

Reflections on the ‘Dual Conquest’ Theory of Hungarian Origins*
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For almost a half-century now there has been a heated debate in Hungary as to when the ancestors of Hungarians arrived in their present homeland. In one camp in this war of words are the upholders of orthodoxy who claim that the Magyars came to the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century A.D., while their opponents suggest that these ancestors, or at least most of them, had settled in that part of Europe much earlier. This latter hypothesis even has a name: the “dual conquest” theory of Hungarian ethnogenesis. The historiographical school holding these views is named after Gyula László (1910-1998) and his foremost disciple János Makkay (1933-). “Dual conquest” refers to László’s first formulation of his ideas, which suggested that some of the Hungarians’ ancestors entered the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century, while others had come over two centuries earlier (in late Avar times). In his old age László revised his ideas and the phrase “dual conquest” acquired a different meaning.

Since the death of László and the retirement of Makkay from active scholarly life, the dual conquest theory has fallen on hard times, and some of its detractors have been ready to declare it obsolete. In this paper I will argue that any such action would be premature. In fact, the contrary is the case, since in recent years much evidence has surfaced — mainly as the result of genetic and anthropological researches — suggesting that the ancestors of the Hungarians, or at least most of them, had indeed arrived in the Middle Danube Basin centuries, perhaps even many centuries, before 895.

The first scholar who challenged the traditional view of Hungarian ethnogenesis in a fundamental way was Armin Vámbéry (1832-1913). Born as Hermann Wamberger, in his youth Vámbéry learned several languages, later travelled throughout Central Asia, and still later became a professor of oriental languages in Budapest. He is best known for his argument that Hungarian was more

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of an Altaic than a Uralic language — a view that he moderated in his old age, admitting that the Ugric core of the Magyar language was undeniable. Today few people know that Vámbéry held equally unconventional opinions about Hungarian origins. To put it briefly, Vámbéry believed that the Hungarian language developed in Central Europe's Middle Danube Basin, where the ancestors of the Hungarians had settled in late Roman times or before. A corollary of this theory is that the nomadic tribes that conquered the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century were Turkic-speakers who were few in numbers and whose descendants were assimilated by the autochthonous and by then Hungarian-speaking population (Vámbéry 1914; Dreisziger 2013).

These views were summed up in Vámbéry's posthumous 1914 book: *A magyarság bölcsőjénél* [At the cradle of the Hungarians]. In the decades that followed, his theory about Hungarian ethnogenesis seems to have been forgotten. This happened despite the fact that other scholars in Hungary also began questioning the accepted view of Hungarian beginnings. One of these was Lajos Kiss of Marjalak (1887-1972), a historian and writer of school textbooks. Marjalaki, as he is known to Hungarians, postulated that Hungarians had lived in the Carpathian Basin since time immemorial, and when Prince Árpád and his nomadic warriors conquered their land, they did not even try to resist, as they just exchanged one set of overlords for another — as they had done so many times in the past (Marjalaki 1930, 1956). Marjalaki's new theory of the timing of Hungarian settlement in the Carpathian Basin, just like Vámbéry's, was ignored by Hungary's academic establishment — and her reading public. One wonders if the social and intellectual climate in interwar Hungary had anything to do with this fact. As is well known, for much of the first half of the 20th century, class-consciousness and anti-Semitism were rife in the country — and Vámbéry was Jewish and Marjalaki was the son of a poor peasant.

A few decades after Marjalaki began publishing on the subject of Hungarian origins, another Hungarian scholar came along who challenged the orthodox theory of the “Hungarian conquest.” That person was the above-mentioned Gyula László, an archaeologist, artist and university teacher. His archaeological researches led him to believe that Hungarians began arriving in the Carpathian Basin in late-Avar times, probably in the 670s, with the rest of them coming at the end of the 9th century. His proposition became known as the “dual conquest” [*kettős honfoglalás*] theory of Hungarian origins (László 1978; Erdélyi 2013). Late in his life, he amended his theory, arguing that most of the ancestors of the Hungarians had settled in the Carpathian Basin in late-Avar times or even earlier, and the nomadic warriors who conquered that part of Europe at the end of the 9th century were predominantly Turkic-speakers (László 1997). Accordingly, the phrase “dual conquest” acquired a new meaning. In its new incarnation, the theory suggests that in the second half of the first millennium A.D., two important events took place in the Carpathian Basin

that determined the course of Hungarian evolution. The first of these was the arrival of the ancestors of the Hungarians, a development that established the demographic basis of the future Magyar nation. The second event was the conquest in 895 of the Hungarian homeland by a group of nomadic tribes — whose descendants later created a centralized feudal kingdom that still later evolved into the modern nation-state of Hungary.

