ATTILA ZSOLDOS

The Árpáds and Their People

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An Introduction to the History of Hungary from cca. 900 to 1301

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Pál Fodor and Attila Zsoldos

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Front cover: Medieval wall-painting of the Last Judgement (detail). Reformed Church in Bögöz (today Mugeni, Romania). Photo: Zoltán Bagyinszki.
Back cover: Medieval wall-painting of the Saint Ladislaus legend (detail). Premontre Church in Türje. Photo: Attila Mudrák.

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◾ PREFACE

The aim of this book is to present the history of the Árpád era. The method applied here differs significantly from the traditional approach of following the chronological order of events, however. The period is presented not as a linear narration of events with only a few deviations for minor details, but rather in the light of the society of the time. The introductory chapters describe the sources and the arena of Hungarian history and give an overview of the event history of the times; these are then followed by chapters portraying a broad range of typical figures of the age, from the king down to the servants and the free peasants. All the knowledge of the full history of the Árpád period that can be expected to be included in a work of such a size has found its place in this social historical overview.

The method applied has of course both advantages and disadvantages. Enumerating the latter remains a task for my critics; here I would, understandably and perhaps excusably, like to make some preliminary points about the advantages. The most important of these is that this method allows for the individual, who contributes to the developments of the era or is affected by them, to come to the fore: this makes it possible to present not only a general picture of society but also some typical or exceptional paths an individual's life can take. It is my avowed hope that, as a result, the reader will be able to form a richer view of the Árpád era, one that is more interesting and reflects the reality of the past far more truthfully than one based on a mixture of general statements and sets of facts that are often difficult to interpret. I find it equally important that breaking with the constraints of the traditional chronological method has allowed for a coherent treatment of certain historical developments that otherwise would have had to be split into several parts in order to be included in the narrative. But there is yet another argument in favour of the chosen method, one I considered while planning this book: by consciously giving a lower priority to event history, I could present phenomena that, in a traditional treatment of the subject, would by necessity have had to be omitted, either in part or in full, from a work of this length. My personal view is that it is possible to tell the story of the Árpád era the way I have chosen to. Deciding whether I was right or wrong – and if wrong, how wrong – remains a task for the reader.

The first version of this book was published, in Hungarian, in 1997. Since then, my research results and those of my colleagues have amplified or altered our knowledge of the Árpád world; I have tried to incorporate these new findings in the current volume. Furthermore, this foreign language edition required some reworking: the original edition was written for a Hungarian audience, thereby assuming in a number of places a certain historical knowledge on the part of its readers; obviously, few if any readers of this foreign language edition possess such background knowledge.

Writing this book proved to be a very enlightening and enjoyable task. Should readers feel the same after reading it, I will be more than satisfied – it will mean I have not worked in vain. Finally, I would like to thank all those whose advice and comments have helped me in this endeavour. What is good in the book is partly to their credit; the responsibility for any possible mistakes is mine alone.

Óbuda, 30 August 2020

Attila Zsoldos

■ I. Sources

The earliest periods in the history of the Hungarians can be reconstructed by examining various types of source. Linguistic sources occupy an almost exclusive role in the research process of the earliest times. In certain cases, however, the conclusions drawn from investigating the history of the Hungarian language may be complemented or altered by archaeology. On the other hand, our knowledge of the era of the Hungarian Conquest is based primarily on archaeological findings, supplemented by written sources. These include reports passed down to us by outsiders – Muslim travellers, and Italian, German or Byzantine historiographers – who had either come into contact with the conquerors themselves or had learnt about them and their conditions from hearsay. One of the most outstanding works in this regard is the book written by Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, entitled *On the Administration of the Empire*. Although at several points it is difficult to interpret the content, it gives the most detailed account of the era. When it comes to the Árpád period, we see a clear dominance of written sources. The foundation of the Christian Kingdom of Hungary brought with it a proliferation of the culture of manuscripts, and thus the majority of sources at our disposal from this period was produced by Hungarians. As a result, they provide more plentiful and more precise information than works written by foreign observers, though as sources for the history of the Árpád era they are every bit as indispensable as archaeological findings.

1. Annals, gestas, legends

The purpose of some written sources from the Árpád period had actually been to record history. Annals *(annales)*, kept mainly in monasteries, gave concise accounts of the most important events in the life of monks, while at the same time, year by year, they also recorded all major occurrences that took place near the monastic quarters. A number of annals kept in Germany contain references to Hungary for the 10th to 13th centuries. While annals may have been kept at several places in Hungary, too, only one has come down to us: the Annals of Pozsony *(Annales Posonienses)*. This was probably started at the Benedictine monastery in Pannonhalma;

it provides brief, single-sentence summaries, with varying accuracy, of events that occurred between 997 and 1203. The text has been preserved in a codex kept in Pozsony, which explains the word "Pozsony" in the title of the annals. Today it is kept in the National Széchényi Library in Budapest.

