

ON THE CONTACTS OF HUNGARIANS WITH THE BALTIC AREA IN THE 9TH–11TH CENTURIES

From an Archaeologist's Point of View

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Those Hungarians of oriental origin who found a new home-land in the centre of Europe at the end of the 9th century lived through three very tempestuous centuries from the 9th to the 11th. They traversed many hundreds of miles on their migration, at first from the Don region to the Dnieper and Dniester area; between 895. A.D. and 900 A.D. they conquered their new country, the Carpathian Basin, later they terrorized large areas of Europe with their raids; after the great defeat at Augsburg (955) the very existence of the Hungarians was in danger. Due to the sound political realization of their leaders they nevertheless integrated with the family of European peoples. At the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries one of the most significant Christian kingdoms was created in Hungary, which played a prominent economical, political and military role in this area as early as the 11th century.

In this exceptionally eventful period of Hungarian history the Hungarians naturally got into touch with almost all the peoples of Eastern and Central Europe for a longer or shorter period of time, but their connections with the Islamic East as well as with the peoples of Western, Southern and Northern Europe were also significant. Among these latter we should like to concentrate on the connections of Hungary with the Baltic area and Scandinavia. As this period of Hungarian history is extremely poor in written documents, the connections are to be established first and foremost by means of archaeological relics.*

The archaeological finds of Viking origin, from the 10th and 11th centuries, found on Hungarian territory, and showing a strong Scandinavian influence, were summarized in 1933 by Peter Paulsen in his work *Wikingerfunde aus Ungarn*.¹ He analysed the gold plated and niello decorated lance, dragged up from the Danube in Budapest, the two-edged Hungarian swords, the helmet and sword from the Cathedral Treasury, Prague, as well as the sword of the first Hungarian king St. Stephen, similarly kept in Prague. Among Hungarian archaeologists, Nándor Fettich paid special

* On Baltic and Hungarian early contacts see: Voigt, Vilmos, "Hungaro-Baltic Preliminaria", *Acta Linguistica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 21, 3–4 (1971) 391–400, and idem, "Baltic Problems of Hungarian Prehistory", *Études Finno-Ougriennes* XV/1978—79 (1982) 447–453, however, from a different point of view.

attention to the Viking findings in Hungary; he was the first to demonstrate convincingly that the Hungarians kept very intensive commercial connections with the Vikings as early as when living in their former dwelling-places in Eastern Europe (namely in areas known in Hungarian historical sources as *Levedia* and *Etelköz*).²

In the course of this short summarizing paper I try to give a concise survey of the results yielded in the last decades by Hungarian research investigating these Northern connections.

Speaking of the beginning of the Hungarian-Baltic (and Scandinavian) connections, we have to face many unsolved problems of Hungarian prehistory. The first is the question of where the Hungarians actually lived in Eastern Europe during the 9th century. In my opinion the most likely answer is that from the first half of the 9th century A.D. to the 830-es they lived in the Volga-Don-Doniec-region, in the neighbourhood of the so-called Saltovo archaeological culture, and later, up until the conquest of 895, they dwell west of this territory, in the Dnieper-Dniester-region.³ The earliest archaeological data concerning Hungarian-Northern connections comes from these latter territories.

Nándor Fettich still supposed that the most beautiful works of silversmiths' art, found in 10th-century Hungarian graves (sabretache plates, discs, sabres) were made, almost without exception, before the Hungarian Conquest in the 9th century, partly in Norse-Slav workshops in the Kiev region.⁴ His notion is, however, fundamentally revised by recent research work. It is no longer questionable that these objects were mainly made already in the new country during the 10th century.⁵ Among the sabretache plates it is possible that that of Bezdéd was made earlier back in the East (Fig. 1). István Dienes has proved that the fashion of covering the sabretaches with metal plates was widespread among the Hungarians as late as after the conquest (A. D. 896), while the cover plates and locking straps were formally ornamented with mountings.⁶ In his profound study he also collected a great number of East European parallels for these mounting types, which are rather rare in Hungary.⁷ These pieces were found in the graves of the 10th century rich, Eastern Slav-Norse *Družina* (royal attendance) members (i. e. the armed men of the Kiev state from the Kiev, Chernigov and Smolensk region). They were more widespread, however, further to the north along the Dnieper waterway: we find them in the Ladoga region, where Norsemen also lived, and still further on in Scandinavia, primarily in the Birka cemetery. (Along with the complete sabretache plates, fragments were also found.)⁸ The sabretache with mountings, found in the Chemihino cemetery in the Ladoga region *in situ*,⁹ demonstrated beyond doubt that these northern pieces had the same structure as the Hungarian ones. (Further good parallels were recently published from the Shestovici, Chernigov region.)¹⁰

