

# Gyula Kristó

(1939–2004)



The representatives of Medieval Studies in Hungary mourn deeply the loss of history professor, Dr. Gyula Kristó, a correspondent fellow of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, an established scholar, an eminent teacher, an outstanding public figure and a great friend. Professor Kristó died on 24 January 2004 following a long illness.

Gyula Kristó was born on 11 July 1939 in Orosháza, Hungary. He completed his primary and secondary school studies in his native town, and in 1962 graduated with honours from the University of Szeged, majoring in History, Hungarian and Latin language and literature. Early in his studies he became seriously involved in scholarly activities and, as a result, upon graduation he was offered a teaching position at the same university. Gyula Kristó accepted the offer and he remained loyal to the same institution until his death.

In the field of academic work Gyula Kristó initially investigated the question of medieval Hungarian chronicles, and, in 1969, at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences defended a CSc dissertation entitled *The Development of the Elements of Historical and Political Thought in Hungarian Chronicles*. In parallel with this research, he wrote a monograph on eleventh-century pagan revolts, published numerous scholarly articles and started in-depth research into the topic of the process of feudal disunity from the dynastic division of the country to the emergence of regional administration and from the concentration of offices to the establishment of provincial power. This research led to a dissertation, as a result of which Gyula Kristó was awarded the degree of Academic Doctor (DSc) of History in 1977.

He always applied a complex approach when investigating ninth to fourteenth-century Hungarian history and considered economic, social and political history as well as aspects of military, regional and local history in his research. Because of the comprehensiveness of his approach and of the creative use of his diverse, yet in-depth knowledge of various fields of history, many of his colleagues considered Gyula Kristó a universal scholar, an attribute he always modestly declined in spite of the fact that he not only excelled at different fields of history, but was also familiar with medieval Latin, microphilology, linguistics, archeology, ethnography and literature. In research methodology he was a devotee

of the so-called “complex approach”, without which, he said, it had been impossible to comprehend life in the past as a whole. He also thought that in every scientific field researchers should go as far as possible and it was only when this stage had been achieved that they were advised to compare the outcome of their own research with the results of other fields. Using a term of his own, Gyula Kristó considered himself a “realistic” historian, who, while building on a complexity of historical facts, always aimed at describing historical reality. He contrasted this method with the aims of those historians, who, by selecting historical data at random were rather trying to find evidence to support their own hypothetical ideas. He was convinced that being a good academic meant both a love of the investigated field and great sacrifices on the part of the researcher. In his opinion, an in-depth knowledge of the research field, as well as systematic self-improvement, detailed familiarity with source criticism and research methodology were all indispensable preconditions for real academic achievements. With great diplomatic tact, he was always prepared for professional debate on the condition that true facts, which could be proved, needed to be consistently separated from hypotheses, unproved facts or desired opinion. (This is why he was on several occasions involved in debates with some representatives of Slovak, Croatian and Romanian historiography.) On the basis of these principles, he created an unrivalled quality and quantity of writing. Prior to his death, Gyula Kristó had authored 101 books (with some additional ones in print), and had published over 600 articles, a number of textbooks and other writings for educational purposes. In addition, Gyula Kristó edited several monumental works, including the *Encyclopedia of Early Hungarian History, from the 9th to the 14th Centuries* (Budapest 1994).

In addition to books of his own, Gyula Kristó was the co-author of several works of significance as well. When the research tendency to overemphasise the importance of geographical names in early Hungarian history became dominant, he organised a small research team with the aim of collecting those geographical names which have derived from the names of ancient tribes and clans as well as from persons and, by doing so, was able to prove the real value of these and similar sources.

In the early 1970s he also established a 50-member research team for the investigation of ancient Hungarian history with the aim of carrying out an interdisciplinary investigation into the most ancient period of Hungarian history. Gyula Kristó was the main organiser and a representative of historical sciences on the team. (See the *Introduction to the Sources of Research into Ancient Hungarian History*. 4 vols. Budapest 1976–1982.)

