

1000-1100 years ago...

Hungary in the Carpathian Basin

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Edited by Lajos Gubcsi PhD



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*The jacket illustration shows Sándor Györfi's bronze equestrian statue of Attila,
King of the Huns – Etele
page 3: Sword of Attila – Hungarian metalwork, 11th century,
Museum of Fine Arts, Vienna
page 4: The Seven Tribal Chiefs, Viennese Illuminated Chronicle*

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There are few European states which have been in existence and constantly maintained their statehood for 1100 years.

Arriving in the lands around the Tisza and the Danube in 895–896, the Magyars occupied the whole of the Carpathian Basin within a few years and unified the smaller peoples who lived there. In 907, at the Battle of Pressburg, they demonstrated to the whole of Europe their determination and ability to defend their new homeland. After nearly a century of military expeditions across Europe, the new country finalised its borders and established its authority. Its rulers, and particularly the first king, St Stephen, made Hungary into a respected force in Europe, the continent for which it was to serve as a defensive shield over the next thousand years. The House of Árpád, named after the prince who led the Hungarian Conquest, became Europe's greatest dynasty, with no less than five saints of royal blood: Stephen, Emeric, Ladislas, Elizabeth and Margaret.

– *The editor*



Statue of St Stephen (detail), Sándor Györfi

The Hungarian nation is the aristocrat of heroism, greatness of soul and dignity. When will repay our debt to this blessed nation that saved the West? French historians should at last show their gratitude towards Hungary, hero among nations. This nation elevates and ennobles us by its heroic example. Hungarian heroism is a manifestation of high morals.

JULES MICHELET (1798–1874)



Dealised portrayal of Magyar chieftain Szabolcs,
Nádasdy Mausoleum

(reprint)



rpád, Father of all the Hungarians.
The Hungarian Conquest in 896

Arab sources tell us that the Magyars followed a tradition of dual rulers before the Hungarian Conquest. It was similar to the sacred double kingship of the Khazars; the Magyar kende and gyula were in a similar relationship as the Khazar kagan and kagan bek.

Árpád was the son of Prince Álmos, a man of middle age at the time of the Conquest in 895, with a son, Liüntika (known now in Hungarian as Levente), who led an army of his own. While Álmos was still alive, Árpád became the grand chieftain, the leader of the Tribal Alliance. We know this from the writing of Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus, who heard it directly from Prince Bulcsú, the leader of a Hungarian embassy to Byzantium in 948. One of Árpád's great-grandsons, Tormás, was a member of that party. Bulcsú stated that Árpád had been elected chieftain 55 years before, which means a date around 893.

The Hungarian medieval chronicle portrayed Árpád's conquest as the recovery of a people's ancient patrimony. The chroniclers regarded Árpád as the heir of Attila, with a rightful claim to the former land of Pannonia, the land whence God had guided him after leaving the domains of the oriental Scythians. The original chronicle, written in the late 11th and early 12th centuries, has been lost, but some of its passages survive in later chronicles. It related the great event thus: *In the 888th year of our Lord, the Magyars, or Huns, called Ungarus in Latin, made their return to Pannonia. They passed through the lands of the Pechenegs and White Cumans, the cities of Suzdalon and Kiev, and upon crossing the Havas Mountains arrived in a province where they saw many eagles, and could not remain there, for the eagles fell upon them from the trees like flies and devoured their beasts and horses until they died.* Since the end of the 19th century, Hungarian historians have considered, no doubt rightly, that what the chronicle wrote as "eagles" (Latin *bessi*, and in old Hungarian *bese*) were in fact the Pechenegs, and the anonymous chronicler worked into his text a tale of a Pecheneg attack.

The Byzantine Emperor who wrote down the events of the Hungarian conquest around 950, Constantine Porphyrogenitus, saw the events somewhat differently: *And when the Turks [Hungarians] went to war, the Pechenegs under Simeon went before the Turks and slaughtered their families and wickedly expelled the Turks left to look after the land. When the Turks returned and found their lands bare and laid waste, they settled in the land where they live now.*

The Magyars are a Turkish race and their chieftain leads twenty thousand horsemen into battle... The land of the Magyars is rich in trees and water. They have much cultivated land... The Magyars are handsome and of fine aspect, well-built, and display great wealth, which they have gained through trade. They wear clothes of silk brocade. Their weapons are mounted with silver and gold and inlaid with pearls.