Continuing the investigations of István Dienes, I have recently reconstructed (on the basis of the archaeological report and the sabretache find in Miskepuszta, Hungary), one of the sabretaches of Chernigov, decorated with silver mountings.¹¹

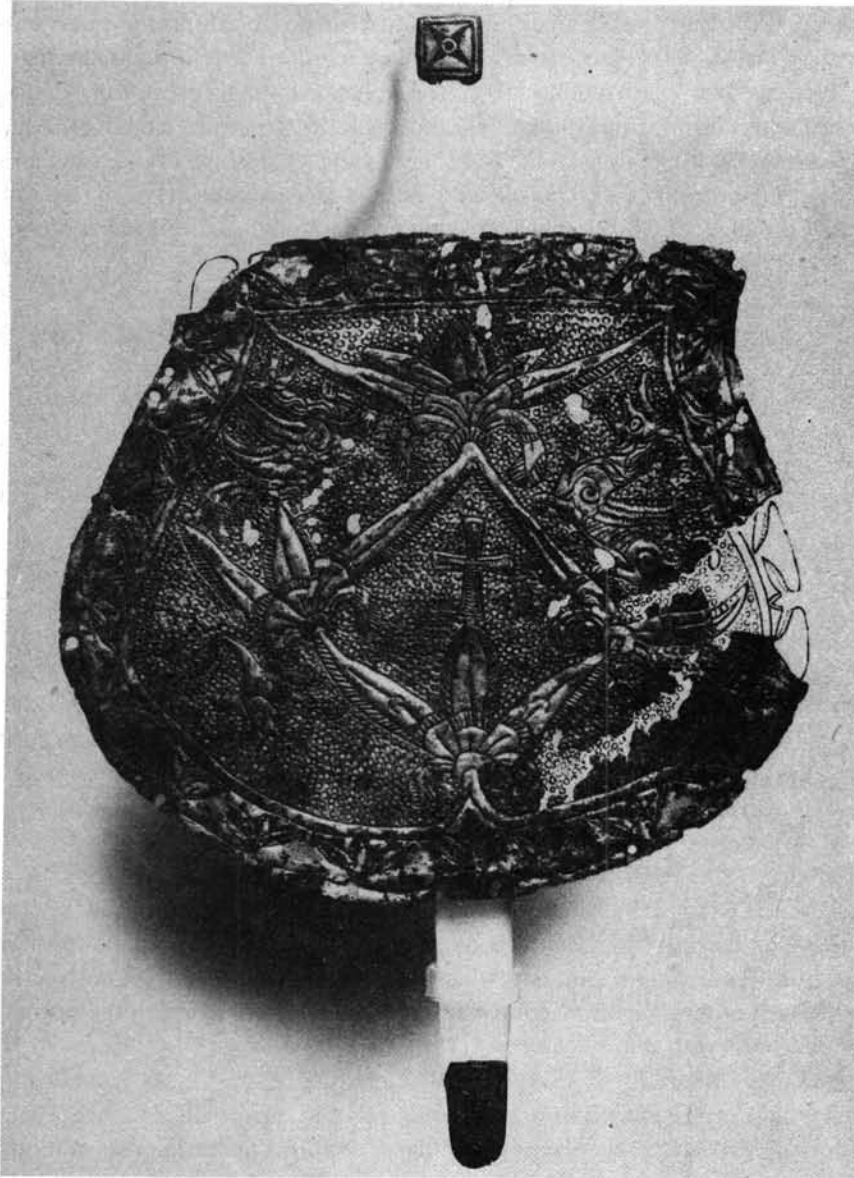


Fig. 1

Considering the East European diffusion of the Hungarian sabretache ornaments, I came to the conclusion that this sort of sabretache decoration was brought into fashion among the Slav-Norse aristocracy of the Kiev Rus' state, a decoration technique established at this time by the Hungarians, and it was the Norsemen who transmitted it to the North, to certain regions of the Baltic area and Scandinavia. At the same time I drew attention to the fact that the Volga-Bulgarians used sabretaches with mountings of different sorts;¹² in the Birka cemetery similar pieces were found.¹³ We may suppose



Fig. 2

that a significant number of the objects mentioned above was made by Hungarian artisans, such as the so-called Khoinovsky sabre, found in Kiev, or the silver plate with palmette decoration, covering the hilt of the swords found near the Golden Gate in Kiev.¹⁴ It also seems very likely that the niello decorated strap-end of the Benepuszta, Hungary, may be dated from the early 10th century, as well as the niello mountings of the Bezdéd sabretache made in Eastern Slav territories, as Fettich also suggests (Fig. 2).

According to the evidence of archaeological finds, the connections of the Hungarians with the Baltic area and Scandinavia were not broken off after the Hungarian Conquest. As has already been indicated by earlier research, it is primarily the art of the Hungarian armourers which was strongly attached to the Northern regions. Recent Hungarian archaeological research has contributed to the history of these connections with many features.