Another genre in which events are narrated around a timeline is that of the chronicle *(chronicon)*. The purpose of the chronicles was to portray the history of the known world, mostly by placing contemporary events at the centre of the narrative. To the best of our knowledge, no works with characteristics appropriate to this genre were written in Hungary during the Middle Ages; the works that are traditionally referred to as "chronicles" are in fact gestas.

Gestas describe the deeds of a person or a people. The term comes from the Latin *res gestae*, meaning 'things done'. Compared to the two genres mentioned above, chronology is not so strictly followed in the gestas; in some cases, it is completely neglected. One example is the *Illuminated Chronicle*, which describes the history of the Hungarian people and occupies a distinct place among the written sources of the Árpád period.

"In the year of the Lord 1358 […] was begun this chronicle of the deeds of the Hungarians in ancient and most recent times, whence they came and how they fared, their victories and their boldness, compiled from divers old chronicles, preserving what in them is true and utterly refuting what is false" – the *Illuminated Chronicle* starts with these words,[1] telling us much about the circumstances of its creation. The writer of the chronicle – who, based on a not entirely proven assumption, is identified as Márk Kálti, a court priest of the kings of the House of Anjou of Hungary – did in fact little more than paste together earlier chronicles accessible to him at the court, adding some parts he wrote himself. The works he relied on have not come down to us in their original form, so the original content can only be deduced from copies made in later times. One such copy is a splendid codex – the actual *Illuminated Chronicle* – in which the text is complemented with magnificent miniatures: in some cases, these are mere illustrations; in other cases they refer to events that are either missing from the text or treated differently, thereby making research quite a task. Other codices contain other versions of the text, and the term "fourteenth-century chronicle compilation" has been coined in Hungarian historical studies to refer to all the existing versions collectively.

The origins of the chronicle compilation remain a mystery, and despite the continuous research of the past decades, there is still no satisfactory solution to all the contentious issues. The introductory lines of the *Illuminated Chronicle* quoted above leave no doubt that the work is a mixture of texts of various origins; even a single careful reading reveals that certain events are portrayed in a number of mutually exclusive versions. One of the main aims of the study of the chronicle is to

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1 *Chronici Hungarici compositio saeculi XIV.*, c. 1 (*SRH*, vol. I, p. 239); *The Illuminated Chronicle*, p. 3.

learn as much as possible about those "divers old chronicles" that the author of the *Illuminated Chronicle* used as his sources, because these works are lost – thanks perhaps to the devastations of the Ottoman era – and their original wording can only be recovered, albeit partially, by analysing the 14th-century chronicle compilation.

It is widely held that the origins of the first summary of the history of the Hungarian people, the so-called "oldest gesta", go back far in time, to the first century of the kingdom. The question of exactly when it was written is still the subject of lively discussion, however: almost every decade from the mid-11th century to the early 12th century has been suggested. It is most probable, however, that it was written during the reign of King Solomon, in the first half of the 1060s, presumably by a Hungarian ecclesiastical figure. Later on, more texts were added to it. The first such addition may have been attached to the oldest gesta around the turn of the 12th century, at King Coloman's court. Another addition was then added during the age of Stephen II. In the second half of the 12th century, at least one writer was working on the gesta. Events that occurred during the century from the year 1167 are recorded in short inscriptions, similar to those found in annals, which mainly refer to the most important facts relating to the rule of the monarchs. During the age of Stephen V, at the beginning of the 1270s, the text underwent yet another major change, in the course of which it was both amplified and abbreviated. The writer – identified by some researchers as Ákos, provost of Óbuda – was, unlike his predecessors, much more interested in the past of the contemporary élite than in the history of the Árpád dynasty. So, it was he who inserted the chapters dealing with the origins and the family history of these high-born relatives, at the same time recording legends of real or imaginary events from the 10th century. Shortly thereafter Simon Kézai, the first Hungarian historiographer known by name, worked on the chronicle between 1282 and 1285 in his capacity as court priest of King Ladislaus IV. His work is a stand-alone creation, yet is not independent from the chronicle compilation: he both abridged the works of his predecessors and supplemented the main body of the text with some extra chapters, parts of which were subsequently inserted into later versions of the chronicle compilation. This was the case, for example, with the very detailed "Hun story", which Kézai told by relying on foreign sources and by using some elements of Hungarian legends. In this story he elaborated his theory of identity between the Huns and the Hungarians, a theory that had been considered historical fact for centuries. In the 1330s one or more Franciscan monks continued writing the chronicle, and the text reached its final form, as it is known today, in 1358.

