes had taken the road for the Carpathians. The expedition is proof that the break-up of the ancient tribes, somewhere in the steppes, remained in the collective memory. The Dominicans initially searched to the north of the Caucasus, on the site of one of the ancient encampments established before the migration towards the Danube and the Carpathians. Their search was fruitless. Following the death of his companion, the monk Julianus eventually found the people he was looking for, much further north, on the Volga. His narrative does not locate what he called 'Magna Hungaria' with any precision, but he talks about the River Etil (Volga) and about a nearby Turkish-Bulgar town, thus confirming the site as being somewhere in the region of Bashkiria.

The great trek south and then on to Hungary is thought to have begun during the sixth century according to some historians, and around 700 according to others. The Dominican's 'reunion' with his ancestors in Magna Hungaria thus took place after half a millennium or more of separation. His findings may well be less than wholly reliable, but his account, written up by a fellow monk, was sealed and delivered to the papal chancellery. It then received added confirmation when Julianus undertook a second journey in 1237. This time, Julianus also brought back information about the Mongol-Tatars, successors to the great Genghis Khan (d.1227), who would invade the entire Danube region, including Hungary, in 1241-2.

As for the Hungarians who left their ancient land, they reappear in the eighth and ninth centuries, much further south along the Volga, then the Don, cohabiting with Turkish Bulgars, the Onogurs in particular, as well as having some kind of connection with the Khazars. Relations with the Onogurs probably lasted two centuries or more, as

evidenced by more than two hundred Hungarian words which are Turkic-Bulgar in origin, while other borrowings indicate the persistent Iranian cultural-linguistic influence of the Sarmatians and the Alains.

The importance of the Onogur influence begs questions about the nature of their political and military ties: did the Hungarians and the Onogurs (meaning ‘ten tribes’) belong to some form of confederation, or did the latter rule over the Magyars? There are no answers. It must be remembered that written sources come much later: the first mention of the Magyars dates from 830.

Between the seventh and tenth centuries the Khazar Empire dominated first the Caspian Sea region, then the steppes stretching from the Don, the Dnieper and the Crimea. Apart from its military might, its economic role was important, trading between Kievan Russia, the Byzantine Empire and the Arabic Orient. Initially converted to Islam, the Khazar princes adopted Judaism towards 740 and were eventually converted to Christianity by St Cyril in the ninth century. The Onogurs, along with many other peoples, including the Hungarians, were part of this vast empire. The nature of their relationship is open to interpretation, of course, and in any case the fortunes of the army or force of circumstance would have altered it at various times. Furthermore, and at least twice, the Hungarian tribes undertook the journey through the steppes from east to west, from north of the Caucasus to north of the Black Sea, perhaps as far as the River Sereth at the foot of the Carpathians. One of the countries they occupied was called Levedia, the other, further to the west, was established as Etelköz by the ninth century. In Etelköz, by around 850, the Hungarians were no longer dependants of the Khazar Empire.

We have followed the trail of the ancient Hungarians far back into the vaults of time, tracing thousands of kilometres. There is, however, a quite different mythical journey to the new homeland, preserved in the collective memory and documented in the *Gesta Hungarorum*, lost in its original version but recorded in later chronicles. According to these, Hunor and Magor (the sons of Gog and Magog, kings of the Scythians), out hunting one day, caught a glimpse of a stag which they set about following. They soon lost it in the Meotide swamps – ancient name for the Azov Sea – and bewitched by the beauty of the landscape, the abundance of herbs, wood, fish and game, they decided to stay. One day, they again set off hunting, this time in search of women. They

found their future wives, the two daughters of Dula, prince of the Alains, among the abducted women. From these unions came 'the famous and all powerful King Attila and, much later, Prince Álmos, from whom descended the kings and princes of Hungary'. Later, so the legend goes, their homeland became cramped and so the forefathers of these peoples took to the road once more.

The authors of the first Hungarian chronicles (*gestae*) written in Latin, an 'anonymous notary' (Anonymus – around 1200) and Simon Kézai (around 1280), were not historians who practised critical appraisal of sources. The legend of the 'miracle stag' nonetheless fed the Hungarian imagination, merging the very likely memory of an abode near the Azov Sea with the improbable legend of a family connection with Attila's Huns.