The Budapest lance (Fig. 3) was recently investigated by László Kovács in his thorough study, embracing both archaeological and historical sources. His investigations as to the date and place of production confirms the earlier propositions of Paulsen, according to which the weapon was made in Gotland in the early 11th century, making it likely that it belonged to a leader of the Hungarian royal attendance, who might have been of Rus'-Varangian origin.¹⁵ (The Hungarian royal lance—a symbol of royal power—was a winged lance of Frankish type, as can be seen on perhaps the earliest Hungarian coin, and on the traditional Hungarian coronation robe, made in 1031.¹⁶)

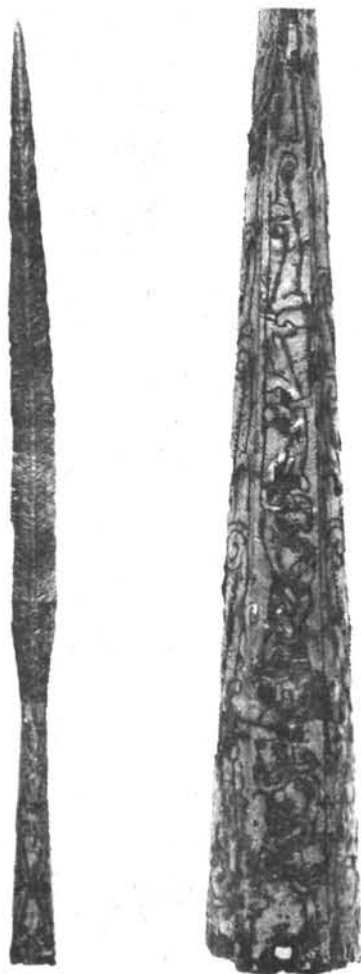


Fig. 3

The two-edged swords found in Hungary were formerly held by Fettich to be of Norman origin. Later Gyula László pointed to the fact, also confirmed then by Kornél Bakay, that these weapons were, in the main, mass productions from Western Europe, namely from the Rhine region.¹⁷ This weapon type—together with a group of Frankish winged lances—¹⁸ were distributed in Hungary from the seventies of the 10th century, when Prince Géza and his son, King Stephen, organized a modern army of the Western type. In the ranks of this new army, especially among the royal attendance, the Rus'-Varangian element—mentioned by written sources and kept in remembrance by toponyms in Hungary, like Orosz, Oroszi, Kölpény, Varang—¹⁹ may well have played an important role. The weapon of the Benepusztá cemetery from the 10th



Fig. 4

century, previously considered to have been a sword, is, in fact, a sabre, which points to the fact that the Hungarians did not use a two-edged sword as early as the first half of the 10th century. The appearance of stirrups (Fig. 4.) with gabled sides of the Carolingian-Norse type, may be connected with the Rus-Varangian elements of the new army as Károly Mesterházy has proved,²⁰ and so can the profusion of certain axe types²¹ (Fig. 5.). As these weapons were used over very large territories, their place of origin is generally rather uncertain, but we can locate the origin of the sword scabbard-tips of Beszterec, Gyulafehérvár and Dombrád in the Baltic region with some confidence.²² (Connection between the Polish and Dnieper regions can be deduced from the niello buckle and the tiny niello axe used as an amulet, found in Szabolcsveresmart.)²³ It is an interesting feature of armour history that in those

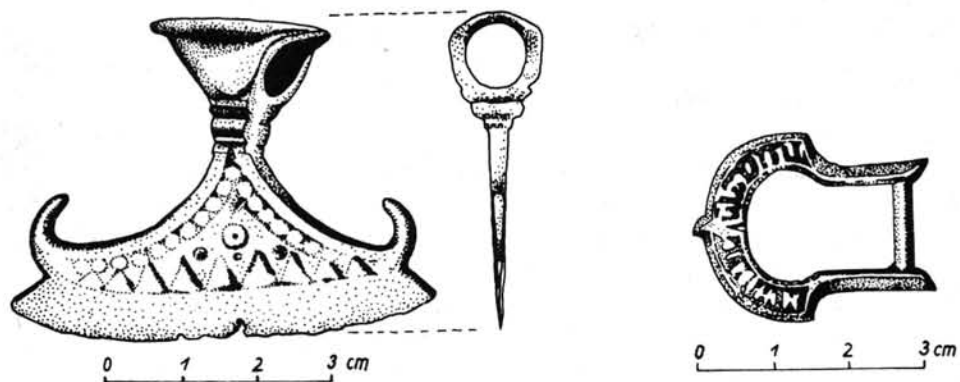


Fig. 5



Fig. 6

territories in which sabres—characteristic of Oriental steppe warfare—and the Western-Northern, heavy, two-edged swords were equally used, a so-called “hybrid” weapon came into being at about the end of the century: in the Baltic area the sabre-sword (*Säbelschwert*),²⁴ in Hungary the sword with a sabre hilt.²⁵

