

Magyar Századok Series¹



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The general-editor and the authors of the series entitled *Magyar Századok* (Hungarian Centuries) had embarked a monumental venture, when they decided to present to the general public a comprehensive picture of the more than thousand-year history of the Hungarians. A good opportunity was offered to achieve this ambitious goal with the thousandth anniversary of the foundation of the Hungarian state, since during the celebration, understandably, an increasing demand

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arose for an overview of all the events which had happened to our ancestors and us during the last millennium and/or to sum up what historians actually know about the Hungarian past in our days. Independently of the millennium, the relevance of the preparation of the above series can be easily conceded, as a modern historical synthesis of the past thousand years had been long missing from the shelves of interested readers. The significance of the completed series is increased by the fact that, though several attempts were made at writing an integral Hungarian historical synthesis, all of these undertakings had aborted. Up to the present, the larger part of the medieval history of Hungary is still missing from the ten-volume series planned by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, but the other series meant to embrace all the previous centuries, such as the *Magyarok Európában* (Hungarians in Europe), *Magyar História* (Hungarian History), and *Magyarország Krónikája* (The Chronicle of Hungary) which also remained incomplete.

With regard to the history of the present series it must be mentioned that in 2000 only ten volumes were published covering Hungarian history from the eleventh up to the twentieth century, and the first volume dealing with the chronology of the topic as well as the chronology volume concluding the whole series came out only during 2001. As an outcome of this enormous venture, today the whole of Hungarian history can be read in an integrated series of 3,176 pages. The volumes contain the latest results of recent research written by well-known Hungarian historians. The author of the present review – as a medievalist – can only express his opinion of the first six volumes of the series, leaving those volumes dedicated to the second, undoubtedly more documented half of the millennium to more competent expert(s) for criticism.

Concerning the volumes of the *Magyar Századok* series, several questions may occur to the reader. 1) How can the integrity of the past millennium be presented, if it is cut into parts by such units of time mechanically intersecting the historical processes? 2) Is it possible to provide an organic image of the history of the past more than thousand years with the help of “century-histories” written by different authors?

The first question has already been answered in the prefaces of the volumes themselves as the authors attempted to choose breaking points relevant (also) from the angle of the historical processes as starting and ending dates of their monographs. Thus, for example, the volume on the history of the ninth and tenth centuries embraces the period from the 830s till 997, while that on the eleventh century deals with the years 997–1095, the one on the twelfth century about the period 1095–1196, and the volume written on the thirteenth century includes the years from 1196 to 1301. Obviously, due to the proportioning of the different volumes, sometimes it was not possible to choose a clear-cut date that is also close to the turning of the appropriate century. Therefore, the account on the fourteenth century starts in 1301 and goes until 1402/03, while that on the fifteenth century has its beginnings “around” 1403 and ends in 1526. Accordingly, in relation to periodisation, the authors of the series tried their best to keep in mind the significant changes and/or fateful events of Hungarian history. Moreover, in the volume about the eleventh century in one chapter the most important issues (every-

day life, the raids, society, political relations) of the tenth century are also discussed, since otherwise the changes undergone in the eleventh century would hardly be understandable.

Thematically the first, considering its date of publication the last volume of the series is slightly – though rightfully – different from the others, as it spans over two centuries, more precisely it examines the history of almost 160 years. It is an atypical volume in the series, but its material is also unusual, as it deals with a period of Hungarian history when our ancestors were just about to appear in written documents, thus the number and the relevant content of these written sources is both low and limited respectively. The authors of the volume, Gyula Kristó and Ferenc Makk, commendably decided not to include in their detailed presentation that part of the period about which even those few written sources are silent, about which only small “mosaic-pieces” from several other fields of science (linguistics, archaeology, anthropology) are available. Those more interested in this period, however, can obtain an overall picture in the first chapter (*What might have happened before the ninth century*).

Afterwards, the authors survey the migration of the Magyars (ancient Hungarians) from their ancient homeland in Levedia to the Carpathian Basin. The scholarly attitude characterising the whole book is already clear in this chapter, accordingly the authors always indicate in relation to a certain issue if the academic position is still open and/or if several answers can be given to a particular question. It is also apparent that the authors inserted quite a lot of quotations from the written records of the period under consideration. As a consequence, the line of their arguments can be followed more easily and, at the same time, the words of the contemporary writers increase the pleasure of reading. It should also be mentioned that Gyula Kristó and Ferenc Makk place this early phase of Hungarian history into a larger spacio-temporal context and, this way, provide the readers with indispensable background information on the history of the ninth–tenth-century steppe, Central, and Western Europe.

