

**Misinformation, Disinformation
or Pseudo-science?
István Kiszely's Quest for a
Glorious Hungarian Past**

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István Kiszely. *A Magyar ember: A Kárpát-medencei magyarság ember-története*. [The Hungarian Man. The human history of the Hungarians of the Carpathian Basin]. Budapest: Püski, 2004. Illustrations, graphs, and maps. 2 volumes.

Books on the origins and ethnogenesis of Hungarians have proliferated in recent decades both inside and outside of Hungary. One prominent figure of this new popular historiography is István Kiszely. A physical anthropologist by training, Kiszely during the past five decades has published numerous books and great many articles on the early history of Hungarians and on their anthropology. In a sense, the work under review is Kiszely's tribute to his mentor Lajos Bartucz, an outstanding figure of mid-20th century anthropology in Hungary. Even the main title of Kiszely's present book is patterned on Bartucz's similarly entitled work that appeared in 1938.

The late 1930s were characterised by intense preoccupation with physical anthropology. Scholars and the general public alike, especially in Central Europe, believed that it was possible to identify the anatomical features that made individuals — and even nations — different from others. This belief is still held by Kiszely who feels that it is possible to define the anthropological characteristics that differentiate Hungarians from their neighbours and, in fact, most other peoples in the world.

Volume I of Kiszely's work being reviewed here starts with a history of the discipline of anthropology in the world and in Hungary. He focuses most of his attention on the "golden age" of this science, the mid-19th to the mid-20th centuries. Kiszely concludes this part of his work by bemoaning the

fact that in the 21st century this science has fallen on hard times. As far as Hungary is concerned, he blames this fact on the lack of patriotic consciousness on the part of the country's political and academic establishments.

Kiszely's second chapter asks the question whether there are human beings with unique Hungarian characteristics? He promises to answer this question in his book. He also hints that his answer will be a positive one. In fact, he goes further and states that today's Hungarians are more unique than they had been a millennium ago, at the time of the Hungarian nation's ethnogenesis. He does admit however, that from the point of anthropology it would not be accurate to say that Hungarians constitute a separate race of humanity. Nevertheless, he goes on to make some statements that readers, especially in Western countries, will find controversial, to say the least. Most of these we will discuss later. At this point we will mention only one point, which is the fact that, in referring to the origins of the Hungarians' unique language (Magyar), Kiszely makes no mention of its place in the Finno-Ugric linguistic family tree. In fact he hardly mentions the Finnic languages at all.

An important question of Hungarian history is the story of the so-called Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century. According to all schoolbooks used in Hungary today, the ancestors of Hungarians, including the Székelys, arrived in their present homeland in 895. It should be mentioned that from the end of the Roman Era in Europe to the 11th century, about a dozen similar conquests or occupations of a homeland (the Hungarian word "*honfoglalás*" is not quite the equivalent of the English word "conquest"). Interestingly, all these conquests in one respect had a different outcome than the Hungarian one as it is told in the history textbooks in Hungary: in all these cases the conquering population, in the course of a few or several generations, lost its original language and learned the vernacular of the conquered inhabitants — or at least that of the most numerous ethnic group among them. In other words, the conquerors were assimilated by the autochthonous populations. Until recently, the only exception to this "rule" was believed to have been the conquest of England by West Germanic-speaking peoples (the Saxons, Angles and Jutes) in the early 5th century. They were supposed to have brought the ancestor of the English language to the British Isles. This interpretation, however, has fallen on hard times recently and now it is increasingly believed that a proto-English language had come to England not so much with these post-Roman invaders but with the prolonged or repeated migrations of West-Germanic speakers from north-western continental Europe that had started already in pre-Roman times.¹

In most of the “conquests of a homeland” of the early medieval period in Europe it seems that what happened was that a militaristic people did the conquering and the conquerors occupied lands that were inhabited by a larger number of settled and often less militaristic ethnic groups. Historians of the Hungarian experience are acutely conscious of the importance of the relative size of conquering and conquered populations. All historians who endorse the “dominant” theory of the Hungarian conquest claim that in the case of the Magyar conquest of the Carpathian Basin, the conquerors outnumbered the conquered. Kiszely does the same. In the work under review here he says that the population of the pre-Hungarian conquest Carpathian Basin was only 250,000, (or 400,000 as he states elsewhere) while he claims that the conquering Hungarians numbered half a million. Only a decade earlier, Kiszely gave very different numbers, in another 2-volume history of the Hungarian distant past. In that work he estimated that the local populations, including descendants of the Huns and of the Avars, outnumbered the conquerors two to one.² In giving high estimates of the numbers of the conquerors and underestimating the size of the pre-conquest population Kiszely is very much in agreement with other Hungarian historians who uphold the dominant theory of the Magyar conquest.

