

László Kósa (ed.)
A Cultural History of Hungary
Translated by Tünde Vajda
Budapest: Corvina Books/Osiris Kiadó, 1999.

A translation of the first part of the 1998 *Magyar művelődéstörténet*, the book under review, is the only cultural history of the Hungarians available in the English language. Indeed, it is the only such work in Hungarian since the book of the same title published under the editorship of Sándor Domanovszky between 1939 and 1942. Consequently, this new cultural history is an invaluable source for anyone interested in Central Europe before the nineteenth century.

One great strength of the book is the breadth of the Hungarian term *művelődéstörténet*. While the English term *culture* connotes shared attitudes or ideas, the Hungarian term *művelődéstörténet* seems to include anything not covered in a traditional political history. Unfortunately, the five authors whose essays compose this collaborative work do not seem to agree at all on the material to be covered or on the style in which it should be presented. In fact, a cultural history of the entire period written from any of the authors' points of view would be quite interesting. Taken in succession, however, these essays too often leave the reader wondering what each author might have included in one of the sections that author did not write.

The first section, by *István Fodor*, deals with the period through the occupation of the Carpathian Basin. Based on archaeology and linguistics, the author presents chronologically the movement and technological development of the people who spoke the ancestors of the Hungarian language. While this section begins with the caveat that "establishing the ethnicity of the dwellers of a particular ancient settlement or identifying the tongue they spoke pose serious problems," too often the author seems to equate language and ethnicity and to identify them with a particular archaeological complex. While this is justified with relation to the remains of the Conquest period, the unwary reader will take as settled the idea that the relics of the neolithic Gorbunovo culture were produced by speakers of a common Finno-Ugrian language who were the genetic ancestors of contemporary Hungarians. Nonetheless, the author does do an admirable job of stressing the cultural influence of neighbouring peoples at every stage of development. He also emphasizes the heterogeneous ethnicity of the people who entered the Carpathian Basin at the end of the ninth century, especially noting their strong Turkic element. It is unfortunate that this sort of intermixing is only discussed with regard to the period just before the *honfoglalás*.

The second section, by *István Bóna*, is entitled "The Hungarians and Europe in the Tenth Century." As the title indicates, this section deals not so much with developments within the lands controlled by the recently-arrived Magyars, but rather with their relations with other parts of Europe. After a short section dealing with the Conquest itself and with the peoples encountered in the newly-occupied lands, the author devotes a section to Italy, one to "Gaul

and beyond," one to the Byzantine Empire, and finally a somewhat longer one to the Germans. This section is a wonderful introduction to the period of the raids and to the roots of mediaeval Hungarian foreign affairs. It is a bit difficult to see how certain parts of this section are to be distinguished from political, rather than cultural, history, but it is a welcome addition to the small amount of material available in English on the raiding period. It would also have been nice for the editors to include an essay on the internal cultural development of Hungary in the tenth century – an era that saw the beginning of the most far-reaching societal changes in Hungarian history.

The period from the reign of Saint Stephen to the Ottoman conquest is covered by *Iván Bertényi*. The author divides the subject into thematic sections dealing with matters as diverse as roads, clothing, games, chivalric culture, and the doctrine of the Holy Crown. Each section contains a wealth of detail based on written records and archaeology. This material would be of interest to any student of mediaeval European culture even outside of Hungary. Unfortunately, the reader unacquainted with the Hungarian sources will occasionally be confused as to the chronological placement of a particular reference within the five centuries covered by this section. This could easily have been remedied by reference to a footnote except for the disastrous editorial decision to include no notes in the entire volume. This essay does also include the one instance of the sort of boosterism often found in older national histories, but that most contemporary scholar might find a bit embarrassing. When the author, in discussing the sculptural works of the fourteenth-century Kolozsvári brothers, declares that "It would be high time to declare that in sculpture, just as in the foundation of the first secular order of knighthood, the Hungarian Kingdom was at the lead in contemporary Europe," it is hard to disagree with the facts, especially as based on one of the volumes lovely black-and-white illustrations. One only wishes he had expressed them in a less vehement style. Similarly discomfiting is the discussion of the doctrine of the Holy Crown, which seems to project the attitudes of a later age back into the eleventh century and never discusses the questionable provenance of the actual crown itself.

The final two sections, on the early modern age, are possibly the most satisfying of the book. This is due mostly to the fact that it has been divided between an essay of *István György Tóth*, dealing with material culture and such practical topics as medicine and literacy, and an essay of *István Bitskey*, dealing with such aspects of "spiritual life" as religion, literature, and courtly culture. The former, in particular, is nicely divided into large sections on man and nature, lifestyle and mentality, sickness and cures, and the advance of literacy. Both of these essays, moreover, make it absolutely clear at all times when the particular event discussed occurred. The only thing further that one might wish in these sections, as in the previous section on the mediaeval period, is more of the comparative aspect. This comparison would be most welcome concerning the non-Hungarian inhabitants of the Kingdom of Hungary. While the volume is impeccably translated, striking an admirable balance between scholarly style and idiomatic language where required, the choice of title in English is somewhat unfortunate. This is not a cultural history of Hungary, which would imply a history of the cultural developments that occurred in Hungary, regardless of the ethnicity of the participants. It is however, a perfectly admirable Hungarian cultural history, as its title in the original states.

Once again, the lack of notes in the volume under review is a serious drawback. The discussions are far too detailed to give to readers below the undergraduate level, but it is hoped that any college student would be accorded the convenience of notes so that he could research further, verify the author's statement, or resolve any confusion he might have as to chronology or source. That said, this is a uniquely comprehensive cultural history and should be on the

syllabus of any course dealing with the history of Hungary or with the history of Central Europe before the nineteenth century. More advanced scholars will also find it a valuable reference both because of its lucid discussions of a wide range of topics and because of the brief but current bibliographies at the end of each section.

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