A more reliable, if not totally trustworthy, source has survived on the origins of the Hungarians and their settling of Hungary at the end of that long journey. This information, a source dated after the event but nonetheless of immense value, will be referred to extensively in this narrative. It is *On Imperial Administration*, written around 950 by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, Byzantine emperor. Constantine, son of Emperor Leo the Philosopher, himself a famous writer, obtained his information from two Hungarian princes who came as ambassadors to the court. He was also able to draw upon Arab and Persian sources, as well as the writings of his father, who had already known and described the Hungarians from before the conquest in his military work, *Tactics*. Indeed, in 895, Leo the Philosopher had called the Hungarians to his rescue against the Danubian Bulgars. Thanks to these sources, the ninth century is well documented. The name Etelköz undoubtedly meant 'between the rivers' but since at the time both the Volga and the Don were known as Etel (or Etil) it is not easy conclusively to locate this settlement. According to the historian István Fodor, Arab sources have placed Etelköz between the Don and the lower Danube. This immense area covers the steppes of Russia and of modern southern Ukraine and suggests that whoever the occupants were, they must have been militarily formidable. Another possibility is that the Hungarians moved several times from east to west. An Arab traveller visited them somewhere 'between the rivers' and described a semi-nomadic and opulent lifestyle. The Hungarian warriors (who in 862 had already ventured to the borders of the eastern Frankish kingdom)

constituted a fearsome, mobile army. Meanwhile, they maintained trading relations with Kiev as well as capturing Slavs and selling them into slavery in the Byzantine ports.

During the last centuries before the Carpatho-Danubian conquest, contact with the Turks left a deep impression: language, the organisation of tribal society and military fashion, as well as culture, testify to their influence. Among the two hundred or so Hungarian words that are of Turkic-Bulgar origin we find wheat (*búza*), barley (*árpa*), wine (*bor*) and even the word plough (*eke*), no doubt referring to a far more sophisticated tool than the *araire* used earlier. The names of domestic animals and the words cheese (*sajt*), wool (*gyapjú*), enclosure (*karám*) are perhaps evidence of an intermittently sedentary way of life. The word for letter (*betű*) and the verb to write (*ír*) date from the same period, but writing, if indeed it existed, was probably runic (in the form of notches), surviving only as engravings on some objects. In any case, this script had probably already been used by the Szeklers (*székely* in Hungarian), an ethnic group that joined the Hungarians whose identity and provenance remain enigmatic.

The same goes for the Kabar tribes, of Turkish origin, who probably joined the Hungarians at the time of the conquest or just before, since they appear alongside the seven known tribes. Further evidence of a significant ‘Turkish connection’ lies in the tribal names. Of the seven, only two, the Nyék and Megyer tribes bear Finno-Ugric names, the others are all Turkish. The same is true for the names of the leaders. Were the warlords Turkish (a kind of ‘ruling class’) or only ‘Turkified’ through living in the Khazar Empire? The Emperor Constantine also referred to the Magyars as ‘Turks’. However, this could be simply because their military organisation followed the Turkish model. While different interpretations abound, what is certain is that the Finno-Ugric roots of their language was a key evolutionary factor. Another theory, put forward by Gyula László, offers a rather original explanation. According to him, the Hungarians of the conquest found a group of people who spoke Finno-Ugric already living in the Carpathian basin, having arrived in the Avar Empire two centuries earlier. This is the so-called ‘two-stage conquest’ theory, very popular with lay opinion but rarely shared by the specialists.

The Hungarian people and their culture are therefore the product of a gradual accumulation: a prodigious collage of borrowings; a nation

of nearly 15 million men and women speaking a language from the dawn of time, the largest of a linguistic family dispersed to the four winds by the vagaries of history.