In the opinion of this reviewer the numbers given by Kiszely (and the establishment historians in Hungary) are untenable. A much more realistic number for the size of the conquering population has been offered by the renown Hungarian medievalist Elemér Mályusz. He had estimated the numerical size of the conquering tribes at 70,000.³ However, it is the size of the Carpathian Basin’s pre-985 population, as given by Kiszely as well as mainstream historians in Hungary, that is a vast underestimation. In his history of East Central Europe Piotr S. Wandycz gave population estimates for various regions of Europe at the turn of the millennium. According to him the lands that constitute today’s France at the time had a population of nine million, the Italian peninsula seven million, and the German lands close to five-and-a-half million.⁴ If many millions lived in other parts of Europe it is inconceivable that the population of the pre-conquest Carpathian Basin would have been only 250,000 — or even only 500,000 as Kiszely estimated in his 1996 book. Five times that number would probably not be an unrealistic estimate. In fact one Hungarian historian, Gábor Vékony (1944-2004), who taught at Hungary’s most eminent university (ELTE) before his untimely death, estimated that the ratio of conquerors to the masses of autochthonous people in the Carpathian Basin in the early 10th century might have been as low as one percent.⁵

By all counts, the Carpathian Basin of the times was a land rich in rivers teeming with fish, forests with abundant fauna, and plentiful natural

resources. It could not have been an abandoned wasteland, even if there had been wars in the region in the decades preceding — wars had ravaged just about all parts of Europe in the 9th century. Indeed we know that tens of thousands of Avar-age graves had been excavated in this part of Europe, testifying to the densely-populated nature of this region in early medieval times, and historians as well as contemporary sources talk about numerous peoples having lived there. These include, if we are to believe the many scholars who say so — including Kiszely himself — the Székelys.

The early history of the Székelys is a perplexing question of Hungarian proto-history. The Székelys constitute a Magyar-speaking ethnic or cultural group that today inhabits the south-eastern counties of Transylvania, a land that used to belong to the old Kingdom of Hungary but which was transferred to Romania in the post-World War I peace settlement. According to Székely oral tradition, the Székelys are descendants of the Huns whose empire had reached its zenith under their leader Attila during the first half of the 5th century. Kiszely explicitly endorses this idea. (pp. 159, 180) He even disagrees, probably quite correctly, with the suggestion that the Székelys had changed their language some time during the Dark Ages from Turkic to Magyar. Interestingly, Kiszely does not speculate what happened to the Székelys once they had settled in the Carpathian Basin. Other scholars, such as the above-mentioned Vékony,⁶ have suggested that they probably populated their new homeland in the following centuries even though they had come under the rule of nomadic military elites that arrived from the east, most notably the Avars in the 560s and the Onogurs or “late Avars” in the 670s. But, neither of these probably Turkic-speaking warrior peoples had an interest in exterminating their subject peoples, neither the Székelys nor the others.

A far more likely scenario than the one presented of the “Hungarian conquest” by Kiszely — and most historians in Hungary — is that this conquest resulted in the conquerors being assimilated by the local population. In this the “Hungarian conquest” was no different from all the others in Europe in early medieval times: those of the Franks and Burgundians in France, the Visigoths and Ostrogoths in Iberia, the Longobards in Lombardy, the Scandinavians in Normandy, Novgorod, Kiev and elsewhere, the Normans in England, and the Bulgars in the Lower Danube Basin, and the list could go on citing even some non-European examples, all of which resulted in the assimilation of the conquerors by the autochthonous populations.