As this very sketchy overview shows, the text of the chronicle compilation is the result of the work of numerous authors, each contributing to its present form. Some excerpts written by various authors can only be separated after careful and scrupulous analysis, during which the text is examined sentence by sentence or even

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word for word. There are two main reasons why these texts of various origins are almost inseparably fused together. One is that chroniclers of the Middle Ages did not cite their sources precisely, nor did they pay attention to clearly distinguishing their own texts from those they had taken from earlier writers. The other reason is that they not only extended the source material by simply adding to it events that had occurred up to their own time; they also corrected previous texts, according to certain criteria. So, each chronicler was just as much an editor of the old text as a successor in the task of writing it. This makes the interpretation of the chronicle and its use for historical studies difficult, however. All in all, it is hardly necessary to emphasize that the chronicle is an invaluable treasure when it comes to the history of the Árpád era, partly because it is the most detailed domestic source for the 11th and 12th centuries, and partly because, thanks to the analysis of discernible revisions, it provides information on the world of ideas and the political thought of the age – information that cannot be obtained elsewhere.

Another well-known piece of Hungarian historical literature is the gesta written by the chronicler Anonymus, who called himself "P who is called master". The author also revealed that he had been the "notary of the most glorious Béla, king of Hungary of fond memory".[2] He did not however reveal which of the four kings by the name of Béla he meant, thus leading to never-ending discussions. Today we can say with great certainty that no convincing arguments exist in favour of Béla I, and it is also rather unlikely that he was referring to Béla II or Béla IV, although there are researchers who support this latter view. The predominant view is that the king referred to can be identified as King Béla III, and thus the work of Anonymus dates back to the turn of the 13th century. A more exact dating of the work is, once again, subject to much dispute, as is the question of whether it is at all possible to identify the chronicler with any of the known clerics of the age, and, if so, then which of them could be lurking behind the initial "P".

In his work Anonymus gave a short summary of the origins of the Hungarian people, and thereafter provided a detailed picture of the Conquest of Hungary – yet he did so as he imagined it. The stories that unfold one after the other on the pages of the gesta follow a well-established pattern: courageous heroes fight victorious battles, leaders of the enemy surrender, leaving their people with no choice but to yield to the conquering Hungarians. All this, of course, is very far from the reality of the Conquest of Hungary, but the author – and this is said somewhat in his defence – had intentions other than the recording of history. His is first and foremost a literary work, one that addresses the subject in the form of a novel. It nevertheless has major historical value: when describing the Carpathian Basin and the character of the conquering Hungarians, Anonymus projected the conditions of his own time into the past. And even though he disdained the "false stories of peasants" and the

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2 *Anonymi gesta Hungarorum*, c. 1 (*SRH*, vol. I, p. 33); *Anonymus and Master Roger*, p. 3.

"gabbling song of minstrels",[3] he did draw upon the historical tales and traditions of the dynasty and of the noble families. Yet he seems to have been ignorant of twenty-one historical figures, known to us from reliable sources, that he could have included in his narrative. Instead, he filled the Carpathian Basin with non-existent inimical grand princes whom the Hungarians had to defeat in order to conquer their new homeland.

The fourth genre of historical writing in the Middle Ages is that of the legends *(legenda)*. Legends tell stories about saints and the miracles they caused or experienced. With the spread of Christianity, the cult of saints arrived in Hungary, too; from the end of the 11th century, the young Hungarian Church could pride itself on having saints of its own. The legends about Hungarian saints from the Árpád era are all very well known. Some even exist in several versions. The life of Saint Stephen, the founder of the Hungarian state, is for example told in three different legends, the last of which was finished as early as at the end of the 11th century. The primary aim of legends was to verify the sanctity of a hero. Yet they can be used as historical sources. The longer version of the legend of bishop Gerard, who died a martyr's death, depicts a graphic and unique picture of the power of Ajtony, a main figure of the struggles during the foundation of the Kingdom of Hungary, while the biography of Saint Stephen by Bishop Hartvic offers a glimpse into what people at the Hungarian royal court thought about the relationship between royal power and the church at the end of the 11th century.

Among the narrative sources for the Hungarian history of the Árpád era there are some that do not really fit into the framework of the genres described above. The most important of these is the fictitious letter entitled *Carmen miserabile* ('Sorrowful Lament'), written by Master Roger. Although Master Roger was born in Italy, his work is one of the most important sources on the Mongol invasion of Hungary. Written around 1244–1245, shortly after the invasion, it tells the story of the invasion with the authenticity – and of course the subjectivity – of an eyewitness report. Master Roger had himself been held captive by the Mongols for a while, but managed to escape. The writer displays great historiographical skill as he tries to explore the reasons for the catastrophic event. As is so often the case, the conclusions of his analysis of the country's internal situation coincide at several points with the picture established through the study of other sources by modern methods of historiographical research.

The combined extent of narrative sources on the Árpád era is modest at best. Luckily, research has other written sources to rely on.