#### THE CONQUEST OF HUNGARY

Around 895, Hungarians, already settled in Etelköz, probably to the west of the Dniester or even the Prut, suffered a lightning attack by the Pechenegs who were themselves retreating from invasion by other steppe tribes. The effects of this surprise attack must have been catastrophic, as most of the Hungarian armies were busy fighting elsewhere, having been called upon to help Leo the Philosopher, the Byzantine emperor, to ward off the Danubian Bulgars. The Hungarian tribes, fleeing the Pechenegs, crossed the Carpathians through two or three passes. The conquest began under the leadership of two chieftains, Árpád and Kursan, leading the seven Magyar tribes and the Kabar tribes of Turkish origin who joined the Hungarians. By 900, the occupation of the basin was completed and in 902 the Hungarians turned their attention to the Moravian principality of King Svatopluk's sons (the king died in 894). The Moravian Empire was in a state of collapse, while the eastern kingdom of the Franks – ruled by the last Carolingian, Louis the Infant – no longer exercised anything more than symbolic authority over Pannonia, and the powerful empire of the Danubian Bulgars had recently suffered a severe defeat. Conditions for occupation were therefore favourable.

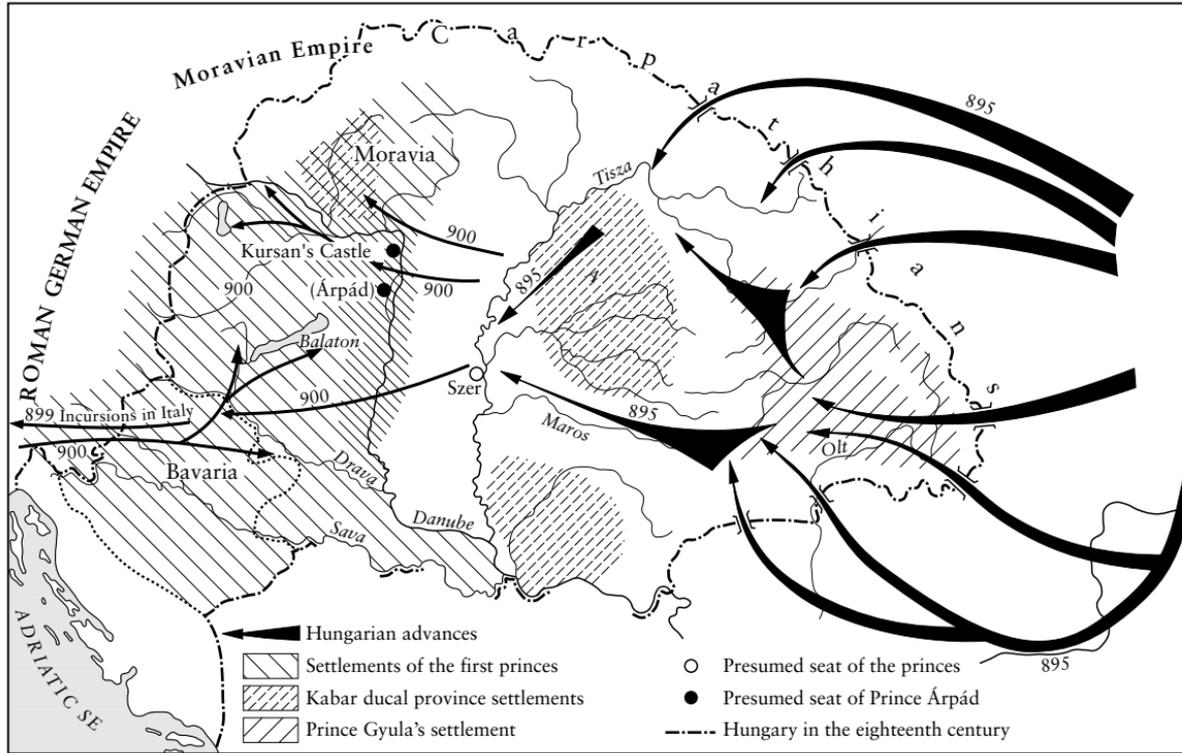
The tribes that had initially occupied the plain, choosing land with easy access to water and pasture and then spreading progressively to other areas, had already established a form of organisation. The tribal leagues, following a Khazar model, recognised the authority of two princes: a religious leader, the *kende*, and a military chief, the *gyula*. It is not known which of the two roles was assigned to Árpád and which to Kursan. According to legend, Árpád's father Álmos was killed at the time of the invasion, in accordance with the Khazar custom of sacrificing the chieftain. This would suggest that he and his son were the successive *kende*. Kursan, for his part, died in 904, when the custom of a dual principality was abandoned. From this moment on, all sources regard Árpád and his descendants as a single line of princes until the extinction of the dynasty in 1301. The title of *gyula* did not, however,

