

Miscellany:

László Réthy and the Quest for an Ancient Hungarian Homeland

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Hungarians live surrounded by peoples who speak Indo-European languages but their own tongue is quite different. Where did this language come from? And where was the ancient Hungarian homeland where the Magyar language developed? These questions have puzzled Hungarians for centuries and historians, anthropologists, paleo-linguists and archaeologists have given widely divergent answers to these questions. Especially disparate were the explanations that some enthusiastic amateur scholars have offered, some of whom placed this “ancient homeland” in such exotic locations as the Near East, North Africa, Siberia, in what are now North-Western India, even Ecuador, and an island in the Pacific Ocean that had disappeared a long time ago. Miklós Érdy in his book *A magyarság keleti eredete* [The eastern origin of Hungarians] enumerated nine locations where Hungarian and international scholars (as opposed to amateur historians) had placed the land where the Hungarian language and its linguistic relatives developed. Not one of these experts, according to Érdy, pointed to the present homeland of the Hungarians.¹

A few students of the Magyar past, however, begged to differ. They placed the ancient Hungarian homeland, where the Magyar language had developed, right where Hungarians are living today, in the Middle Danube Basin of Central Europe. And, as far as we know, the first scholar to do so was László Réthy.

Réthy, or Réthi as he spelled his name when he was a young man, was born in 1851. He attended school in Budapest, Vienna and in the Polish city of Krakow. From early on he had an interest in languages and, in addition to studying several European ones he familiarized himself with such exotic tongues as Armenian and Sanskrit. As a professional scholar he is best known for his work in numismatics, especially the coin-making of Muslim tradesmen in medieval Europe. For much of his adult life he was a member of the Department of Coins and Ancient Artefacts of the National Museum of Hungary. In this field he is best known for the mas-

sive two volume *Corpus nummorum Hungariae. Magyar Egyetemes Éremtár* [Hungarian compendium of coinage] I - II (Budapest, 1899-1907). As a private person he wrote a large body of bawdy poetry under the pen name Árpád Löwy. He also had an interest in history, especially in the birth and evolution of languages and nations. In this field he is perhaps most famous for the monograph *Az oláh nyelv és nemzet megalakulása* [The genesis of the Romanian language and nation] (Budapest, ca. 1887). Few people know that Réthy also produced a work on the birth and evolution of the Magyar language and its related tongues, which he published under the title *Hol van az urali nyelvek szanszkritja?* [Where is the Sanskrit of the Uralic languages?] (Vienna: Sommer, 1871). The conclusion of this pamphlet was that the Magyar language, in fact the Uralic languages collectively, evolved in the Carpathian Basin of East-Central Europe.²

The afterlife of an idea

Réthy died in 1914, forty-three years after he announced his brave theory about the Magyar, in fact Uralic, ancient homeland. It was also in 1914 that a book by Ármin Vámbéry, one of Réthy's contemporaries, appeared posthumously. The monograph was entitled *A magyarság bölcsőjénél: A magyar-török rokonság kezdete és fejlődése* [At the cradle of Hungarians: The beginning and evolution of Magyar-Turkish relatedness] (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1914). This was Vámbéry's third and last book about Hungarian ethnogenesis and it was a summation of his ideas on the subject. His theory can be considered an elaboration upon Réthy's idea, except for the fact that Vámbéry dealt only with the genesis of the Hungarian language and not with the origin of all the Finno-Ugric tongues. Basically, his 1914 book underscored Réthy's thesis: the Hungarian language developed in the Middle Danube Basin where the ancestors of the Hungarians had lived from Avar times, possibly from late-Roman times, or even earlier. Vámbéry's theory had an important corollary: the nomadic tribes that conquered the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century were Turkic-speaking peoples who were few in numbers — “a few thousand” — and who were in time assimilated by the masses of this land's Magyar-speaking autochthonous population.³

In less than two decades after the appearance of Vámbéry's book another Hungarian scholar questioned the orthodox theory of the Hungarian past, the one that holds that the ancestors of the Hungarians appeared in their present homeland at the end of the 9th century a.d. This person was

Lajos Kiss of Marjalak (in Hungarian: Marjalaki Kiss Lajos). Through his archaeological studies and his examination of old Hungarian place names Marjalaki Kiss also came to the conclusion that Hungarians must have been living in the Carpathian Basin since time immemorial and that their language had no doubt developed there — long before Prince Árpád's nomadic warriors arrived in that land. Parts of Marjalaki Kiss's views are worth quoting:

At the time of [Prince] Árpád's [arrival] the land [that later became] Hungary was a densely populated place. The regions of this... fertile land... were inhabited by a Hungarian-speaking... settled people. These peaceful fishers, tenders of animals and tillers of the soil, during the millennium before the Hungarian conquest... had changed masters so many times that they never even thought of resisting Árpád and his conquerors. Their masters of the time were not of their people, and [the struggle for their land] was not their business but that of the people who ruled them....

