

# *Conferences on the History of the Steppe at the University of Szeged*

(1997, 2000, 2002)



The Department of Medieval World History at the University of Szeged organised its third conference on the history of the steppe in 2002. Oriental studies and, especially, the investigation of the world of Eurasian nomadic peoples has far-reaching traditions in Hungary. This can be explained partly by the fact that the different Turkic-speaking peoples had significant linguistic and cultural impact on the Hungarians, and partly also by the good geo-political location of Hungary that created a suitable background for such research. Among the Hungarian scholars the most outstanding ones are Gyula Németh, Lajos Ligeti and András Róna-Tas who greatly influenced oriental studies at the University of Szeged and, at the same time, were and are internationally acknowledged professors. In the cases of Gyula Németh and Lajos Ligeti the placement of their significant private libraries at the University of Szeged gave a great impetus to research, while András Róna-Tas established a study group investigating the history of nomadic peoples in a complex way. Through his disciples, this group became determinant in the Hungarian research of the medieval history of the steppe.

The first conference (1997) focused on the relations between the Carpathian Basin and the Eurasian steppe. The presented studies on the Huns (Tibor Schäfer), the Alans (Barbara Fejős), the Gepids (Eszter Istvánovics), the Avars (Szabolcs Felföldi, Gábor Lőrinczy, Péter Straub, Margit Nagy and Mihály Dobrovits), the Bulgars (Csaba Farkas), the Khazars (Szabolcs Polgár and Richárd Szántó), the Hungarians (Sándor László Tóth, Balázs Sinkovics, László Klima and Zoltán Kordé), the Pechenegs (György Galamb) and the Cumans (István Vásáry) were published in the first conference volume.<sup>1</sup>

The second conference (2000) concentrated on the similarities and dissimilarities of the nomadic migrations and the Hungarian conquest. The studies on the Indo-Aryan peoples (Gyula Wojtilla), the Scythians (Eszter Istvánovics and Valéria Kulcsár), the Huns (Tibor Schäfer), the Alans (Barbara Fejős), the Hephthalites

---

<sup>1</sup> *A Kárpát-medence és a steppe* [The Carpathian Basin and the Steppe], ed. A. Márton. Magyar Őstörténeti Könyvtár 14. Budapest 2001.

(Szabolcs Felföldi), the Bulgars (András Róna-Tas and Csaba Szalontai), the Hungarians (István Zimonyi), the Cumans (László Keller) and the Mongols (Mária Ivanics and László Balogh), together with some other studies covering broader periods of time, such as the one on the nomadic espionage (Hansgerd Göckenjan), on the colour symbolism of the steppe (Balázs Sinkovics), or on the parallels between the Russian and Hungarian raiding campaigns (Márta Font) were published in the second conference volume.<sup>2</sup>

The author of this short summary cannot aim at presenting all the more than thirty studies published in the two conference volumes. Therefore, only a few were chosen to be discussed in details, mainly those hopefully well-representing all the others.

In his article András Róna-Tas discussed the problem of the location of *Magna Bulgaria* led by Khuvrat ("Where was Khuvrat's Bulgaria?"). In the seventh century the Bulgars theretofore being overruled by the Avars won their independence. It was achieved under the leadership of Khuvrat who, as an ally to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclios, made his realm become a significant political factor. The majority of the scholars accepted the opinion of Gyula Moravcsik placing the abode of Khuvrat's Bulgars north to the Caucasus, in the region of Kuban.<sup>3</sup> As opposed to him, on the basis of the rich archaeological material found in the grave of Malaia Perescepina (Ukraine) near the Dnieper River that could be dated to the seventh century, András Róna-Tas stands for a fundamentally different theory. According to the widely accepted reading of the Greek inscriptions cut in the seal-rings found in the grave, these objects might have been in Khuvrat's property. The author discusses the sources concerning Khuvrat's realm in details and concludes that it can be unambiguously located to the region of the Dnieper. After Khuvrat's death the nomadic empire established in the western part of the South Russian steppe, led by a Turkic ruler being on Christian faith, fell apart. Certain groups of the Bulgars fled to the West and their place was occupied by the Hungarians.<sup>4</sup>

István Zimonyi presented an account on the Hungarians of the tenth century ("A New Muslim Source on the Hungarians Living in the Carpathian Basin"). Hitherto, scholars connected a certain fragment written by al-Bakhri, a Muslim writer of Andalusia, with the inhabitants of the British Isles. In the critical edition of the text the part in question, coming up at the enumeration of East-European countries, were entitled as the *Anqliš*. After the profound survey of the text, however, it became apparent that this account bears information about the Hungarians. Therefore, the reading of the title should not be *Anqliš*, but on the basis of

<sup>2</sup> *Nomád népvándorlások, magyar honfoglalás* [Nomadic Migrations, Hungarian Conquest], ed. Sz. Felföldi and B. Sinkovics. Magyar Őstörténeti Könyvtár 15. Budapest 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Gy. Moravcsik, "Zur Geschichte der Onoguren," *Ungarische Jahrbücher* 10 (1930): 53–90.

<sup>4</sup> For the English version of the study see: A. Róna-Tas, "Where was Khuvrat's Bulgaria?" *Acta Orientalia Hungarica* 53 (2000): 1–22; further reading concerning the issue: A. Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe in the Early Middle Age. An Introduction to Early Hungarian History*. Budapest 1999.