IBN RUSTA, Arab lexicographer and geographer wrote around 930

Later historians generally regarded the much more contemporary Byzantine account as the more credible, and drew the conclusion that the Pecheneg and Bulgarian forces completely destroyed the women, old people, children and military rearguard whom the main army had left at home. This meant that when Árpád crossed the Verecke Pass and occupied his new land, the only section of the people he had with him comprised men of military age. One exiled Hungarian historian considered the Conquest to be nothing less than a “forward retreat”. The idea was even taken up by the poet Gyula Illyés in his poem *Árpád: Hardly a woman. Hardly a chattering mouth./ Revenge knew know mercy. / No elders. All was lost / what held us together: judge, seer, priest, altar. / A gaggle of widowers and an army /of orphaned striplings, are these the Hungarians?*

In 893, Niketas Skleros, envoy of the Byzantine Emperor, held talks with Árpád and Kurszán on the Lower Danube concerning a military alliance against the Bulgars. The bargaining with the Byzantines was protracted, and in the meantime, the Hungarian tribes made increasingly frequent explorations from their base in Etelköz to the Carpathian Basin. These were mostly organised by Árpád himself, or his “co-ruler” Kurszán. Their eagerness to reconnoitre this wealthy land stemmed from the wishes of the Magyar tribal leaders to move westward. In 894, Árpád came to an agreement with the prince of the Moravians, Svatopluk, that Magyar and Moravian armies would together expel the Eastern Franks from Pannonia. The story of this alliance is preserved in a famous Hungarian legend, the story of the “White Horse”. After Svatopluk died, Magyar tribal armies began to raid the upper Tisza country, and in 895, Árpád’s army crossed the Verecke Pass, descended into what is now the Hungarian Great Plain, and seized the territory for the Magyars.



Turul-Monument, Tatabánya, Kis-hegy

ὡς περὶ τὸν ἴθρον· τοῦτοισ' ἀποκαλεῖται καὶ μικρὸν κατακράτος· μὲν
τὸ σὲν ῥοδὸς ὅλῳ ὃ καὶ δριγρὰ καλεῖται.

τόνκοι



ἢ ἡ κησὺ τὸ σὲν ῥοδὸς τοῦτοισ' ἀποκαλεῖται καὶ μικρὸν κατακράτος· μὲν

The conquest in 895–896

By 894, the Byzantine–Magyar collaboration had come to fruition, and Árpád attacked the Tsar Simeon of the Bulgars. The Hungarian forces were led by the co-ruler, Prince Kurszán. The Bulgarian Tsarate lost a series of battles to the Hungarian armies and abandoned the area of the Lower Danube. This gave Árpád's people control of what was to become southern Hungary. While the battles were in progress along the Lower Danube, however, the Bulgars forged an alliance with the Pechenegs, who attacked the Magyars at home in Etelköz. Lacking an army, the Magyars there were unable to take up the struggle and fled across the passes of the Carpathian Mountains into Transylvania, where they settled. The Magyars had taken the lands of the Carpathian Basin as far as the River Tisza, and Árpád's army fought a series of battles to consolidate its positions in their new homeland.

In March 899, Arnulf, King of the East Francia, sent an embassy to the court of Prince Árpád and asked the Magyar chieftain to help him defeat the armies of the king of Italy, whereupon all of Pannonia, now Transdanubia, would be given over to the Magyars. Árpád's armies defeated King Berengar's Italian forces, and on their return from Lombardy, the Magyar troops took possession of the areas west of the Danube. The Moravians, however, also had their eyes on these lands, and attacked the Magyars as they sought out places to settle. Árpád's army defeated the Moravians, and in punishment seized the Moravians' conquests in Nyitra (now Nitra, Slovakia), so that by autumn 900, all of the Carpathian Basin was under Magyar control, and the Hungarian conquest had come to completion under Árpád.

Contemporary reports imply that the territory inhabited by Árpád's tribes before 900 was in the Upper Tisza area in eastern Hungary. Western sources are silent about Árpád, mentioning only Kurszán. The Byzantines, who were in contact with Árpád and his successors, describe Hungary as if it consisted of no more than the Tiszántúl area (between the Tisza and the Danube), although they note that there were Franks to the west of them. It is probable that Árpád's successors spoke in particular detail to the Byzantines about the area under their own control, Tiszántúl.

They retained a semi-nomadic lifestyle, changing pastures between winter and summer, so that Árpád and his sons would migrate between winter and summer dwelling-places along a river, finding water for their livestock. From place names, it



is possible to conclude that Árpád's winter quarters – clearly after his occupation of Pannonia in 900 – were in Árpádváros (“Árpád's town”), now a district of Pécs, and formerly Árpádfalu (Árpád's village). His summer quarters – as confirmed by Anonymus – were on Csepel Island. In between, he led a nomadic life along the right bank of the Danube. Another summer-quarters place name survives beside Sárvíz, on the bank of the River Jutas: Árpád Valley, near Székesfehérvár between Sárkeresztes and Moha.



Sacrifice, Feszty Panorama, Ópusztaszer National Historical Memorial Park

His four surviving sons migrated along the banks of the Danube, the Sárvíz and the Kapos-Szék rivers, their winter quarters relatively closely spaced along the two sides of the Danube. Üllő's summer quarters were by Üllő, Tarhos' near Tarrós, Jutas' in Jutaspuszta, now part of Veszprém, Zolta's in Bodrog, now in the Voivodina region of Serbia, and at Solt near Kalocsa. Like Árpád, Kurszán also wandered the right bank of the Danube, maintaining his winter quarters in Aquincum and his summer quarters in Csallóköz until his assassination by the Bavarians in 904. Árpád then extended his stretch of the riverbank to include Kurszán's, and his new summer quarters were also in Csallóköz, at a place which preserves his name.