disappear: the Transylvanian lords carried it and exercised quite extensive local control, becoming increasingly independent of the princely and then royal authority. The title eventually became the family name Gyula. Árpád and his sons occupied the central area of the basin, between the Tisza and the Danube. The Árpád residence was probably situated not far from what became Budapest. Árpád and his sons would therefore have assumed the titles and responsibilities originally assigned to Kursan. In addition, the crown prince received an entire province as ducal land. As for the tribal chieftains – the ‘seven Magyars’ as they are still known colloquially – a few may have maintained control over their respective tribes until central power was reinforced. Did this mean that the tribal system had already disintegrated? In the final analysis, the tribes were made up of individual clans, a large number of which – about a hundred – survived long after the disintegration of the tribal system.

In modern Hungarian, the words *bő* and *bőség* mean ‘breadth’ and ‘abundance’, the word *ínség* ‘poverty’, and the word *jobbágy*, ‘serf’. At the time of settlement, each of these words had different meanings. The lords, chieftains of the tribes and clans, were called *bő* (also *úr*), members of the warrior class were the *jobbágy* while the poorest, down-trodden tied labourers were known as the *in*. The latter were slaves who had either arrived with the conquerors or were from the local population, perhaps captured during looting and pillaging. There may have been other classes: in particular those persons – or indeed entire villages – assigned to practise certain trades, as indicated by place-names. Cemeteries provide other clues: tombs, filled with weapons and jewels, contain horses and harnesses belonging to the chieftains, who were buried alone; warriors from the large free families (the future nobility) were buried together; finally, the common cemeteries were reserved for the lower orders.

#### FORAYS TO THE WEST AND THE HOUSE OF ÁRPÁD

During the tenth century, the country of the Magyars frequently appears in Western sources under the name of the Avar Empire. Emperor Constantine, on the other hand, talks of the ‘country of the Turks’. The uncertainties surrounding this first century following the conquest stem from contradictions between sources. Nonetheless, from



Map 2. The conquest of the Carpathian basin

this time onwards dozens of chroniclers from Fulda, Ratisbon (Regensburg), Saint-Gall, Salzburg, even Cordoba – scholars, bishops and kings – have left annals bearing witness to the Hungarians. Until then practically unknown, these horsemen of the steppes found fame through their devastating raids into Moravia, Bavaria, present-day Austria, Italy, Saxony (Saxe), Lotharingia, Burgundy, Aquitaine and as far as the Pyrenees and Spain. The desperate plea, ‘*De sagittis Hungarorum . . .*’, asking God for protection from ‘the Hungarian arrows’, echoed a Western world terrorised by what Hungarian historiography rather indulgently calls ‘the age of adventures’.

The Hungarian tribes certainly benefited from disarray of a Western Europe under attack from all sides. In the Germanic lands including Saxony, Thuringia and Bavaria – and in Italy – rival factions were busy tearing each other asunder. The France of the last Carolingians, under attack by the Normans, the Saracens and the Hungarians, was disintegrating. Even the Byzantine Empire, despite its power throughout the tenth century, thought it preferable to submit to a few Hungarian affronts rather than to alienate this occasional (admittedly turbulent but often useful) ally, particularly against Bulgaria.

Despite these circumstances, it is still astonishing that a semi-nomadic cavalry was able to carry out around seventy incursions in just fifty years with impunity. Often called upon to assist one or other side of a conflict, these adventurers invariably took the opportunity to carry out a bit of pillaging and ransacking for themselves. And yet, even taking into account the vulnerable state of the European world, the overall strength of the Hungarian forces seems insignificant. According to Paul Bairoch’s calculations, in his book *De Jéricho à Mexico*, the population of Europe excluding Russia was around 40 million. Hungary consisted of 60,000 souls, and could raise around 20,000 horsemen, a considerable number at the time but very limited when compared with the territory that had to be covered. The phenomenon of their military success is all the more astonishing because these armed bands were supported by a society that had yet to be fully organised.