After these comments Marjalaki Kiss explained that the conquerors of the late 9th century became assimilated by their subjects just as the [Turkic] Bulgar tribes who conquered the Lower Danube Basin were assimilated by their Slav subjects; the [Scandinavian] Varangians who moved to Novgorod, by the Russians; the Germanic Longobards who conquered much of the Italian peninsula, by the Italians; the Germanic Goths and Franks by the French; the French-speaking Normans who occupied England, by the English; the Mongolian conquerors [of China] by the Chinese; and so on.⁴

Neither Vámbéry's nor Marjalaki Kiss's views received much attention or sympathy in the Hungary of their times. Both of these authors were outsiders in the Hungarian society of the first half of the 20th century. The former was the son of impoverished Jews and the latter was of peasant background. Neither carried much credibility in the eyes of their country's political and intellectual elites. Their works were ignored or became forgotten, but the idea that the ancestors of Hungarians — and the Hungarian language — had been in the Carpathian Basin long before 895 re-surfaced with vengeance in the second half of the 20th century.

First to resume the assault on the orthodox theory of Hungarian ethnogenesis was Gyula László. He was a native of Transylvania who completed his university education in Budapest where he studied art, art history, ethnography, geography and archaeology. He began his career in various museums and later became the head of the Medieval Department

in Hungary's National Museum. In 1957 he joined the faculty of Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest where he taught until his retirement in 1980. Starting with the 1940s he was involved in numerous archaeological investigations, mainly in his native Transylvania. László's examination of 7th to 10th century graveyards led him to an interpretation of Hungarian ethnogenesis that resembled the theories of earlier critics of historical orthodoxy. The evidence he found, rather than reinforcing in him the idea that the ancestors of Hungarians arrived in the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century, suggested to him that the vast majority of them had settled there during the Avar Age of Central European history. One circumstance that buttressed his questioning the orthodox interpretation of the "Hungarian conquest" was the fact that his study of contemporary graves and cemeteries told him that the subject peoples of 10th century Hungary greatly outnumbered the newly-arrived conquerors. The ancestors of the Hungarians lived in large villages and their cemeteries contained the remains of thousands, while the graves of the newly-arrived numbered in the dozens. When 20 members of the military elite lived among 2,000 of their subjects, who assimilated whom? — László asked. László tried to popularize his theory until the very end of his life. He said that he didn't mind if his name was forgotten, as long as his ideas survived. He died in 1998 while he was on another lecture tour of the towns and cities of his native Transylvania.⁵

In the last two decades of László's life, and in the nearly two decades since his death, at least half-dozen more high-profile Hungarian academics have questioned the orthodox version of Magyar ethnogenesis, all of them arguing that the ancestors of Hungarians had arrived in the Middle Danube Basin long before the end of the 9th century. In a short study such as this one it's not possible to outline in any detail these dissident scholars' arguments. We can do not much more than list their names and academic affiliations. First to be mentioned should probably be János Makkay, an archaeologist who was a close associate of László and who for many years had defended László's views after his death in 1998.⁶ Still another scholar who should be alluded to in this connection is archaeologist Dezső Simonyi who placed the arrival of the Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin in the 5th century a.d.⁷ Still another high-profile historian who came out with similar views was Pál Engel who for much of his career was a professor at Hungary's premier university, the Eötvös Loránd (ELTE), in Budapest. In one of his English-language studies Engel pointed out that of the ca. 2,100 graves known from the 11th to 13th centuries in Hungary, ca. 95-97 percent contained remains that were "Europoid".⁸

About half decade after the publication of Engel's last study on this subject there appeared a book by another ELTE professor, Gábor Vékony. One remarkable feature of this book was the conclusion that when the nomadic warriors of Prince Árpád had settled in their newly-conquered homeland they constituted about "one percent" of the inhabitants there — an observation that harked back to Vámbéry's estimate of the size of the conquering population of the late 9th century. Another noteworthy suggestion made by Vékony was that the conquerors might have been mainly or predominantly Bashkirs.⁹

A few years after the publication of Vékony's book there appeared still another work that questioned the timing of the arrival of Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin. The new book was by veteran linguist-historian Péter Király and it dated this development to the end of the 6th century a.d. Király had examined the archives of numerous Central and Western European monasteries and over the decades found some five dozen references in them to a group or individuals by the names of Ungar, Ungari, Ungarus, Wenger, Hungarius etc. who, according to the authors of monastic documents, lived in the Middle Danube Basin or had migrated — or in a few cases, raided — from there to places further West in Europe.¹⁰

About half-a-decade after Király's book appeared there came another work, also by a historian, that claimed that speakers of the Magyar language had lived in the Middle Danube Basin long before the end of the 9th century. The new book was by Elek Benkő, and what was notable about it was that it was published by one of the institutes of Hungary's Academy of Sciences.¹¹ Much of volume 2 of this work was devoted to the subject of Hungarian origins and the main author of this section was Erzsébeth Fóthi. Since Fóthi is a paleo-anthropologist a few sentences should be said about the opinions of anthropologists on this subject.