Unlike Vámbéry and Marjalaki before him, László attained a fair degree of public recognition in Hungary. In academic circles, however, he found few supporters. Perhaps the only significant exception was archaeologist János Makkay (1933-) whose most substantial publication in defence of the dual conquest theory, as formulated by László in his old age, was the monograph *A magyarság keletzése* [The dating of Hungarians]. In this work Makkay used evidence produced by linguists, historians, anthropologists and scholars in other disciplines to support László's arguments. Concerning linguistic evidence, Makkay argued that the Bulgaro-Turkic loan words that exist in the Magyar language were borrowed while Hungarians had lived along with various Bulgar tribes (as well as other Turkic peoples) in the Carpathian Basin in the centuries before 895. In his opinion the same was true of Slavic loan-words in Hungarian: these were acquired by Magyar agriculturalists who had co-habited with Slavic settlers for centuries in the Carpathian Basin long before the end of the 9th century. Makkay pointed out that many words in Hungarian describing organized religion are of Slavic origin. According to him these words entered the Magyar language in the Carpathian Basin as the result of the interaction of the Hungarians with Christian Slavs over many generations (Makkay 1994: 157-158). Had Hungarians not been living in the Carpathian Basin at that time but only after 895, their exposure to Christianity would have come only around the year 1000 when Hungary's rulers invited missionaries mainly from the German world to convert the descendants of the nomads who conquered the Carpathian Basin a century earlier. In that case words describing organized religious life in the Hungarian language would have been German and not Slavic. Finally, Makkay turned to the issue of the origins of the Magyar-speaking populations of Transylvania, and he suggested that some of them, especially the peoples of the region in the heart of the Transylvanian Basin known as *mezőség*, had probably settled there even before the rest of the Hungarians arrived during the time of Avar rule. Makkay's evidence for this was the very distinct, archaic dialect of Hungarian spoken in the region (Makkay 1994: 153). Another prominent scholar who endorsed László's views, or at least the idea that Prince Árpád and his warriors found Hungarian-speakers in the Carpathian Basin when they arrived there, was historian Pál Engel (1938-2001) (Engel 1990: 13).

By the 1970s and 1980s, there were other Hungarian scholars who were questioning the traditional interpretation of the settlement by Hungarians in their

present homeland. Today, the relevant writings of these people are never mentioned in the works of the defenders of historical orthodoxy, and the reading public of Hungary seems to know nothing about them. The reason for this might be the fact that they published only in academic journals and books — and often in foreign languages. The most highly qualified of these people was the physical anthropologist Pál Lipták (1914-2000) of the University of Szeged. Through the study of the anatomy of the occupants of Conquest-era graves, Lipták came to the conclusion that the majority of the nomadic warriors who conquered the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century were anatomically different from the people who lived there at the time and — importantly — also from the vast majority of the people who lived there in subsequent centuries. This fact suggested to Lipták that the majority of the conquerors of “895” fame were not Hungarians and that the real ancestors of the Magyars had settled in the Carpathian Basin in several waves, from the early 5th century on to the end of the 9th century, but especially during Avar times (Lipták 1980: 365-368; 1983: 160-162). Lipták based his observation in part on the research of the Hungarian archaeologist Dezső Simonyi, who in the early 1980s postulated that the ancestors of Hungarians might have started to settle in the Carpathian Basin in the early 5th century (Simonyi 1981: 71-88).

Less than two decades after the publication of Lipták’s and Simonyi’s major works, another Hungarian critic of the orthodox theory of the “Hungarian conquest” published a monograph. He was Gábor Vékony (1944-2004), who spent most of his career teaching at Eötvös Loránd University. Vékony suggested that the ancestors of Hungarians arrived in the Carpathian Basin in the second half of the 7th century, but possibly as early as the 5th; and he went further to argue that the nomadic tribes that conquered the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century probably spoke Turkic languages — which they lost when they were assimilated by the masses of Hungarians they found living there (Vékony 2002: 219). Vékony’s book was received with a high degree of scepticism on the part of his fellow academics in Hungary.

