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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

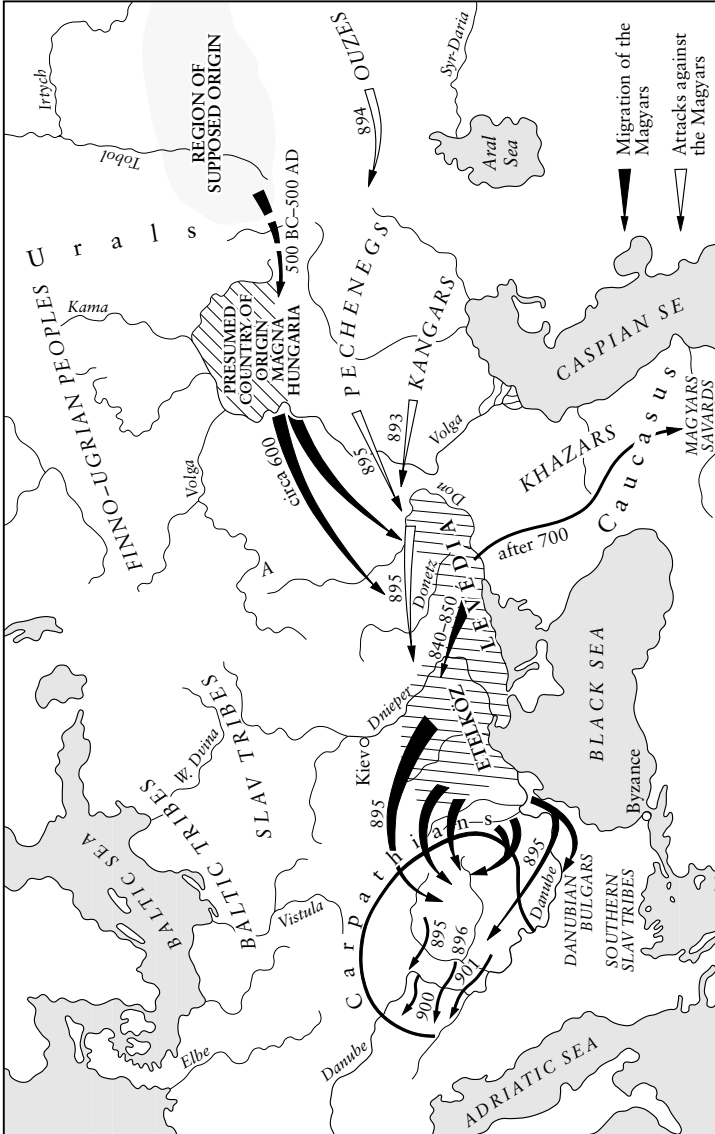
The prehistory of the Magyar peoples' distant ancestors begins several thousand kilometres further east and north of Hungary, in a time beyond memory, when a people speaking a language called 'Uralian' inhabited a vast region that probably straddled both sides of the Urals. It should be said at the outset 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 I. 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 Etekköz by the ninth century. In Etekköz, 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