We may ask at this point who were the tribes that conquered the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century? The answer is that they were most likely an assortment of mostly Turkic-speaking nomadic peoples (the fact

that some of the tribes — the Kabars — were Turkic is admitted by everyone), similar in language and culture to the also Turkic-speaking Bulgars — who had been by that time assimilated by their Slavic subjects in the Lower Danube Valley. And who were the people who assimilated the newcomers in the Carpathian Basin? They could not have been the local Slavs as several scholars have suggested, because if they had been the Slavs, then today's Hungarians would be speaking a language similar to those of most of their neighbours: the Croats, Slovenes, Serbs, Slovaks and Ruthenians. The people who assimilated the newcomers of 895 must have been an Ugric-speaking people, probably the very people mentioned as autochthons by Kiszely: the Székelys themselves. The Székelys' ancestors were probably not the Huns, but an ethnic group that had been a part of Attila's extremely heterogeneous empire. Their presence in the Carpathian Basin before 895 is mentioned by contemporary sources (by the names Ungari, Ugorski, Wenger, or simply Huns, as the Székelys had been calling themselves since time immemorial) as well as by eminent scholars such as Gyula László (1910-1996), the above-mentioned Vékony, as well as János Makkay (1933-). Even the renown Bálint Hóman (1885-1951) entertained the possibility of the Székelys having settled in the Carpathian Basin long before 895.⁷

While Kiszely is probably wrong on the subject of the “Hungarian conquest” he is definitely misinformed or disingenuous on several other issues. One of these is his ignoring of the Finnic connection in Hungarian proto-history. In fact, it almost seems that according to Kiszely, the Finns and other Finnic-speaking peoples had been inconsequential in medieval European history, or at least this is what the maps presented in his book on pages 220-222 suggest. The three maps on these three pages are completely identical, yet each of them has a different caption. The one on p. 220 is entitled the “ancient homeland of the Slavs”, the one on p. 221 is described as the lands of the “Western Slavs in the 8th century a.d.”, and the one on p. 222 is described as an ethnic map of Russia in the 9th century. The gravest error in these maps is that areas inhabited till modern times by Finnic-speaking peoples (including the whole of today's Finland) are described as Slav-inhabited territory (*sic*!).⁸

A strange claim that Kiszely makes is that Europeans (but presumably not Hungarians) are the descendants [*utódai*] of the “early Neanderthals”. (p. 169) Of course, Kiszely might mean, by using the word “*utódai*” rather than “*leszármozottjai*”, that Homo Sapiens inherited Europe from the early Neanderthals. But, early Neanderthals lived in Europe more than 100,000 years before our Homo Sapiens ancestors arrived there. How could today's Europeans be their descendants or even inheritors? And if they are descendants of the Neanderthals they would have to have “descended” from the late and not the

early Neanderthals.⁹ Kiszely's discussion of this subject suggests a limited, even faulty knowledge of European proto-history.

The list of Kiszely's misconceptions and distortions could go on. The cause of some of these is probably his being mired in an outdated science or, more precisely, in an outdated version of a science that today still has some relevance to the comparative study of populations. Just one point: to Kiszely the study of such things as the longevity of certain populations as well as the study of their average height is important, while most scientists today would say that these characteristics are governed more by nutrition and other economic and cultural factors (such as the state of medical knowledge at any given time) than by genetics. It must come as no surprise to most people today that the neglect of Kiszely's brand of physical anthropology by Hungary's political and academic establishments — as well as their neglect everywhere else — is motivated not so much by lack of patriotism, but by other, much more relevant factors — such as the advancement of scientific knowledge.

In his second volume to this work Kiszely devotes an entire chapter to the discussion of genetics. The overall message here is that geneticists have found “no evidence” of a genetic link between Hungarians and Finnic peoples. Nowhere does Kiszely admit that, from a distance of more than 4,000 years, a genetic relationship can not be easily documented between peoples who at one point belonged to the same ethnic group — just as after 6,000 years of separation, no connection can be established between languages that at one point were spoken by the same people. Here Kiszely is inconsistent. He laments the fact that since the conquest some eleven centuries ago, the genetic characteristics of Hungarians have changed a great deal, but he does not admit that after more than 4,000 years of separation, the genetic characteristics of Finnic peoples and Hungarians cannot easily show similarities. Only with the further advancement of this science is there a prospect for a genetic marker being found that is common to Ugric (including Hungarian) and some Finnic (including the Volgaic) populations — and that genetic marker might already have been found.¹⁰

Kiszely's works have been quite popular with the general reading public in Hungary. His insistence that anthropologically and culturally Hungarians are unique beings, and his ignoring — one might say denial — of the Finnic connection, while certainly not unique, has earned him respect on the streets of Hungary, as did his emphasis on the Hun, Avar and other “inner-Asian” roots of today's “Hungarian Man”. (vol. 2, p. 788)