Within a few years after the appearance of Vékony’s book, another work surfaced in Hungary that questioned the traditional interpretation of Hungarian ethnogenesis. The book was by veteran scholar Péter Király (1918-2015), whose arguments against the traditional interpretation of the “Hungarian” conquest are based mainly on the study of medieval Central European written sources. After studying the latter for many decades, Király came to the conclusion that the ancestors of the Hungarians probably started to settle in the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 6th century. Király even cites a pre-895 list of the members of a monastery in what is now eastern France, suggesting that Christian Hungarians from the Carpathian Basin were joining monastic houses in Western Europe long before Prince Árpád and his warriors arrived in the Danube Basin (Király 2006: 156). Király’s book was

published by an obscure publishing house and did not seem to have created any waves in academic circles.

In the meantime, members of Hungary's historical establishment felt that they had effectively refuted some of László's arguments and were ready to cast the "dual conquest" theory on the scrapheap of historical writings. At a gathering of Hungarian archaeologists, historians, paleo-linguists and physical anthropologists that was hosted by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in April of 2013, the defenders of historical orthodoxy could feel comfortable. Among the several dozen speakers at the conference, only one brave soul dared to voice doubt about the traditional explanation of Hungarian settlement in the Carpathian Basin. More will be said about this person and her views later.

The debate between the defenders of historical orthodoxy and those who question the idea that Hungarians arrived in the Carpathian Basin only at the end of the 9th century revolves around many issues, and in this short paper only a few of these can be mentioned. The most important of these is the question of relative numbers: the ratio of the newly-arrived to the autochthonous population. Another issue is the ethnic identity of the conquerors: were they Hungarian-speakers or an ethnic group completely unrelated to Hungarians? And the third critical question is whether a conquest similar to that described by the vast majority of historians in Hungary has ever happened in any other land in Europe in the Middle Ages. In the rest of this essay I will comment on these issues.

1. The question of relative numbers

This question is probably the most crucial issue of the debate at hand. If the nomadic tribes that conquered the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century constituted a large multitude of people, and if the local population was small, then it is plausible that it was the conquerors who assimilated the locals. However, if the conquerors were not a large mass and the locals outnumbered them by a considerable margin, then there can be little doubt that it was the autochthonous population that assimilated the newcomers.

Not surprisingly the members of the two historiographical schools dealing with this issue tend to provide numbers that support their respective theories. Exact numbers are difficult to find, since during the Dark Ages there was no record keeping of any kind in the Carpathian Basin. The last censuses taken there were in Roman times, and they indicated that the part of the Basin that was administered by Rome was quite densely populated. Not having any local data as guidance for the 9th century, historians have usually resorted to guessing the size of populations at the

time.

Almost all the supporters of the traditional version of the conquest of Hungary have argued that the conquerors numbered many, 300 or even 500 thousand. At the same time, they suggest that the autochthonous population could not have amounted to more than half this number. In contrast to these speculations, László and the other “dissidents” have all argued that the Carpathian Basin’s original population far outnumbered the newcomers. According to László, in some communities the ratio was one hundred to one in favour of the autochthonous population (Laszló 1997). Historian Vékony, furthermore, had given this “100 to 1” ratio for the entire Carpathian Basin’s two populations: the locals vs. the newly-arrived conquerors (Vékony 2002: 219). Vámbéry gave an even lower estimate of the numbers of the conquerors than Vekony did (Vámbéry 1914: 59-65).

For estimating the size of the autochthonous population, historians have various methods. By the 14th century, Hungary was a Christian kingdom where the church kept some records on the approximate membership of parishes and dioceses. From such admittedly haphazard recordkeeping, as well as from the size of cemeteries, historians can calculate the size of the Carpathian Basin’s population of the times. The growth rate of Christian Europe’s population of in the late medieval period is also known. As a result, the population of the Carpathian Basin five centuries earlier can be estimated — even if only approximately. Such calculations suggest that the size of this population was larger than the supporters of the orthodox theory of the Hungarian conquest would have us believe.