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3 *Anonymi gesta Hungarorum*, c. 1 (*SRH*, vol. I, pp. 33–34); *Anonymus and Master Roger*, p. 5.

2. Laws

During the Middle Ages, law in Hungary was predominantly based on custom. Despite this, written laws were formulated as early as at the time of the foundation of the Kingdom of Hungary. In the introduction to his collection of laws, Saint Stephen defined for his people "the way they should lead an upright and blameless life" by "emulating both ancient and modern caesars".[4] The laws of Saint Stephen have come down to us, organized in two "books of laws". Earlier it was believed that one of them, traditionally called the "first", was written immediately after the king's coronation, whereas the "second" was written around the year 1010, or even later, around 1030. Today it appears more likely that the two "books of laws" are the result of arbitrary subsequent editing and that the provisions themselves were written during various phases of the king's reign. It is most likely that Stephen's immediate successors passed laws as well. This can definitely be said of King Peter, even if his texts have been lost. Later on, especially at the end of the 11th century, there was an abundance of legislative activity. Saint Ladislaus passed three laws, while under the reign of King Coloman another five laws and acts of synod were passed. These laws contain both secular and ecclesiastical provisions. A common feature of all 11th century laws is that they are known to us from copies that were made during later years and that their text was distorted several times due to copying errors. In some cases, the laws from the period are rather fragmented, while in others it is obvious that the version in the "book of laws" as it is known today is the product of forging together provisions that had been written at least twice. The actual date of the laws is uncertain. The only exception is the law known as Saint Ladislaus's decree, known to have been passed in 1092 at the Synod of Szabolcs. Characteristically, two strikingly inappropriate paragraphs, the origins of which are unknown, were later added to it.

We have no knowledge of any laws from the 12th century, which of course does not mean that laws were not written in this period. On the other hand, there are laws that have been passed down to us from the last century of the Árpád era. One of these is the so-called Golden Bull, issued by Andrew II in 1222 and somewhat amended in 1231. Due to the similar nature of its provisions, when discussing the Golden Bull, one must also mention the law of 1267, passed by Béla IV. Other laws of this period include the law of Ladislaus IV, passed in 1279, which regulated the situation of the Cumans, and the two laws of Andrew III, one passed in 1290 and the other in 1298.

Laws are, by their very nature, rather peculiar historical sources. There is no doubt that their provisions reflect the realities of the era, yet one must differentiate between the legislative intentions of the laws and their implementation. When for example Saint Stephen ordered that ten villages build a church, we can get a glimpse

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4 Decreta Sancti Stephani regis, Lib. I (praefatio) (*LMKH*, p. 1).

into his work for the ecclesiastical organization of the country. The aim of the law is obvious: the king wanted to ensure that the newly-adopted religion be well rooted in Hungarian society. We can in no way be certain whether these churches were actually built, however. And *vice versa*: it would not be reasonable to believe that every church dating back to the first half of the 11th century was built as the result of the implementation of said law. As a general observation, it seems that laws in the Middle Ages were not very effective, and the implementation of their provisions was doubtful, to say the least, so every case needs to be justified. It is also true that laws allow for the drawing of conclusions on topics well outside their intended scope. Staying with our example of building churches, there is no reason to think Stephen would have imposed a task too burdensome to fulfil. Therefore we can justly assume that on average ten settlements had the financial means to cover the costs of construction, that technically the task did not exceed the possibilities of these settlements, that they were situated close enough to each other for inhabitants to be able to contribute to the construction and also to use the church for its proper purpose once it had been built. In the light of these and other such considerations – and the list is far from exhaustive – the analysis of this single law alone can lead us to questions regarding the ecclesiastical organisation and network of settlements in Hungary. Thus, for all their ineffectiveness, laws are prominent historical sources. But specific methods are needed to make them tell their story.

3. Charters

Laws contain general rules that concern the whole of society or a part of it. Charters, on the other hand, were used in Hungary during the Middle Ages to put individual legal issues in writing. In this sense, a charter is a document which expresses a legal fact, and serves to prove it. Finally, charters were issued according to certain rules. Charters could vary a great deal in terms of their form and content, but they did have some common features.

To ensure that charters might fulfil their purpose for a long time, they were written on durable material. Papyrus was used in the early medieval period but was replaced in the 10th century by a specially-prepared animal skin membrane (parchment). During the Árpád era charters were exclusively written on parchment. Paper, discovered in ancient China and introduced in Europe via the Arab world, did not reach Hungary until the beginnings of the 14th century.

Since charters had legal power, great care was taken to prove their authenticity. The most general, but certainly not exclusive method of authentication was by means of a seal. Sealed charters were mostly made in the following way: first, the seal, bearing the impression of its issuer, was pressed into wax, either natural in colour or dyed, by adding some natural colouring material. Then, to show that the content of the charter corresponded to the will of its issuer, it was attached to the membrane. Seals could

also be made of easily-formed metals such as lead and gold. Charters with metal seals were called bulls, and the so-called Golden Bull, issued by Andrew II in 1222, was named after the golden plates that made up the king's seal of authentication.

