



BOOK REVIEWS

Történetírás és történetírók az Árpád-kori Magyarországon (XI–XIII. század közepe) [The writing and writers of history in Árpád-era Hungary, from the eleventh century to the middle of the thirteenth century]. By László Veszprémy. Budapest: Line Design, 2019. 464 pp.

The centuries following the foundation of the Christian kingdom of Hungary by Saint Stephen did not leave later generations with an unmanageable plethora of written works. However, the diversity of the genres and the philological and historical riddles which lie hidden in these works arguably provide ample compensation for the curious reader. There are numerous textual interrelationships among the *Gesta Hungarorum* by the anonymous notary of King Béla known as Anonymus, the *Gesta Hunnorum et Hungarorum* by Simon of Kéza and the fourteenth-century *Illuminated Chronicle* consisting of various earlier texts, not to mention the hagiographical material on the canonized rulers. For the historian, the relationships among these early historical texts and the times at which they were composed (their relative and absolute chronology) are clearly a matter of interest, since the judgment of these links affects the credibility of the historical information preserved in them. In an attempt to establish the relative chronology, philological analysis is the primary tool, while in our efforts to determine the precise times at which the texts were composed, literary and legal history may offer the most reliable guides. László Veszprémy has very clearly made circumspect use of these methods in his essays, thus it is hardly surprising that many of his colleagues, myself included, have been eagerly waiting for his dissertation, which he defended in 2009 for the title of Doctor of Sciences, to appear in the form of a book in which the articles he has written on the subject since are also included.

Veszprémy aims to shed light on “the most critical questions of medieval Hungarian chronicle research.” However, the focus of his discussion is the *Gesta Hungarorum* by the anonymous notary of King Béla III and the early chapters of the fourteenth-century *Illuminated Chronicle*, which narrates events from the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries. Later developments in the Hungarian chronicle tradition after the middle of the thirteenth century, such as the aforementioned *Gesta* by Simon of Kéza, fall beyond the scope of his analysis, though the author very clearly would have a great deal to say on the subject.

The first section of the volume offers ample testimony to one of the greatest virtues of Veszprémy's method. It provides an overview of the beginnings of and later developments in Hungarian historical literature against the backdrop of medieval European historiography. The rich tradition of history writing in Europe was available only to a limited extent to the first Hungarian readers, as indeed the analysis of the Pannonhalma library catalog demonstrates. However, demand for and interest in historical works date back to the eleventh century, even if the desire to revive the heroic pagan past (or rather, to construct it) was only fulfilled by the work of Anonymus around 1200. One could mention, as evidence of this early interest, the *Pozsonyi Évkönyv* ('Annals of Pozsony') and the annals of the Somogyvár Formulary, the latter of which Veszprémy discusses only briefly. Based on the layout of the pages of the codex of the *Pozsonyi Évkönyv*, Veszprémy came to the possible but not entirely compelling conclusion that the earlier material of the annals was edited and clarified in 1114, which unquestionably would fit into our understanding of the impetus given to writing practices in Hungary and the surge in interest in history under the reign of King Coloman the Learned.

It is common knowledge that the earliest foreign sources on which Hungarian historiography drew were the *Annals of Altaich* and Regino's *Chronicon*. We do not know, however, when the two narrative works came to the attention of Hungarian chroniclers. While news of the *Annals of Altaich* (which show a pro-German bias) may have reached Hungarian historiography already in the eleventh century (at least by 1108), during the long armed confrontation between the Holy Roman emperors and the Hungarian kings, the first Hungarian author to make use of Regino could hardly have been active before Cosmas of Prague (†1125), who was the first historian in the Central European region to have access to the *Chronicon*.

These questions lead us to one of the most important assertions made in the book. The Hungarian chronicles contain a great deal of unquestionably authentic information concerning the eleventh century, though critical analyses of style have suggested time and time again that the narrative was composed or written down in the twelfth century, particularly in the case of the *Gesta regis Ladislai*, which offers an almost epic account of the struggles for the throne between King Solomon and his cousins, the dukes Géza and Ladislaus (the future Saint Ladislaus I). This is also the section which bears the most affinities with the court romances of Western Europe. Veszprémy seeks to resolve this riddle with the suggestion that in the eleventh century only *historical notes* were

taken, the trace of which may have been preserved in the entries of the *Annals of Pozsony*. As the brief annalistic entries could hardly have grown into the vibrant narratives found in the chronicles, Veszprémy argues that these *historical notes* may have been more ambitious writings which covered longer periods of history, while they did not aspire to offer a unified account of Hungarian history. This hypothesis unquestionably offers an explanation for one of the fundamental questions of early Hungarian history writing, though it is perhaps made slightly less persuasive by the fact that Veszprémy, who has a thorough knowledge of the larger European context, makes no mention of any generic parallels which might explain why the individual historical notes were even created or what the intentions of the authors may have been.