There is still another method of estimating the region’s population in the 10th century. Historians have a fairly good idea of what the population was in various parts of Christian Europe. It is known that the population of the lands that later became France was at least seven million — and that the population of the Italian peninsula was not much smaller. Why would the Carpathian Basin, which was also blessed with a favourable climate and plentiful resources, have a much smaller population? Some defenders of historical orthodoxy have suggested that most of the population of the Carpathian Basin was wiped out by the wars of the Carolingian Age. Professor Teréz Olajos of the University of Szeged, however, argued convincingly that there is no evidence that supports this view, in fact the Avar Age population of the Carpathian Basin survived into the 10th century (Olajos 2001: 50-56). Our overall conclusion can only be that the pre-conquest population of the Carpathian Basin must have been far larger than what the supporters of the traditional theory of the Hungarian conquest suggest.

2. The identity of the conquerors who came in 895

If the ancestors of the Hungarians were already living in the Carpathian Basin before 895 as the advocates of the dual conquest theory say, who then were the conquerors? Anthropological examinations of the skeletal remains of individuals from 10th century graves, according to Lipták, suggest that the elite of post-conquest society in the Carpathian Basin was to a large degree different anatomically from the other elements of society (Lipták 1983: 161). This suggests that the conquerors, or at least most of them, belonged to a different ethnic group (or groups) than did the Carpathian Basin's subject population.

In recent years, evidence surfaced that reinforces this conclusion, and it came from the newly-emerged science of genetics, in particular three genetic studies that had been conducted by the Hungarian geneticist István Raskó and a team of experts. Raskó's team studied mitochondrial, Y-chromosomal, and autosomal DNA extracted from the skeletal remains of men and women — both members of the elite (the conquerors and their immediate descendants) and members of the subject peoples — and DNA samples taken from present-day Hungarians living in Hungary and in the Hungarian-populated counties of Transylvania (Tömöry *et al.* 2007; Csányi *et al.* 2008; Nagy *et al.* 2011).

All three of Raskó's studies suggested that the conquerors of 895 were different genetically from both the subject peoples of 10th century Hungary and from the population living in Hungary today. This fact indicates above all that the conquerors were small in numbers and could leave only minimal “genetic footprints” in the post-conquest population of the Carpathian Basin. As István Raskó remarked in a book he wrote about these studies: “the contribution of the conquerors to the genetic pool of present-day Hungarians [was] insignificant” (Raskó 2010, p. 158; Dreisziger 2011). Despite this statement, Raskó assumed that the conquerors spoke Hungarian and claimed that the pre-985 population of the Carpathian Basin “adopted [átvette]” the language of the conquerors. This of course is inconceivable: in the Middle Ages all nomadic warrior tribes who conquered a region populated by settled peoples became assimilated by the local population and not the other way around.

3. Examples of conquests by warrior people in the Middle Ages

The course of European history from the demise of the Roman Empire in the West to the 12th century is full of examples of nomadic peoples occupying one or another part of Europe. Every time such an occupation occurred, the result was the same: the

occupiers were sooner or later assimilated by the local population. We can start with conquests by Germanic-speaking peoples. Soon after the collapse of Roman rule in Italy, the Ostrogoths occupied most of that land and established a kingdom of their own — and their children started to be Romanized. About the same time, the also German-speaking Burgundians moved into what is eastern France today. In our days nothing remains of their language in that part of France. Also in the 5th century, the Visigoths conquered much of the Iberian Peninsula, and within about half-dozen generations their descendants spoke Spanish. In the 6th century, the Longobards set up a kingdom in Italy, and today only the name Lombardy reminds us of their Germanic language and culture. Still later the Franks, a federation of German-speaking tribes, extended their rule over much of what is now France, part of Italy, and much of the rest of Central Europe. Today there is no linguistic trace of them, except in the lands that had been originally populated by German-speakers. Some people say that the conquest of England in the 5th century by the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes was different, that these tribes imposed their West-Germanic language on the people of England, but this is not the case, if we are to believe geneticist and historian Stephen Oppenheimer of Oxford University and a few other students of the British past. According to these scholars the migration of West-Germanic peoples to England had started before Roman times, and by the time the Saxons and the others had invaded, much of the population there spoke an early form of English (Oppenheimer 2007: 477ff; Heather 2010: 12-21; Pryor 2004).