The family of the first prince had carved out massive sections of the territorial and military cake for itself. Árpád and his successors (in the tenth century, succession sometimes passed to the eldest son of the reigning prince and at other times to the eldest member of the family) held the long line of the Danube – a strategic position if ever there was

one. Other prestigious and presumably wealthy sites were granted to the heirs, whether brother or son, and to dignitaries like the *gyula* and the *harka*. By what was known as the ‘grand ducal’ system, an entire province could also be granted to one of the heirs. Such dukedoms, received as privilege, usually consisted of territories settled by ‘auxiliary peoples’: the Kabars, for example, later called ‘Kalizes’, Muslim warriors who had arrived with the Hungarian tribes, as well as Pechenegs and Szeklers. Control over these military frontiers and buffer zones meant that the dukes exercised considerable military power. One of the first of them, Szabolcs, was the eldest of Árpád’s cousins and therefore his heir.

We know the names (all Turkish, without exception) and, to an extent, the respective roles, of five of Árpád’s sons. None of them attained the rank of first prince and, apart from the supposed reign of Szabolcs, the order of succession until around 950 is not known. At the time, one of Árpád’s grandsons, called Fajsz, had been reigning for a number of years. He was succeeded by Taksony (from 955? to 970?) who decided to put an end to westerly incursions and to abolish accession according to seniority in favour of accession through direct descent.

Decades of armed incursions coincided with struggles for succession and with the obscure period between the disappearance of Árpád around 907 and the rise of Fajsz, then Taksony around 955. During this long period, the *gyulas* ruled over Transylvania and various other chieftains emerged, but the supremacy of the House of Árpád seems to have remained unshaken.

#### *Defeat at Augsburg, 955, and its consequences*

Raids continued unabated until the Battle of Augsburg in 955: from wars of plunder to expeditions undertaken in response to calls from rival Germanic and French kings, or from the Byzantine emperors. The astonishing military prowess of these Hungarian ‘light-horses’ left towns and monasteries more or less defenceless and ripe for pillage. As far as we know, these expeditions were never led by the first prince in person. Their main purpose was the collection of ransoms and tributes destined for the ‘state’ coffers. Expeditions like these were obviously fruitful, as evidenced by protection money paid to the Magyars for many years by the Byzantine emperor and the Germanic kings.

The devastating defeat inflicted upon them by Henri l'Oiseleur at Merseburg in 933 certainly changed things. In 945–55, however, in response to King Otto's rivals – including his son-in-law Conrad the Redhead, duke of Lotharingia, Arnolphe of Regensburg and Otto's son, Liudolphe – the Magyars set off adventuring again. The conspirators then switched allegiance but the Hungarian army made the mistake of besieging Augsburg anyway. King Otto rushed to the rescue of Augsburg at the head of an army that now included all the Germanic kings as well as the conspirators back in his service. A catastrophic defeat ensued. The Hungarian chieftains, led by the *harka* Bulcsu, were hanged at Regensburg in Bavaria, the ancient eastern capital of the Carolingians.

Otto's victory is considered a decisive turning point in his rise to the imperial throne. In the aftermath of the defeat, the Hungarians had little choice but to make peace with the Holy Roman Empire. As for the Byzantine Empire, its rapport with the Hungarians, already long established, was now set in stone with the accession of Taksony's son, named Géza, around 972. Hungarian conversion to Christianity had already begun, through the Greek Church, during Byzantium's apogee under the Macedonian dynasty. Constantine, one of its emperors, had received Bulcsu the *harka*, who was to be hanged seven years later at Regensburg. It was in the interests of the Hungarians to maintain good relations with Byzantium but, above all, they needed to re-establish order at home. These tasks fell to Géza.

Though the honour of being the 'founder of the state' was attributed to his son István – the future St Stephen – Prince Géza's long reign (972–97) undoubtedly paved the way. This was achieved through a foreign policy aimed at establishing external stability between the two empires, and a domestic policy aimed at centralising power and subtly redirecting Christian conversion away from the Greek Church towards Rome and the Holy Roman Empire.