One of Hungary's most noted anthropologists was Pál Lipták. He taught at the University of Szeged and later at ELTE. Through his examinations of the anatomy of the nomadic warriors who conquered the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century he came to the conclusion that Hungarians are the descendants of the peoples who lived there before the conquest and that they probably arrived there in several waves of migration starting with the second half of the 5th century.¹² Some three decades later another anthropologist, the above-mentioned Erzsébet Fóthi, came to similar conclusions. After studying for many years the skeletal remains of conquerors she began arguing that Árpád's warriors were different anatomically both from the commoner population of 10th century Carpathian Basin and from the population of present-day Hungary. At the same time,

according to Fóthi, the population of some of Transylvania's Székely villages was remarkably similar anatomically to the pre-10th century peoples of western Transdanubia. In fact Fóthi argued that in their anatomy the conquerors resembled more the people, the Bulgar-Turkic tribes, who conquered the Lower Danube Basin centuries earlier than they did the autochthonous populations of 9th century Carpathian Basin — and that populations similar to the conquerors existed then and later in the southern Urals. Furthermore, according to Fóthi, the anatomical features of the pre-895 population of the western parts of the Carpathian Basin must have developed in the preceding centuries from people with European features that had intermixed in that land with smaller groups of individuals with Asian anatomical characteristics. For Fóthi then, the “ancient homeland” where the anatomy of Hungarians had evolved was the western half of the Middle Danube Basin.¹³

In the nearly century-and-a-half since László Réthy penned what must have appeared at the time an outlandish opinion about the ancient Hungarian homeland, not much progress has been made in this regard. Most members of Hungary's academic establishment and a large majority of the country's politicians continue to place the ancient homeland of Hungarians in the distant east, somewhere in Central Asia or at least east of the Volga River. In the meantime the genetic identity of an increasing number of present-day Hungarians — and also of people who have lived long time ago in various parts of Eurasia, is becoming known.¹⁴ According to this wisdom, the overwhelming majority of Hungarians — judging from the DNA testing that has been done on thousands of them — belong to genetic groups whose ancestors have been living, for at least a few thousand years, in Central Europe — and only exceptionally east of the Volga River or in Central Asia. For how long more will official historiography — and political opinion — in Hungary place the “ancient homeland” of the Hungarian people to places where it could not have possibly been? We may also ask for how long more will László Réthy, Armin Vámbéry, Lajos Kiss of Marjalak and their successors be ignored or forgotten in the face of new scientific evidence that strongly suggests that the ideas of these scholars — at least regarding the location of an ancient Hungarian homeland — are probably much closer to the truth than those of their detractors.

NOTES

¹Miklós Érdy, *A magyarság keleti eredete és hun kapcsolata* [The eastern origins and Hun relation of Hungarians] (Budapest: Kairosz, 2010), 425-426. On

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this subject see a recent study, published by the Department of Finno-Ugric Studies at Eötvös Loránd University: “Újra kell írni a finnugor őstörénelmet?!” [Must the ancient history of the Finno-Ugrians be written anew?!], published on the Department’s website <http://finnugor.elte.hu/index.php?q=print/905> accessed 2 July 2015. The paper’s anonymous author argues that in Hungary research on this theme is thirty years behind international, archaeological research. Genetic research related to the subject is hardly mentioned in this study.

²See especially page 6 of this pamphlet. In addition to this work see literary critic Aladár Schöpflin’s detailed obituary: “Réthy László,” *Nyugat*, 23 (1914) <http://www.epa.oszk.hu/00000/00022/00163/05285.htm>.

³The text of Vámbéry’s 1914 book can be found on one of the websites of the National Library of Hungary: <http://mek.oszk.hu/06900/06996/06996/pdf>. For a detailed analysis of Vámbéry’s views see my study: “Ármin Vámbéry (1832-1913) as a Historian of Early Hungarian Settlement in the Carpathian Basin,” the *E-journal of American Hungarian Educators’ Association*, vol. 6 (2013) <http://ahea.net/e-journal-6-2013>.