In reality, there is very little evidence that Hungarians are the descendants of Asian ancestors. At the same time there is every indication that

they are predominantly of European background. The evidence is both anthropological and genetic. Physical anthropologists who have examined the skeletal remains of people who have been found in 11th to 13th century graves in the Carpathian Basin have come to the conclusion, according to the eminent medievalist Pál Engel, that between 95 and 97 percent of these people showed “Europoid” anatomical features.¹¹ The physical anthropologist Pál Lipták, who taught at the University of Szeged and then at the University of Budapest (ELTE), concluded his researches on this subject by saying that “the populations of the Conquest and of [the] Árpadian Age [in Hungary] taken together are dominated by the Nordoids and the Mediterraneans.” He admits that there were Mongoloids (not Mongolids who were absent but Europo-Mongoloids) in the population “in the Conquest Period and in the Árpadian Age” but argues that the frequency of these anatomical types “hardly exceed[ed] 6 percent.”¹²

Another proof of the essentially European origins of Hungarians is the relative scarcity of Asian y-DNA among them. Members of the Q, C, and certain Asian sub-groups of N and the R1a Z93+ haplogroups make up only 6 or 7 percent of present-day Hungarian y-DNA groups. The ratios for these groups among Hungarians are only slightly higher than they are for some of their European neighbours. This is remarkable when we consider that from the 10th to the 13th century Hungary witnessed large influxes of nomadic refugees from the east, including the Pechenegs and the Cumans.¹³

This reviewer suspects that Kiszely’s popularity in Hungary is rooted not only in his belief that the Hungarians are descendants of mysterious Inner-Asian peoples but also, and perhaps more importantly, in the present state of Hungarian public psychology, which in turn is influenced by Hungary’s current situation. As is known, Hungary has been troubled in recent years by myriad economic, political and social problems. And when the present of a nation is dismal and its future is bleak, people find an escape in a glorious past, one in which their putative ancestors were able to put the fear into their neighbours, in fact in the case of the Huns, Avars and Prince Árpád’s horsemen, most of Europe. With his dubious scholarship Kiszely seems to aim at restoring a sense of self-respect — even pride — into Hungarians by telling them that they had a glorious past or, at least, they had respected, even feared, ancestors.

Recently there have been revelations on the internet to the effect that during the Kádár Era in communist Hungary Kiszely had been an informer for the country’s political police — and that his activities in this regard negatively impacted the careers and lives of many of his compatriots, especially priests.¹⁴

Whether and to what extent this development will affect Kiszely's image as the messenger of a glorious Hungarian past, remains to be seen.

NOTES

¹ Stephen Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British* (London: Robinson, 2007), especially 477-482.

² István Kiszely, *A magyarság őstörténete* (Budapest: Püski, 1996), p. 212. More precisely, 250,000 autochthonous people, 250,000 descendants of the Huns and Avars, and 250,000 conquerors. This actually means that in Kiszely's estimation the population of the conquerors had grown by 250,000 or 100% — in just 8 years. Quite a growth rate! At the same time according to him the number of the autochthonous people declined by 50% if we compare the figures he gave in 1996 and in 2004. Kiszely does not explain the changes in these demographic figures. It might be of interest that in a work Kiszely published in 1979 he estimated the pre-895 population of the Carpathian Basin to have been somewhere between 600 and 800 thousand, and the number of the conquerors, between 300 and 400 thousand. István Kiszely, *A föld népei: Európa* [The peoples of the world: Europe] (Budapest: Gondolat, 1979), 391-392. Kiszely's handling of population figures is a classic example of data being adjusted to suit the needs of a theory.

³ Elemér Mályusz, *Geschichte des ungarischen Volkstums...* (Budapest, 1940), 25, as cited by János Makkay, *A magyarság keletkezése* (Szolnok: Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok Museums, 1994) 2nd revised and expanded edition, p. 47. Makkay himself, as well as the archaeologist István Erdélyi, give this number as "maximum 100,000." See Makkay, *A magyarság*, p. 46. Erdélyi's estimate came from him directly, in an e-mail to me in early 2010.

⁴ Piotr S. Wandycz, *The Price of Freedom: A History of East Central Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 19.

⁵ See his *Magyar őstörténet – Magyar honfoglalás* [Hungarian prehistory – Hungarian conquest] (Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 2002), 219.