The most debated stage of Hungarian history, the Hungarian Conquest is presented in a separate chapter, touching also upon the pre-Conquest history of the Carpathian Basin and the immediate background events to the Conquest itself. In this chapter the authors draw an overall picture of Hungarian society in the age of the Conquest, the number and the everyday life of the conquering Magyars. The following chapter introduces a fairly stirring period, the age of raids to the readers. The value of this chapter is enhanced by the fact that show the seven decades of the raids as divided into smaller periods accentuating the major characteristics of each. In comparison with the earlier phases of Hungarian history, there are many more sources at our disposal about the age of raids, since the raiding Magyars attacked territories with a high level of literacy. Under the military and foreign political surface of the raids significant economic, social, and political transformation took place. The domestic circumstances of the tenth century are presented demonstrating to the readers the metamorphosis of the Hungarians who, of necessity, left behind their nomadic life style to become settled cultivators. These changes changed their peak during the reign of Prince Géza. The

openness towards Western Europe and the centralising dynastic politics were those milestones marking the way for a long time for the development of the Hungarian state. Accordingly, the reign of Prince Géza is discussed in a separate chapter.

The closing chapter of the book provides an evaluation summary of two decades in a form of summary. Perhaps the most important change during this eventful period was that by the last decades of the tenth century the Hungarians had arrived at the cross-roads: "radical change or, without it, quick perdition." The authors – evolving continuity with the following centuries – emphasise that while basically the reply to the challenges had already been established in the tenth century but, in many respect, the fate of the Hungarians was decided only at the turn of the tenth and eleventh and/or in the first half of the eleventh century.

In the second volume of the series Gyula Kristó grouped the history of the "sacral" eleventh century around four subjects. The first (*The Kingdom*) and the second (*Christianity*) introduce two major areas of transformation – the state and religion – both with profound effects on the lives of the Hungarians. In the chapter entitled *The Kingdom* one can not only read about the coronation of the first king and about the kings and queens of the eleventh century, but also about the ways of exercising royal power, about minting coins, taxation, jurisdiction, administration, war affairs, foreign relations, and also about the issuing of charters that in the eleventh century should be considered as an attribute of royal power. These are all areas of life which were radically transformed by comparison with their tenth-century antecedents, moreover, some of them (minting, jurisdiction) were the consequences of the formation of the medieval Hungarian state. The spread of Christianity, the process of organizing church parallel to the missions, and the accompanying appearance of Western European civilisation also meant revolutionary new developments in the life of the Hungarians. All these are discussed in the chapter entitled *Christianity* in which the missionary activity, the organisation, the bishops, the monasteries, education, literature, the canonisation processes, church incomes, and religious life form the different subchapters. The additional two units of the book introduce the contemporary society (*The People of the Country*) and everyday life of the people (*The Daily Life*). The special value of these chapters that they provide summarising overviews of subjects probably less known to the general public. Thus, for example, one can read about foreigners arriving in the Hungarian Kingdom and about Hungarians travelling abroad. The author clearly demonstrates the transformation of the terms 'freedom' and 'slavery' of cardinal importance as well as the position of the masses marginalised and relegated to vassal status, that is the beginning of an essential transformational process during which the majority of a society that in the tenth century still consisted predominantly of freemen became servants.

In writing the history of the twelfth century, the author, Ferenc Makk introduces a century hardly known to the wider public and which even among academic historians appears to be a grey, featureless period of Hungarian history. However, reading the book, one can be persuaded that this century brought some

exciting changes as well, not only with regard to later events, but also in themselves, even if these changes were not as fundamental as those of the eleventh or thirteenth centuries. The twelfth century brought the perfection of the state-model of King Saint Stephen. The royal power was strengthened, its authority became absolute, therefore, the Hungarian rulers could already think of conquering new lands. As opposed to the defensive foreign policy of the eleventh century, expansion became the determining ambition in foreign affairs, so it is not by chance that Ferenc Makk devoted a significant part of his book to presenting the foreign relations of the country as well. With regard to empire-building, King Béla III achieved the most, his reign can be considered as the peak of the whole period though, at the same time, it is also the closing point of an ascending phase. The history of the century is "strung on the chain of chronology", each chapter discusses the age and reign of one ruler of the period. For that reason, it is no accident that the summarising epilogue of this volume is the longest, as the summing-up of all the changes undergone in the fields of economy, society, population, daily life, and royal power are to be read here.