*Ungarus/Hungarus*, the most widespread foreign denomination of the Hungarians, it should be *Unquluš*. The account, after the description of the abode of the Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin, provides detailed ethnographical data as well. Uniquely, it depicts the *Tengri*-cult and some other religious beliefs of the tenth-century Hungarians.

Mária Ivanics investigated the Book of the Genghis-Legend compiled in the seventeenth-eighteenth century from the point of view how it describes the ideal ruler of the steppe ("Nomad 'Mirror of the Prince' in the Book of the Genghis-Legend").<sup>5</sup> As to the source, such person should possess the following characteristics: 1) charisma, 2) the ability of the constant extension of his empire, 3) respect for the social hierarchy, 4) righteousness and usefulness, 5) inclemency and leniency, 6) executive ability. In most of the cases of the empires of the steppe these criteria cannot be entirely confirmed by contemporary sources. Therefore, this study excellently demonstrates that relatively late sources preserving though the original pagan thinking patterns can be of great help in the investigation of the power system of the traditional nomadic world. The analysed source opposing the ideal ruler to the greatest nomad conqueror of the fourteenth century introduces Tamerlane as well. Legitimacy was not a relevant criteria for him, since he could not lead his origin back to Genghis Khan – that is to the clan possessing charisma assured by heaven. However, parallel to the spread of Islam in the steppe, in his case a new legitimacy had developed that was based on the deeds of the ruler. Thereby, the figure of the conqueror bringing about Islamisation among the peoples of his empire supported by God replaced the earlier pagan charismatic ruler supported by heaven.

Szabolcs Polgár covered a highly debated issue of Khazar history, the building of the fortress of Šarkel. Certain Byzantine sources reveal to us that in the 830s the Byzantine Emperor Theophilus sent building experts to the Khazars who, on the bank of the Don River, built up the stronghold of Šarkel. Scholarly opinion differs about the question against whom this stronghold was actually built. According to the three most frequently accepted ideas, the potential enemies could have been the Russians, the Hungarians or the Pechenegs. Szabolcs Polgár is on the opinion that for chronological reasons the Russians and the Pechenegs can be excluded. On the one hand, at that time when the fortress was built, the Russians did not yet mean such a great threat for the Khazars that could have motivated this large-scale building activity. On the other hand, the Pechenegs then lived east to the Volga River, thus could not be taken into account as attackers of Šarkel. Connecting the building of Šarkel to the threatening presence of the Hungarians was strongly influenced by a sentence written by Ibn-Rusta, a tenth-century Muslim author, saying that there were times when the Khazars defended themselves against the Hungarians and other peoples by moat. Scholarship was disorientated by the fact that in a number of translations the expression „moated” was wrongly written as „circumvallated”. Under these circumvallations or ramparts

---

<sup>5</sup> M. Ivanics, and M. A. Usmanov, *Das Buch der Dschingis-Legende (Däftär-i Čingiz-nämä)*, I. Studia Uralo-Altaica 44. Szeged 2002.

certain scholars – abusively – understood Sarkel. Recently, however, it was proven that the sentence in question actually reports on the building of moat and not rampart.<sup>6</sup> The author of the study believes that there is no evidence on the basis of which one can assume that the Hungarians manifested hostile attitude towards the Khazar Khaganate in the first half of the ninth century. In connection with the construction of Sarkel, the significance of commercial traffic should highly be taken into consideration. Ninth-century archaeological and written sources both attest the growth of trading activity. The goods of the forest-land (slave, wax, fur) were transported in huge quantities to the southern centres of civilisation, the Byzantine Empire and the Baghdad Caliphate. Szabolcs Polgár supposes that taxing this intensive trading of goods compelled the Khazars to built up the stronghold of Sarkel in order to control one of the important sailing routes, the Don River.

In 2002, during the third conference on the history of the steppe (Armed Nomads, Nomadic Arms) organised in Szeged on 9–10 September, the supervisor of the meeting, István Zimonyi, the head of the Department of Medieval World History at the University of Szeged, declared that corresponding to the needs and expectations the fourth conference due in two years will already be an international gathering.<sup>7</sup> The organisers hope that this meeting will generate new opportunities for wider range of co-operation among Western and Eastern European scholars.

LÁSZLÓ BALOGH

---

<sup>6</sup> I. Zimonyi, "A 9. századi magyarokra vonatkozó arab források. A Dzsaháni-hagyomány. [Arabic Sources on the Ninth-Century Hungarians. The Ġayhāni-Tradition.]" In *A honfoglaláskor írott forrásai*, ed. L. Kovács and L. Veszprémy, *A honfoglalásról sok szemmel 2*. Budapest 1996. 49–59.; H. Göckenjan, and I. Zimonyi, *Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter. Die Ġayhāni-Tradition*. Veröffentlichungen der Societas Uralo-Altaica 54. Wiesbaden 2001, 74, note 102.

<sup>7</sup> The Department of Medieval World History, Department of Archeology at the University of Szeged, and the Research Group of Hungarian Prehistory of the Regional Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Szeged organize the *Medieval Nomads: First International Conference on the Medieval History of the Eurasian Steppe* (11–16 May 2004, Szeged, Hungary).