⁶ *Ibid.*, especially pp. 213-215. The fact that a people, numbering into the tens of thousands could, in the course of a few centuries, populate a part of Europe such as the Middle Danube Basin, is not at all unimaginable. We know that in about 1760 French-speakers in New France (Québec) numbered about 60,000. Only two centuries later they numbered about five million, despite the fact that in the intervening time there was no immigration of French-speakers to supplement their numbers, and in fact there was massive emigration from Québec — to other parts of Canada and to New England — in the 19th century. True, in early medieval times mortality rates throughout Central Europe must have been much higher than they were in 19th and 20th century Québec.

⁷ Bálint Hóman and Gyula Szekfü, *Magyar történet* [Hungarian history] (Budapest: Királyi Magyar Egyetemi Nyomda, 1935), vol. 1, pp. 123-124. The list of Hungarian scholars who believe that the ancestors of the Hungarians settled in the Carpathian Basin long before the “Hungarian conquest” of 895 is considerable and includes — in addition to the above-mentioned Makkay and Vékony — Gyula László, Pál Lipták and Péter Király. See Gyula László, *A „kettős honfoglalás”* (Budapest: Magvető, 1978); Pál Lipták, *Avars and Ancient Hungarians* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1983); and Péter Király, *A honalapítás vitás eseményei* [The disputed events of the establishment of a homeland] (Nyíregyháza: Nyíregyházi Főiskola, 2006).

⁸ Kiszely's reference for these maps is a book published by István Kniezsa in 1942. The fact that these three maps are identical might be a printer's error — which should have been caught by the book's author during the reading of the manuscript's proofs. These maps, or more precisely the one map that is printed three times, sharply contrasts with the map that is printed in Kiszely's 1979 book (*op. cit.* pp. 516-517) which quite correctly shows that much of modern northern European Russia, and all of Finland, was populated by Finnic-speaking peoples rather than Slavs.

⁹ If there had been interbreeding between Homo Sapiens and Neanderthals, it was on a very limited scale. See Richard E. Green *et al.*, “A Draft Sequence of the Neanderthal Genome,” *Science*, vol. 328 (7 May 2010) pp. 710-722 (available at www.sciencemag.org accessed on July 26, 2010).

¹⁰ That common marker might be the Z280 SNP (single nucleotide polymorphism) that can be found in certain members of the R1a1a1 y-chromosomal DNA group. In fact Tibor Fehér, the coordinator of the Hungarian y-DNA project for the familytreeDNA company of Texas, is quite certain that the Z280 will prove to be one of the common markers of the Finno-Ugric peoples. According to Mr. Fehér, roughly one in eight Hungarian man whose y-DNA is known, has this marker. E-mail from Tibor Fehér to a group of genomists (including the writer of these lines) 14 Feb. 2012 — as well as other internet communications from Mr. Fehér in 2011.

¹¹ Pál Engel, “The House of Árpád and its Times,” *The Hungarian Quarterly* 41, 1 (Spring 2000): 2. According to Engel twenty-one hundred such skeletal remains are known. Engel's paper is excerpted online and can be found on the website <http://www.hungarianquarterly.com/no157/074.shtml>

¹² Lipták, *Avars and Ancient Hungarians*, p. 161. For other writings by this same author see his essays “A finnugor népek antropológiája [The anthropology of the Finno-Ugric peoples] in *Uráli népek: nyelvrokonaink kultúrája és hagyományai* [Uralic peoples: the culture and traditions of our linguistic relatives], ed. Péter Hajdú (Budapest: Corvina 1975): 129-137; and “A Magyar őstörténet kérdései az antropológiai kutatások alapján,” *Magyar Mult.* 10 (Sydney, Australia): 81-96. Lipták believes that the ancestors of Hungarians settled in the Carpathian Basin at various times from the 5th to the 9th centuries. See his book *Avars and Ancient Hungarians*, especially p. 160. A more recent work that places the first settlement of the ancestors of Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin centuries before the so-called “Hungarian Conquest” is Király, *A honalapítás vitás eseményei, cit.* (see note 7). In this monograph

Professor Király argues that a study mainly of written sources related to the arrival of the ancestors of Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin suggests that their first settlement there took place at the end of the 6th century. See especially p. 214 of his book.

¹³ E-mail from the above mentioned Tibor Fehér, 14 Feb. 2012 (see note 10). The ratio of men with Asian y-DNA among Romanians seems to be even higher, no doubt reflecting Romania's more eastern geographical position.

¹⁴ See the website <http://internetfigyelo.wordpress.com/2009/08/15/ujabb-jelentesek-kiszely-istvan-besugo-...>