The structure of the charters was made up of a set of pre-established elements, the so-called *formulae*, which followed a strict order. In medieval Hungary, the most commonly used order of the formulae was as follows. The text began with a call upon heavenly powers *(invocation)*. It was then followed by the name of the issuer of the charter *(intitulatio)* and of the person to whom the charter was addressed *(inscriptio)*. This introductory part was finished with a formal greeting to the recipient of the charter *(salutatio)*. The main part of the charter consisted of general philosophizing on the matter of the charter, or indeed on a topic irrelevant to it *(arenga)*, a formula for promulgation of the act of the charter *(promulgatio)*, a part describing the merits of the recipient of the charter *(narratio)*, the things being enacted *(dispositio)*, envisaged sanctions for those who did not comply with the provisions of the charter *(sanctio)*, and the formula for how the charter was authenticated *(corroboratio)*. The ending included a dating clause *(datatio)*, but it was also customary to name those who witnessed the acts of the charter and those who played a role in issuing it. All of the above is but a theoretical model and does not offer an exhaustive list of the parts of the charters. In practice, it was the type and the subject of the document that defined which of these formulae were included in the charter, and in which order. As the practice of granting charters became consolidated, the use of various formulae became more frequent. With a more permanent use, charters on similar matters were edited by using the same or very similar formulae. In the end it was possible simply to insert the specific data of a given case into the right parts of the formulae.

For researchers into the Middle Ages, every detail in every charter may contain useful information. A lot more can be learnt from them than just who received a royal land grant, and when, or who were fighting legal cases against each other, and why. A series of charters on the same subject can also provide information on the procedures and rules for land grants and law suits. On the other hand, by collecting and researching charters issued to a certain family or settlement, one can, within the existing possibilities, follow the history of that particular family or settlement the in fullest manner possible. The various parts of the charters can actually provide valuable information regardless of their matter. To illustrate this, let us have a look at two examples. A unique feature of Hungarian charters is that in the *narratio*, references to the merits of the person to whom the charter was issued were not only made in general form, but, in the case of solemnly issued royal charters, were put into some kind of short story. The origins of this custom are not clear, but this is of no great importance. What is interesting from our point of view is that by studying these *narrationes,* we can reconstruct, at least in part, some military or political events of which, due to the scarcity of available narrative sources, we would otherwise have no or only partial knowledge. This very type of royal charter provides us with yet another,

equally important form of data: from the late 12th century it became an established custom to list major clerical and secular dignitaries in connection with the dating of the document. By collecting and organizing these lists of dignitaries in chronological order, and of course by complementing them with information gained from elsewhere, we can form an exact view of those who were responsible for managing national issues. This in turn provides ample possibilities to learn more about the political, social and institutional history of the country. The formulae can play a role in historical research, too, despite their not being very informative. This is because the issuers of charters edited and formulated the text of the charters according to their own customs. Any deviation from the established pattern needs an explanation, and if none can be given, it can reasonably be suspected that the charter is a counterfeit.

Charters conferred rights, so the purpose of counterfeiting was to obtain or legalize properties or certain privileges. Counterfeiting could be done in various ways. In some cases, fake charters that had never existed were produced on the basis of authentic ones; to make the forgery look more real, seals detached from real charters were attached to the fake ones. In other cases, it seemed to be enough to alter the text somewhat by scraping the original text from the membrane and replacing it with the desired wording. We also know of cases in which the issuer was misled by a charter that looked impeccable on the outside but contained fake information on the inside. Against this background it is understandable that charters, just like any another sources, have to be examined thoroughly in order not to allow historiography to be misled. In certain cases, however, even forgeries can be regarded as valid research sources, especially when it is possible to establish the date and purpose of the counterfeiting.

4. Literacy and its institutions in the Árpád era

Today, reading and writing are seen as basic and essentially indispensable cultural skills. In the Árpád era, however, literacy was the privilege of the élite, while for the majority of the population illiteracy was normal. Not only could people – including the most powerful and the wealthiest – not read or write, they did not even feel a need for the advantages literacy could provide. They managed their affairs, whether of lesser or greater importance, by word of mouth. Saint Stephen did try to keep up with western traditions even in the issuing of charters. However, it was a long time before literacy became established in Hungary. In the 11th century, the practice of issuing charters can be considered continuous, yet was rudimentary in nature. The recipient of the charter often arrived at the royal court with a pre-edited certificate to attain royal consent by having the authenticating royal seal attached to it. Charters were occasionally issued at the royal court. If and when this happened, they were edited by one of the members of the royal chapel, a body bringing together the priests of the court.