Having made investigations concerning the Prague sword of St. Stephen with ivory guard and hilt knob (Fig. 6), Gyula László recently published certain important observations.²⁶ The worn carvings of the guard were studied earlier by N. Fettich who, arguing against Paulsen, claimed that the sword could not have been, an ensign on the ground of these abrasions, but must have been an ornamental sword in everyday use.²⁷ Revising the representation of the guard Gyula László detected two dragons with entwined necks. This composition fits in well with the Scandinavian animal style. The representations make it likely that the weapon might have been a princely, or later, royal ensign until 1000, when the lance became the emblem of the investiture of power. Tradition does not connect this sword with the person of King Stephen in vain.

A similar pair of dragons, interlaced by their tongues, are represented on the so-called Charlemagne, resp. Attila sabre, kept in Vienna—perhaps the most sumptuous of its kind of the period.²⁸ The sabre, dealt with frequently in specialist literature, has in my opinion, been proved by recent investigations to be the work of a Hungarian artisan of the 10th century. Hungarian sabre finds, especially the Rakamaz piece, point most convincingly in this direction.²⁹ The artisan who produced the mountings of the weapon, was not only familiar with the Hungarian art of using palmette motifs, but also versed in Northern German art. There must have been several masters like him, as is proved by a bone mouthpiece, found in a grave at Veszékény, uniting decorations of interlaced motifs and palmettes.³⁰

Independent Hungarian minting started, according to recent research, in the earliest years of the establishment of the Hungarian kingdom, supposedly on the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries.³¹ It is a remarkable fact that coins of the first Hungarian king, St. Stephen, came to light in great numbers in Northern Europe: in Poland, Denmark, Sweden, and in Russia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, all the way over to Lake Ladoga and Finland.³² We know from the studies of Lajos Huszár that the currency of Hungarian coins continued over these regions until the late 11th century, evidently providing genuine proof of one-time commercial connections.

In summary we can state that connections between the Hungarians and the peoples of the Baltic region were, during the 9th–11th centuries, very lively, although we also have firm proof of the existence of Scandinavian population elements in Hungary during the 10th and 11th centuries. There was a mutual interaction between the population of the two regions. We can observe influence of Hungarian costume in the 9th century among the Varangians; in the 11th century Hungarian coins must have played an important role in the economic life of Baltic peoples. At the same time we may note the unmistakable influence of Northern armoury and art in Hungary.

Notes

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3. Cf. Fodor, István, *In Search of a New Homeland. (The Prehistory of the Hungarian People and the Conquest.)* (Budapest, 1982) pp. 211—263.
4. Fettich, Nándor, *Die altungarische Kunst.* (Berlin, 1942) p. 38.
5. László, Gyula, *Steppenvölker und Germanen.* (Budapest, 1970) p. 70.
6. Dienes, István, "Honfoglaláskori veretes tarsoly Budapest-Farkasrétről. (Beschlagverzierte landnahmezeitliche Tasche von Budapest-Farkasrét.)" *Folia Archaeologica* 24 (1973) pp. 177—217.
7. Dienes, István, "Honfoglaláskori tarsolyainkról. (Les aumonières hongroises de l'époque de la conquête.)" *Folia Archaeologica* 16 (1964) pp. 79—112.
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9. Raudonikas, V. J., *Die Normannen der Wikingerzeit und das Ladogagebiet.* (Stockholm, 1930) p. 125, Abb. 112.
10. Blifel'd, D. I., *Davn'orus'ki pam'jatki Šestovici.* (Kiiv, 1977) p. 153. Fig. 31.
11. Fodor, István, "Altungarn, Bulgarotürken und Ostslawen in Südrussland. (Archäologische Beiträge.)" Szeged, 1977, pp. 87—101, Taf. XI—XV. (*Acta Antiqua et Archaeologica* XX. *Opuscula Byzantina* IV.
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13. Arbman, Holger, op. cit. Taf. 128.
14. Fodor, István, "In Search..." pp. 254—255.
15. Kovács, László, "Die Budapester Wikingerlanze." *Acta Archaeologica* (Budapest) 22 (1970) pp. 323—339.
16. Cf. Gedai, István, "Bavarian Influence on the Early Coinage of the States in Central Europe." *Actes du 8^{ème} Congrès International de Numismatique.* (Paris—Bâle, 1976) pl. 48/5.; Kovács, Éva and Lovag, Zsuzsa, "A magyar koronázási ékszerek." (Budapest, 1980) p. 71.; Kovács, L., "Zur Deutung der Münze mit der Umschrift Lancia Regis." *Acta Archaeologica* (Budapest) 28 (1976) pp. 132—136.
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