By the time of Géza's death, at the close of the century, decisive changes had taken place all over Europe. The Capetians came to power in France; England had been conquered by the Danes; the Kievan state had been created in Russia; the Piast dynasty had been founded in Poland and the Premysl dynasty in Bohemia. The successors of Otto – conqueror of the Hungarians at Augsburg – and his Holy Roman Empire controlled both Germany and Italy. The Byzantine Empire, however, was also at the zenith of its power and its glory. The choice of

Roman Christianity was a political gesture and, as such, of the utmost importance, all the more so because despite occasional conflicts with Constantinople, the latter remained the central focus and source of Christianity for Hungarians in the mid-tenth century. Following an ambassadorial visit to Constantinople by Princes Bulcsu and Tormás in 948, the *gyula*, second great dignitary and lord of the eastern part of the country, converted to the Greek religion and brought back with him Bishop Hierotheos. Though the success of the latter's evangelical mission was limited, the Orthodox Church retained a presence until and indeed beyond conversion to Roman Christianity favoured by St Stephen. A Greek religious convent was in fact founded at Veszprém in Transdanubia either by St Stephen himself or by his father, Géza, and several Greek or Bulgarian Orthodox monasteries existed in various other locations. Prince Gyula had remained faithful to his religion, yet his daughter Sarolt married Prince Géza, who was baptised by the Bishop of St-Gallese, Bruno (or Prunward), who was attached to the imperial chapel and personally mandated by Emperor Otto II. The advent of Bruno in the early years of Géza's reign marked a nascent, systematic and countrywide conversion to Christianity, along with a reorientation of foreign policy towards the Holy Roman Empire. Géza succeeded in stabilising the frontier zone, a no man's land – *gyepü* in Hungarian – situated between his country and Bavaria, which at the time also included the Eastern March, Ostmark, in other words the future Austria.

Géza's choice was essentially political and his methods more violent than pious. He forced large numbers of lords and warriors to convert whether they liked it or not and persecuted recalcitrant 'shamans' and pagans. Whether dark legend or truth, he is said to have buried alive Thonuzoba, chieftain of the Pecheneg tribes, who had arrived in Hungary a few decades before. The chronicles speak alternately of his devotion and of his cruelty. Whatever may have been the reality, Géza was faced with numerous revolts, stemming either from attachments to old beliefs or from resistance against his authority as prince. Géza gained ground both physically and metaphorically. His military escort, now established in the villages, became an embryonic royal army, and he was able to count on the loyalty of the majority of lords. As for the cohabitation of various ethnic groups – Magyars, Turks, Slavs – it does not seem to have affected his domestic policy.

*'White' and 'black' Hungarians*

This ethnic cohabitation nevertheless raised historical problems. In Géza's time, there were supposedly two Hungarian countries: that of the 'white' Hungarians and that of the 'black'. The latter comprised Szekler and Turkic tribes who had joined the Magyars as auxiliary soldiers, including the Kabars or the Pechenegs, whose descendants still lived in the Transcarpathian region, at the heart of future Romania, between Kievan Rus and the Bulgarian Empire. Most of the Hungarian 'blacks' were under ducal command but, towards the end of the tenth century, small groups formed under the authority of great rebel lords like the Transylvanian Gyula and his geographical neighbour, the chieftain Ajtony. On the other hand, similar or identical groups in the east were under the authority of the prince. Were these 'blacks' really more resistant to Christian conversion than the Hungarian 'whites' or were they simply following their leaders? The fact is that once the rebellion had broken out, it was fought under the banner of the Eastern Christian leaders, like Gyula and Ajtony, the one baptised in Constantinople, the other in the same town or in Bulgaria. Without minimising the pagan character of many of the revolts, the Greek Orthodox faith underlying the major conflicts suggests that there were more complex aspects to the fight against the refractory lords. Roman Christianity had not yet replaced the influence of Byzantium and of the Greek Church. Indeed, circulation of currency and usage of Byzantine measures attest to the continuing economic importance of these ties.

The final instalment of Géza's struggles was intimately bound up with preparations for the succession. Born c. 970 and originally named Vajk, Stephen was baptised and brought up in the Roman religion. In 996 he married Gizella, daughter of Henry of Bavaria. This was the first Hungarian dynastic marriage to a Western princess but in order to secure Stephen's succession, Géza, who was to die the following year, was forced to take further measures. Pretender to the throne was one Prince Koppány who owned the south-western ducal territory. Seniority succession rights went hand in hand with a levirate which consisted in marrying the prince's widow thereby ousting the son – in this case the heir-apparent, Vajk-Stephen. Géza arranged for Koppány's domains to be surrounded by Szeklers, Pechenegs and other Turkish soldiers and, after his death, it was King Stephen who led them into battle.