The granting of royal charters had become more consolidated by the mid-12th century. The first sign of this was the group of those issuing charters at the royal chapel gradually becoming permanent. This development led to the establishment of the so-called chancery, an "office" separate and independent from the royal chapel, during the reign of Béla III. One of the charters issued by the king even formulated the monarch's ambition that henceforth all rulings by the court should be certified by a "written testimony thereof".[5] From this moment onwards, the chancery became responsible for managing affairs that required writing; the practice of granting royal charters thus became even more frequent during the 13th century, resulting in a sudden upsurge in the number of charters. While rather more than 300 royal charters were issued during the thirty years of King Andrew II's reign at the beginning of the century, almost twice as many came down to us from the single decade when King Andrew III sat on the throne. This means that – also taking into consideration the difference in the duration of the reign of the two monarchs – there was a sixfold increase in the number of charters. The position of chancellor was usually held by high-ranking clerics. Provosts were assigned to the position first; bishops and archbishops later. From the beginning of the 13th century, however, the actual work of the chancery was directed by the vice-chancellor *(vicecancellarius)*. The vice-chancellor was himself a member of the clergy; from the mid-13th century the post was most often filled by the provost of Székesfehérvár, and at the end of the 13th century the church of Székesfehérvár claimed that it had enjoyed this privilege "since antiquity".[6] People employed to draft charters in the chanceries were called notaries *(notarius)*. Anonymus, the writer of the gesta previously mentioned, claimed to be just one such notary. As the institution of the chancery evolved, by the mid-13th century "confidential officers" or "special notaries" *(secretarius* or *notarius speciali*s) entrusted with confidential secretarial tasks were working for the kings. After some initial difficulties, the royal chancery had become a well-functioning body by the time of King Béla IV, while many of the clerics previously employed in the chancery developed bright careers later in life within the clergy.

In parallel with the development of more advanced forms of granting royal charters, "rural" literacy, independent of the royal court, also emerged. The two phenomena ended up reinforcing one another: since all cases dealt with at the court were put into writing, it seemed appropriate for other members of society to have their own legal issues certified in the same way. As part of nationwide surveys of landed estates carried out as early as at the late 1220s, royal commissioners entrusted with the task of carrying out the survey required those surveyed to prove their right to their estates by way of charters. By the end of the 13th century it had become a common practice to form decisions in legal cases on the basis of evidence provided by charters. Yet however rapidly the royal chancery evolved, it could not keep up with the

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5 1181: *ChAH*, p. 78.
6 The Laws of 1290, c. 9 (*LMKH*, p. 45).

sudden increase in demand for written documents. In the end, the church undertook this laborious task, which proved to be the right solution for many reasons. Firstly, in ecclesiastic institutions there had always been people who were literate and had experience in editing charters. Secondly, trust in the church was unassailable. Finally, we should not forget that any ecclesiastic institution – be it a cloister, a cathedral chapter or an episcopal see – could be reached within one or two days from any inhabited area in the country. So, by the early 13th century, matters of private law – including sales and wills, among other matters – were managed according to established practice at ecclesiastic institutions, where charters were also issued on such affairs. Such ecclesiastic bodies were called a "place of authentication" *(locus credibilis)*, whose services were similarly used by the monarch and royal officials when managing official errands.

Members of the royal family, clerical and secular dignitaries, city authorities, and, from the beginning of the century, even county authorities, granted charters. As a result, the number of charters increased substantially during the Árpád era: only counting those that are preserved today, their number is estimated at about ten thousand. This must have been a higher figure in the past. Many charters were lost in wars, whether fought in the Árpád era or subsequently. They could also have been lost in fires. Other types of document were not considered important enough to be preserved. The so-called third law of Saint Ladislaus mentions a census which, extrapolating from the references, may have been conducted to map the various peoples living on royal domains; according to the provisions of the first law passed by King Coloman, certain taxes collected in the form of money could only be sent to the court if accompanied by a written statement. It is easy to see what valuable sources these documents could have been for historiographers, had they not been lost. Yet they were lost, and the reason for this may be that such documents, once the information they provided had become obsolete, were not paid much attention. This accounts for the fact that such census-like documents are the rarest among the sources from the Árpád period and the Middle Ages.

The limitations of historical research on the Árpád era are set exactly by the quantity and other characteristics of the available sources. The source material is not evenly distributed among the three centuries of the period. Narrative sources abound mostly for the 11th century and, to a lesser extent, the 13th. Laws have also come down to us from these two centuries. The overwhelming majority of the charters also provide information on the 13th century – mostly on conditions following the Mongol invasion. The 12th century is thus a barely-known "dark period" of the Middle Ages in Hungary. As the number of written sources on the Árpád era may not increase significantly in the future, even if some new hidden charters are always being discovered, it is more likely that our knowledge of the Árpád era will be amplified, or in some cases even altered, as a result of the expansion of archaeological studies.