After his discussion of the admittedly complex beginnings of Hungarian historical literature, Veszprémy turns his attention to the text of the fourteenth-century *Illuminated Chronicle*, which preserved many earlier works, including the abovementioned *Gesta Ladislai regis* and the *Gesta* by Simon of Kéza. The next few chapters examine the problems concerning the sections of the text which deal with the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Central to his discussion is the issue of authenticity, or in other words, the exact time at which the parts in question were composed. Veszprémy offers an informative analysis of the influence of Gregorian Reform on Hungarian literature. Saint Ladislaus embodies the vision of the ideal ruler at the time, who becomes king thanks to his Christian *idoneitas*, though quite against his will. Of particular interest are the chapters of the chronicle which, as we can conclude on the basis of a comparison with the *Gesta* of Anonymus, had undoubtedly been written before the anonymous notary was active (ca. 1200), i.e., the chapters concerning the Battle of Mogyoród and the Battle of Kerlés. Instead of using the vague expression *ancient gesta* (“ősgeszta”), which one often stumbles across in the modern historiography, Veszprémy consistently writes about a *pre-1200 chronicle redaction*. This conscientiousness about terminological precision constitutes an example worth following.

The next section focuses on Anonymus' *Gesta Hungarorum*, the study of which has certainly been one of the motivating forces for the rise of medieval studies in Hungary over the course of the past 250 years. Veszprémy's interest was captured by the rhetorical models of the work, which was composed in the decades following the death of King Béla III, and other elements which offer indications as to when it was written. Earlier, Veszprémy identified several citations which are from a Latin novel about the fall of Troy entitled *Excidium Troiae*. The work was not extremely popular, but it was definitely used in schools.

Now, Veszprémy has managed to determine that the version used by the anonymous notary resembled the text preserved in the Brussels manuscript of Guido Pisanus. This constitutes one more clue in the relatively long list on the basis of which Veszprémy concludes that Anonymus probably studied in Italy (though he does not rule out the possibility that he stayed in France, a notion which is often found in the secondary literature). Elements which indicate the period of the writing include the mention of the Black Sea, formerly known in the West only as Pontus, which appears in Anonymus as Nigrum Mare. As the expression was first used in western sources only in 1265, the occurrence of the term here used to be considered as one of the few reasons for a later dating of the relevant chapter of the *Gesta* (to the late thirteenth century). Veszprémy and Orsolya Csákváry, his coauthor, now point out that this name already appears in the Scandinavian saga literature in the first quarter of the thirteenth century, though the term may well have made its way to Hungary considerably earlier, during the golden era of ties between Scandinavia and Byzantium in the eleventh century. Veszprémy arrives, after a similarly exciting investigation, at the conclusion that the fate of the only surviving codex of the *Gesta Hungarorum* may be intertwined with the fate of the Turkish-language manuscript *Tarih-i Ungurus*, or History of the Hungarians, which has a considerable textual link to the Hungarian chronicle tradition.

The third major section of the book contains case studies which concern reports on Hungary found not in Hungarian sources but rather in sources from abroad, such as Adémar de Chabannes and the Bavarian traditions of Scheyern. Among these studies, only the one on the European sources of the Hungarian Hun tradition which is very clearly tied to the subject indicated in the title of the book. Veszprémy very clearly feels that the association of the Hungarians with the Huns and with Attila predates Anonymus. This association, however, could hardly have stretched back to the period before the Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian Basin and rather should be attributed to intellectuals familiar with the German Attila tradition, who traveled in great numbers to the Kingdom of Hungary in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

László Veszprémy's book thus offers an engaging intellectual adventure, and as far as the content is concerned, the reader will not be disappointed. The organization and editing of the book, however, at times leaves something to be desired. I myself was somewhat annoyed that Veszprémy discusses some of the more significant problems (such as the relationship between Anonymus' *Gesta* and the earliest textual layers of the *Illuminated Chronicle*) in isolation, following

the structure of the studies that had been published earlier as articles. The book is not always sufficiently didactic, a problem which is also related to the manner in which the boundaries between the various studies have not been adequately transcended. This will make the book more difficult to use as a handbook on early Hungarian historiography. True, that was not Veszprémy's goal, but given the source material in the book and the new findings which are presented, the specialist readership will undoubtedly hope to use this beautifully published book in this capacity.

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