The experience of Scandinavian conquerors was similar. Wherever they conquered or otherwise acquired lands (Novgorod, Kiev, Sicily, etc.), they became assimilated by the locals. Early in the 10th century, they occupied Northern France and established what became known as the Norman kingdom, and in about half-dozen generations their descendants spoke French. In 1066 these French-speaking Normans occupied England, and in another half-dozen generations their descendants began speaking English. Much further east, in Eastern Europe's lower Danube region, the Turkic-speaking nomads known as Bulgars came as occupiers in the 7th century. They established themselves as the region's ruling class — and in less than ten generations their descendants spoke Slavic, the language of their subjects. The same must have happened in the Carpathian Basin after the end of the 9th century: the Turkic-speaking nomadic warriors who occupied the region were assimilated — in a few, or in some cases several generations — by a more numerous, autochthonous, Hungarian-speaking population.

4. Conclusions and a post-script

In today's Hungary the vast majority of historians believe that Hungarians are the descendants of the nomadic tribes who arrived in the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century. The works of Vámbéry, Marjalaki, László, Makkay, Simonyi, Lipták, Engel, Vékony, Király and others are ignored by historians and are forgotten by the public. The evidence for this is the above-mentioned conference on Hungarian proto-history that had been organized by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in April of 2013. At this conference only one speaker expressed doubt about the currently dominant theory of Hungarian arrival in the Carpathian Basin. That scholar was Erzsébet Fóthi, who is not a historian but a physical anthropologist. In her short paper given at the conference she did not go into details (Fóthi 2013). Her ideas about the settlement of Hungarians in their present homeland, more precisely in the Middle Danube Basin of Central Europe, can be found in her other publications.

Fóthi has been studying the anatomical features of people resting in 5th to 11th century graves of the Carpathian Basin for most of her long career. In regard to the conquerors she came to the conclusion that, judging by their anatomical features, they resembled most the Turkic-speaking Bulgars who had conquered the Lower Danube Valley only a few centuries earlier. They were not the same people, Fóthi argued, but came from the same genetic stock, and their former homeland had been the southern Urals region of today's Russia (Fóthi 2013). Fóthi and her colleagues also studied other pre-13th century populations in the Carpathian Basin. Among those whom they examined extensively were the ancestors of the Székelys of the Háromszék district in the southeasternmost part of Transylvania. According to Fóthi the medieval population of the Háromszék region was anatomically the same as the population of the northwesternmost part of the Carpathian Basin had been in earlier times, long before the end of the 9th century. The Háromszék population also showed remarkable similarity to the people who had lived in the Zala River Basin of the Carpathian Basin's western part during Avar and Carolingian (Frankish) times. Fóthi admitted that the medieval inhabitants of Háromszék were somewhat different in their anatomical features from other peoples of the pre-Conquest Carpathian Basin, but they did not constitute a separate ethnic group within the general Hungarian population of the age (Fóthi *et al.* 2012: 543-552).

It might be recalled that, according to Vámbéry, the Hungarian language developed during the centuries before 895 from the blending of Ugric and eastern Turkic linguistic elements, producing the language that the ancestors of the Hungarians of the Carpathian Basin had spoken by the end of the 9th century. Fóthi's conclusions about the anatomical development of the population that at one point occupied the northwesternmost region and later also the southeasternmost districts

of the Carpathian Basin are remarkably similar. “The development of this people,” she argued, “must have taken place” in a region where long before the 12th century there lived a population — the vast majority of whom had long skulls typical of Europeans — together with another people, much smaller in numbers, of Asian origin. The sporadic appearance of Mongoloid anatomical features in the resulting population is explainable by the blending of these two human types throughout the centuries that had preceded the Székelys’ re-settlement (by Hungary’s Árpadian rulers) in their present (Transylvanian) homeland (Fóthi *et al.* 2012: 506, 543-552). According to Vámbéry and Fóthi, then, the development of the Hungarians’ language and the evolution of their physical anatomy paralleled each other and took place in the Carpathian Basin — centuries before the arrival of Prince Árpád and his nomadic tribes.

The conquerors of the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century were nomadic peoples who were small in numbers and whose descendants were assimilated by the local population. This fact should not detract from the legacy that Árpád, his warriors, and their descendants bequeathed to the Hungarian nation: the establishment of a centralized state that soon became one of Central Europe’s Christian kingdoms — and later turned into the modern nation-state of Hungary. Notwithstanding the prevalent views of most members of Hungary’s academic establishment, today it seems apparent that the basic tenets of the theory of the “dual conquest” — as formulated by Gyula László and János Makkay in the 1990s — are still valid.

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