■ II. Geographical setting

One of the most debated issues regarding the early history of the Hungarians concerns their original homeland. Researchers seek to find an answer to the question of which territories in Eurasia served as the setting for the events that led to the formation of the independent Hungarian people. The conflicting theories suggest different territories for the various phases of the process, from the Altai Mountains to the Caucasus Mountains, and from the Ob and Volga rivers down to the coasts of the Black Sea. There is no less uncertainty, despite the existence of written sources, as to the last two territories inhabited by Hungarians outside the Carpathian Basin, namely the oft-mentioned areas of Levédia and Etelköz. According to Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, the only source with an account of Levédia, the territory was situated by a certain "river *Chidmas*, also called *Chingulous*".[1] It is very difficult to interpret this geographic definition, however, as these names feature nowhere else but the work of the emperor. Identifying these territories is therefore virtually impossible. On the basis of other references made by Constantine, though, it seems most likely that Levédia was situated between the rivers Don and Dnieper. Etelköz on the other hand must have been situated west of Levédia, thus comprising the territories between the river Dnieper and the Lower Danube. Other theories place both Levédia and Etelköz either further to the west or further to the east. According to yet another view, the emperor may have misunderstood his informants, and Levédia had in reality formed part of a larger area known as Etelköz. When it comes to the history of the Árpád era we do not encounter the same difficulties. The theatre of events for that period can clearly be defined as the Carpathian Basin and its immediate surroundings.

1. The Carpathian Basin

The Carpathian Basin is a closed geographical unit in the eastern part of Central Europe. It is surrounded by well-defined natural boundaries; the only opening is towards the Alps in the west. The area owes its name to the ranges of the Carpathian

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1 *DAI*, p. 171.

Mountains that mark its boundaries to the north, east and south-east. To the south the area is enclosed by the mountains of the Balkan Peninsula. This vast territory (approximately 300,000 km²) features a variety of landscapes, each with different geographical landforms.

The middle of the Carpathian Basin is comprised mainly of the Great Hungarian Plain, an area of flatlands intersected by large rivers, minor watercourses, ridges and sandy areas. A smaller but similar landscape in the western part of the basin is the Small Hungarian Plain, extending over both sides of the river Danube. The hilly area between the two plains is Transdanubia, which is enhanced by a smaller mountain range and by Lake Balaton. Upper Hungary, occupying one third of the Carpathian Basin in the north, is characterized by significantly higher mountains. This series of mountain ranges is divided into smaller sections by river valleys that at some points widen into minor basins. Its major basins include the region of Szepesség and the Turóc and Liptó Basins. The area beyond the forested mountains bordering the Great Hungarian Plain to the east, stretching all the way to the Eastern and Southern Carpathians, is Transylvania (original meaning: [area] 'beyond the forest'). The area to the south of Transdanubia used to be Slavonia. It is important to bear in mind that the name Slavonia denominated a different region in the Middle Ages. During the Middle Ages Slavonia was the area stretching from west of the Dráva–Száva interfluve to the mountain range of Gozd in the south, today called the Dinaric Alps. Later, however, due to ethnic and administrative changes following the Ottoman expansion, the area known in the Middle Ages as Slavonia became part of Croatia. In the meantime, the meaning of the name Slavonia shifted to refer to an area east of the Dráva–Száva interfluve, which in the Middle Ages had belonged to Hungary, with no special name given to it. The majority of the terms for these landscapes were coined in the modern era. Some of them, like the Small Hungarian Plain, or Upper Hungary, were established as late as in the 19th century. The name "Transdanubia" in today's sense of the word became a standard expression in the 18th century, when Pozsony, as the city of coronations, national assemblies and the seat of central government institutions, became the centre of the country. The reason for this is that looking from Pozsony, the area is located on the "far side of the Danube". In the Middle Ages, the meaning of expressions like "far side" or "near side" of the Danube very much depended on which side of the river the area in question was looked at from.

Of all the toponyms mentioned above, only those of Transylvania and Slavonia were known and used during the Árpád era. This can hardly be accidental. The explanation may be that both Transylvania and Slavonia were connected to the country in a very special way; both geographic regions had their own administration, separate from the rest of the country, and the provinces thus created showed unique distinctive characteristics. Yet, despite this clearly noticeable separation, both Transylvania and Slavonia formed integral parts of Hungary, as shown by the fact

that Hungarian monarchs never bore the title "King of Transylvania" or "King of Slavonia", for the simple reason that such titles did not exist. Transylvania and Slavonia were inherent in the concept of the Kingdom of Hungary. This is obvious in the case of Transylvania, as according to reports in chronicles that were deemed to be credible, the conquering Hungarians arriving from Etelköz occupied the central basin of Transylvania first, and from there moved on to the Great Hungarian Plain. The case of Slavonia is slightly different. According to a medieval legend, Slavonia was conquered by King St Ladislaus around 1091. This, however, contrasts not only with the theory described above, but also with quite a lot of historic data, including several references found in the works of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. It also contradicts the fact that Hungarian counties in Southern Transdanubia often expanded into territories south of the river Dráva that later came to belong to Slavonia. All in all, it seems most probable that the Hungarian conquerors took control of this territory in the first half of the 10th century, and named it *Tótország* ('country of the Slavs') after its Slavic inhabitants. (The word *tót* – which did not carry any of the prejudicial connotations of modern times, relating to the Slovaks – was the old Hungarian word for Slavic people.)