⁴Kiss published these views in an article that appeared in the journal *Nyugat* [West] that often featured unconventional opinions. The article’s text can be found on the website: <http://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00022/00492/15257.htm>. See also my article: “The Székelys: Ancestors of Today’s Hungarians,” *Hungarian Studies Review* 36, 1-2 (2009): 153-169.

⁵One of László’s early works on this subject is *A „kettős honfoglalás”* [The “dual conquest”] (Budapest: Magvető, 1978). In a later version of his theory László emphasized the fact that the ancestors of Hungarians were a “late Avar people”. See the interview he gave in 1997: “Életem egyik fele, a régészet” [One half of my life, archaeology] *Akadémiai beszélgetések*, 17 April 1997, <http://www.mmakademia.hu/ab/3/303.php> (accessed 13 Dec. 2010), as well as: “A szlávok régészeti kutatása hazánkban” [Archaeological research on the Slavs in our country] http://betiltva.com/files/laszlo_szlavok_hazankban.php accessed 23 Sept. 1997. In this study László concluded: “... a mai magyar pépesség volta-képpen egyenes folytatása a késő-avarkor (nagyreszt ugyancsak magyar) népességének...” [today’s Hungarian population is basically the direct continuation of the (mainly also Hungarian) population of the late-Avar age].

⁶Makkay’s major work on the subject is *A magyarság keletzése* [The dating of Hungarians] (Szolnok: Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok Megyei Múzeumok, 1994, 2nd edition). Since then Makkay has produced a 3rd expanded edition of this work but has not been able to find a publisher for it. Makkay’s ideas on Finno-Ugric origins are highly praised by the author of the paper “Újra kell írni...” (see note 1 above.)

⁷Dezső Simonyi, “A pannóniai bolgárok és a Magyarság kialakulása: Tanulmányok a bolgár-magyar kapcsolatok köréből” [The Bulgars of Pannonia and the ethnogenesis of the Hungarians: Studies relating to the contacts of the Bulgars and Magyars] in *Tanulmányok a bolgár-magyar kapcsolatok köréből*, ed.

Csavidar Dobrev, Péter Juhász and Petar Mijatev (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1981), 71-88.

⁸Engel's most relevant book on the subject is *Beilleszkedés Európába, a kezdetektől 1440-ig* [Fitting into Europe, from the beginnings to 1440] (Budapest: Háttér, 1990); the English-language paper that he published a decade later is "The House of Árpád and its Times," *The Hungarian Quarterly* 41, 1 (Spring 2000) <http://www.hungarianquarterly.com/no157/074.shtml>.

⁹Gábor Vékony, *Magyar őstörténet – Magyar honfoglalás* [Hungarian proto-history — Hungarian conquest] (Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 2002), see especially this book's last pages.

¹⁰Péter Király, *A honalapítás vitás eseményei: A kalandozások és a honfoglalás éve* [The disputed events of the establishment of a homeland: The marauding expeditions and the year of the conquest] (Nyíregyháza: Nyíregyházi Főiskola, 2006). See especially p. 214 of this work. Király nearly lived to age 100.

¹¹Elek Benkő, *A középkori Székelyföld* [The Székelyland of the Middle Ages] (Budapest: MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont, Régészeti Intézet, 2012), 2 volumes. For Benkő's own views on the subject see pp. 429-430.

¹²Lipták published many books on the subject but for a succinct overview of his ideas see "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. One of Lipták's books is available in English: *Avars and Ancient Hungarians* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1983) see especially p. 30.

¹³Erzsébet Fóthi, Zsolt Berner, Tamás Hajdu and Ivett Kővári, "Középkori embertani leletek a Székelyföldön" [Medieval anthropological specimens in Székelyland] in *A középkori Székelyföld* [The Székelyland of the Middle Ages] author and editor Elek Benkő (Budapest: MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Régészeti Intézet, 2012), vol. 2, 473-552, especially p. 506.

¹⁴Carl Zimmer, "DNA Deciphers Roots of Modern Europeans," *The New York Times*, 10 June 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/16/science/dna-deciphers-roots-of-modern-europeans.html?sm...> This article is a summation of a scientific study that appeared under the name of forty-four scholars a day earlier: Morten E. Allentoft *et al.* "Population genomics of Bronze Age Eurasia," *Nature* vol. 522 (11 June 2015): 167ff. Available to selective audiences online. Allentoft and his co-authors speculate about the arrival in Europe of the people of the Yamnaya culture whom they assume, with some reservations, to be the ancestors of today's Indo-Europeans. The article's authors, however, say nothing about the ancestors of the Uralic peoples — where they might have lived during the Bronze Age — so their homeland before some of them had apparently settled in the Middle Danube Basin remains a mystery.