Gyula Kristó played a significant role in the area of source publishing as well. It was he who had the critical edition of the *Thuróczy Chronicle* published, a work which was complemented by two enormous volumes of commentaries (written by Gyula Kristó and several co-authors) in Latin. He was also the editor, author or translator of numerous source publications, including the readers on the history of Békés County, the publications dedicated to the memory of kings Béla III, Ladislav IV (the Cuman) and the Angevin Charles Robert. He also published, in

Hungarian, all the available sources on the topics of the Magyar Conquest and that of the foundation of the Hungarian state. His greatest venture was, most probably, the organisation of that academic community which undertook the task of editing and publishing all the documents of the Angevin period (1301–1382) in a series entitled *Documenta res Hungaricas tempore regum Andegavensium illustrantia*. Since 1990, eighteen volumes have been edited and published of which Gyula Kristó edited seven.

Gyula Kristó was the founder of the doctoral school in Medieval Studies in Szeged. First, as a young teacher, he supported and assisted his students in writing their theses. When the interest of history students was turning toward Medieval Studies, he organized a specialized program for them for the study of the Middle Ages, out of which eventually a postgraduate program (a doctoral school in Medieval Studies) grew when the system of academic degrees was reorganized in Hungary. This school was the first of its kind in the country. He also involved his graduate students in research related to the collection and investigation of Angevin documents and, in order to provide them with more research opportunities, he founded a specialized academic research team.

Not long ago the Szeged Workshop of Medieval Studies, also founded by Gyula Kristó, celebrated the 20th anniversary of its foundation. This organization links those historians who live in or nearby Szeged, who graduated from the University of Szeged, or who simply have developed an interest in Medieval Studies. Their publication is the *Szeged Library of Medieval History* and the aim of the workshop is to provide local researchers with opportunities to publish. In addition, Gyula Kristó worked tirelessly in the field of educational organization in general, and in teaching history and training teachers of history in particular. In 1975, he organized a section within the university's Department of History, which specialized in teaching historical auxiliary sciences, and it ultimately became an independent and autonomous department in 1984. For one and a half decades Gyula Kristó was the head of the Department of Medieval and Early Modern Hungarian History and, for a considerable period of time, he was the head of the Institute of History of the University. In addition to the several awards and prizes he received (Order of Labor in 1985), he was awarded the Albert Szent-Györgyi Prize for his educational activity. As an outstanding researcher, in 1998, he was elected a correspondent fellow of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and in the same year in acknowledgement of his creative and organizational work, Kristó was invested as an Honorary Citizen of Szeged.

It is almost impossible to compile a precise list of the roles Kristó played in public life; herewith we restrict ourselves to mentioning the positions he held at the university. From 1977–1979 he was the pro-dean of the Faculty of Arts at the Attila József University, Szeged); from 1979–1982 the pro-rector, then from 1982–1985 the rector of the University. From 1987–1990 Gyula Kristó worked as the dean of the University's Faculty of Arts.

Gyula Kristó was extraordinarily enriched and fulfilled by his wonderful family life. His wife was always an equal partner who ensured a stable back-

ground. As husband and wife, they brought up three children in harmony and happiness.

Finally, let us quote a list of some of Gyula Kristó's most significant works; those which were published in foreign languages:

- Johannes de Thurocz: *Chronica Hungarorum. Textus*. Budapest 1985. (co-author: Erzsébet Galántai); II/1. *Commentarii* (Ab initiis usque ad annum 1301.) Budapest 1988. (co-author: Elemér Mályusz); II/2. *Commentarii* (Ab anno 1301-usque ad annum 1487). Budapest 1988. (co-author: Elemér Mályusz)
- Die Arpadendynastie. Die Geschichte Ungarns von 895 bis 1301*. Budapest 1993.
- Hungarian History in the Ninth Century*. Szeged 1996.
- Die ersten Könige Ungarns. Die Herrscher der Arpadendynastie*. Herne 1999. (co-author: Ferenc Makk)
- Die Geburt der Ungarischen Nation. Studien zur Geschichte Ungarns 4*. Herne 2000.
- Early Transylvania (895–1324)*. Budapest 2003. (Romanian edition: *Ardealul timpuriu [895–1324]*. Szeged 2004).
- Histoire de la Hongrie Médiévale. I. Le Temps des Arpads*. Rennes 2000.

Professor Kristó's death is a tragic loss for his family, friends, students, academics, historians and fellow teachers, for the whole university, the local community and for all those who knew and respected him. May he rest in peace.

LÁSZLÓ SZEGFŰ