The physical attributes of the Carpathian Basin depended very much on the amount of water in its rivers. The main river in the basin is the Danube, which, with one or two exceptions, collects water from all the rivers in the area. Its major tributaries are the Tisza and Száva rivers. The river Tisza divides the Great Hungarian Plain into two parts, whereas the river Száva marks, roughly speaking, the southern border of the entire Carpathian Basin. Some of the major rivers of Upper Hungary, such as the Vág and Garam rivers, flow directly into the Danube. Others, like the river Sajó (together with the river Hernád), flow into the Tisza river or into the river Bodrog, and then, together with other tributaries, reach the Danube indirectly. The two major tributaries of the Tisza, the Szamos and Maros rivers, originate in Transylvania. In the Árpád era and also subsequently, the rivers were surrounded by vast areas of tidal plains, which, especially during the rainy season, expanded and turned into moorlands.

2. Natural treasures

To form a general view of Hungary during the Árpád times, we can rely on several descriptions that both reinforce and complement one another. Three of these date back to as early as the mid-12th century. During the Second Crusade, in 1147, Otto, bishop of Freising, crossing Hungary with a crusading army through Hungary, gave an account of his experiences in his gesta on the deeds of Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I. The bishop did not insist on being a neutral observer; he openly expressed his distaste for the Hungarians. A more objective account is given by Abū Hāmid al-Garnātī, an Arab traveller who resided in Hungary between 1150 and 1153. In

his work he mainly provides valuable information on the Muslim inhabitants of the country. The author of the third account was the geographer al-Idrīsī, also of Arab origin. Al-Idrīsī lived in Italy and most likely had never visited Hungary. His work presents the entire world as it was then known, and the data on Hungary seems to be based on the accounts of Italian traders. The most detailed account, however, is given in our fourth source, which dates back to the years immediately following the Árpád era, possibly to 1308. It is entitled *Description of Eastern Europe*, and was written by an unknown, presumably French monk.

According to the information consistent to these four accounts, during the Árpád era the Kingdom of Hungary was a vast and prosperous country, rich in natural resources. Al-Idrīsī briefly notes that "Hungary is a long and wide country, where cultivated fields abound. It has many cities and great wealth".[2] Abū Hāmid is of similar opinion when he writes that "Hungary is among those countries where life is the easiest and the best".[3] In this respect the report by Otto of Freising does not contradict the two Arab writers: "there is a vast plain in its centre, irrigated by illustrious rivers and water flows. It is especially rich in forests full of all kinds of animals and its beauty is just as eye-catching as the fertility of its lands". Yet he does not fail to add: "rightly can the stars in their courses be blamed or rather the divine forgiveness adored for having endowed such human monsters [i.e. the Hungarians], that cannot be called people, with so beautiful a country".[4] Abū Hāmid's views, on the other hand, were not based on prejudice, so when describing the inhabitants of the country he considered it worth mentioning that they were a "brave and innumerable people".[5] This is in line with the opinion of an unknown author who, when giving his account of Eastern Europe, noted that "The people are generally short, black-haired, and lean; they are very good warriors, skilled in the use of weapons of all types. Yet most of all they are excellent archers. […]. Hungary's ordinary inhabitants are very humble and Catholic, but its lords and nobles are very cruel".[6]

The "fertility of its lands", as expressed also by Otto of Freising, provided the country and its inhabitants with an abundance of food, even at times when Western Europe frequently faced the threat of famine. According to the author of the *Descriptio*, the country's "soil is suitable for grazing and is rich in bread, wine and meat […] while the abundance of fish exceeds all other countries".[7] As stated in charters and shown by archaeological findings, the major agricultural products included wheat, rye, barley and millet. The main source of meat was cattle and sheep,

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2 *Idrisi*, pp. 432–433.

3 *Abū Hāmid*, p. 208.

4 *Gesta Friderici I imperatoris*, Lib. I, cap. 31 (*MGH SS*, vol. XX, pp. 368–369).

5 *Abū Hāmid*, p. 208.

6 *Descriptio Europae Orientalis*, pp. 139–140.

7 Ibid., p. 136.