The thirteenth century presented by Tibor Almási is characterised by far-reaching and profound changes in almost every field of life, it is an era marked by "special contrast of destruction and construction". The history of hundred and five years is divided into chapters according to the reigns of various the kings. However, besides this division an inner caesura is also sensible in the volume formed by the subchapter (*The Bequeathed Country*) dealing with the reign of King Andrew II – practically the first third of the given period. Even enumerating all the inventions of the thirteenth century, from the social and economic changes through the question of settlement-network up to the issues of power and population, would result in a long and formidable list. Among the volumes of this ambitious series, the book of Tibor Almási is enhanced for its literary qualities which greatly increase the pleasures of reading. In the spirit of linguistic elegance, our thirteenth-century kings get appropriate adjectives for their names, so that is how, for example, King Andrew II became "the venturesome," while King Béla IV "the cautious innovator", and King Ladislas IV "the defier of fate". The author's aim is not to present the period only as the autumn of a dying dynasty and the political system has a fundamental significance. On the contrary, Almási tried to bring about the buds of renewal bursting out on the detritus of the old regime, and tried to demonstrate all those processes – the evolution and development of commodity production and a money-economy, urbanisation, the evolution of personal and collective rights, etc. – that will raise the country back among the European powers during the fourteenth century.

Iván Bertényi, while writing the history of the fourteenth century, chose a thematic structure as the main organising principle for his material. The author dedicated a separate chapter to a presentation of contemporary Europe. It is understandable, since Hungary in the fourteenth century overstepped its former spatial frames, not only by its rulers originating from foreign dynastic families, but also by its political status among the great European powers. Setting a time limit for the century was not easy, as it is proven by the fact that the author de-

voted the whole preface to a discussion of this issue. The individual chapters examine all the important segments of fourteenth-century Hungarian history. Separate units are dedicated to the issues of breaking the petty monarchs' power as well as to the society, economy, royal land-donation policy, military affairs, foreign policy, and the governing of the state. A chronological chapter discusses the rulers of the century and, there is a similar chapter for the wives of the contemporary kings. It is already in itself significant that Iván Bertényi discusses, or better to say can discuss the cultural life of the fourteenth century in a separate chapter, as in this period Hungarian culture became an integral part of the mainstream European culture and, at the same time, the number of the surviving records and monuments makes it possible for the author to say more than before about the character of painting, architecture, literature, or even goldsmith work.

The "long" fifteenth century is discussed by István Draskóczy. The period between 1403 and 1526 brought irreversible changes not only for the Hungarian Kingdom, but also for the whole of Europe. The stagnating, declining, then reviving, but already changed Europe defined the historical space of which Hungary could only occupy a peripheral part, though in this period it was still counted among the leading powers of the continent. Though the country was able to preserve this role for a while, its victories were momentary, moreover, they exhausted the resources of the country to the utmost extent. The danger of the Turks appearing at the southern borderland already from the fourteenth century onwards but, in reality, becoming menacing in the fifteenth century forced the Hungarian Kingdom left alone by the European powers into an unequal and hopeless struggle and agony that inevitably caused the collapse of the country. The author investigates this stirring time through into several thematic chapters. After the presentation of the contemporary country and its peoples, separate chapters are dedicated to the world of the villages, towns, and noblemen and also to that of the churches and monasteries, thus embracing the most important scenes of everyday life. The political history of the era (*Domestic and Foreign Politics 1403–1526*) and the functioning of the state (*The King and the Orders*) are discussed in separate chapters. Similarly, there is a separate discussion about the state of intellectuals and education in the fifteenth-century (*At the edge between the Middle Ages and Modern Times*).

At this point, the review of the volumes – if they were disconnected monographs – could finish. However, as they are integral parts of a series, some reflections still need to be made. Inasmuch as the volumes of the *Magyar Századok* series altogether offer more than individual works, their aggregate value is higher than the sum-total of the individual parts. The series – presumably, due to the excellence of the general-editor, Gyula Szvák – offers a firm but flexible, permissive framework for the individual authors who, within the given timeframes, could arrange their material in a structure best fitting their given theme and/or period of Hungarian history. On the other hand, however, it is due to the excellence of the authors themselves, that they were able to keep their eyes on the entire work and, owing to this, the volumes of the series organically fit together. The historical processes – even if they extend over several centuries – are not lost of, but can

be followed throughout. The appendices at the end of the volumes together with the maps on the inner sides of the book-covers, prepared by the authors themselves should also be highlighted, as they also add to the unity in diversity. In these appendices the "mini-archontologies" of the different centuries, family-trees, and maps are to be found. Each volume contains handy indices of names and places as well as an abundant and thematically grouped bibliography for reference. The aesthetic appearance of the volumes is also noteworthy. The hard-cover, the nicely designed binding, the elegant font type, the title-headings, and the system of page-numbering all increase the pleasure of handling the books.

The first six volumes of the *Magyar Századok* series set a definitely high standard both with regard to content and aesthetics, therefore it is easy to stay that for a long the series will be a basic work on the shelves of readers interested in Hungarian history.

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