Shaman, Feszty Panorama, Ópusztaszer National Historical Memorial Park

Árpád's title in the Tribal Alliance was gyula, but after the kende, Kurszán, was assassinated by the Germans beside the River Fischa in 904, he assumed that rank.

History has not preserved the name of Árpád's wife. The names of five of his sons have survived: Liüntika/Levente, Tārhačsi/Tarhos, Jelek/Üllő, Jutocsa/Jutas and Zolta. All five were recorded by Constantine Porphyrogenitus, but in two different places. In one passage about the Hungarian Conquest and the expeditions, he mentions Liüntika, who was clearly the eldest, and must have been a grown man at that time. In another place, where he lists Árpád's sons and present descendants, he does not mention Liüntika, only the other four, and one each of their sons. Clearly these were the children important for the succession. It seems that no male offspring of Liüntika remained in the time of Constantine, and Liüntika himself may have fallen in the battles along the Lower Danube.

According to Anonymus, Árpád fought his last great battle in July 907, when the Bavarian and Eastern Frankish forces tried to shake off their obligation of tribute. The Hungarians halted the united armies in the Battle of Pressburg, putting beyond doubt the Hungarianness of the Carpathian Basin. It is probable that he had sons who fell in this battle. It is also possible, however, that it was news of the death of the grand prince – Árpád would have been around sixty, a very old age by the standards of the time – which prompted the attack by the Eastern Franks. There is no reliable contemporary record of his death, but 300 years later Anonymus links it to the Battle of Pressburg.

*The Magyars can withstand work, fatigue, searing heat, frost, cold and any deprivation.
They are lovers of freedom and pomp.*

LEO THE WISE Byzantine Emperor (866–911)

At the time of the Hungarian Millennium a hundred years ago, the public were naturally more attracted to the glorious version of the Conquest, the image captured on Mihály Munkácsy's great canvas *The Hungarian Conquest* and the famous Feszty Cyclorama. Historians were not quite so unanimous. In the elaborately-bound ten-volume *A magyar nemzet története* (History of the Hungarian Nation), Henrik

Marczali did not suppress the defeat at the hands of the Pechenegs, but nonetheless appraised the Hungarian's seizure of their new homeland as a glorious campaign. Several, however, gave complete credit to the Byzantine Emperor's version. Gyula Pauler soberly weighed up the balance: "*Hungarian losses in the Etelköz defeat could not have been very high [...] a view borne out by the consequence: Hungarians remained Hungarians. If the incoming Hungarians really had been no more than a troop of warriors with no family ties as Ferenc Salamon has it, [...] with Slavic women and Slavic mothers – what more numerous nation was there? – then the second generation would have become Slavified.* It would have been hard even then to argue against Pauler's logic, and now we can bear him out with new arguments.



Cavalry Charge, Feszty Panorama, Ópusztaszer National Historical Memorial Park

The decisive evidence has come above all from archaeology and anthropology. If Árpád's soldiers really had come into their new homeland without female company, and taken wives among the peoples they found there, archaeologists should find striking differences between the accessories of male and female graves and in funeral customs from that time, and there should also be a striking biological difference between the sexes. In fact, only one or two such examples have been found, as in a grave in Przemyśl in Poland, where in one female grave the head of the dead person was laid to the east, and beside her were the hoops of a wooden pail. Both the eastern orientation and the placing of the wooden pail were foreign to the customs of the conquering Hungarians. Nonetheless, it was without doubt a Hungarian grave the Polish archaeologists came across, the burial place of a garrison stationed beyond the Carpathians. Being a predominantly military community, some of its members may reasonably be supposed to have found wives among the local Slavic population. By contrast, the graves of men and women in the areas occupied by the Hungarians usually reflect uniform funeral customs, both men and women being buried with similar accessories.

The two most important events immediately preceding the Conquest may both be dated to 894. That was when Moravian Prince Svatopluk forged an alliance with the Hungarians against the Franks, who had possession of Transdanubia. The Hungarians' part in this was to invade Pannonia. The record of this campaign in the annals of Fulda Abbey runs, *At this time the Avars, who were called Magyars, effected many terrible things as they roamed beyond the Danube. Murdering the men and the old women, they used the young women to satisfy their lust, bearing them off like animals, and exterminated the people of all Pannonia down to the last man.* The Hungarians also took up arms along the Lower Danube the same year. War had broken out between the Bulgarians and the Byzantines over a trading matter, and after their first military successes, the Bulgarians turned towards Constantinople. Emperor Leo the Wise then approached the chieftains of the Hungarians, Árpád and Kurszán, who lived in Etelköz – i.e. behind the back of the Bulgars. The Hungarian intervention was a complete success: the Bulgar Tsar Simeon only just escaped to the castle of Distra.

There is every sign that these two victorious campaigns may be seen as preparing the way for the Hungarian Conquest. Since the fall of the Avar Empire around 800, no single force had controlled the entire Carpathian Basin, and three neighbouring states had formed in its territory: Transdanubia became part of the Frankish Empire, the western part of what is now Slovakia up to the River Garam was ruled by the Moravians,

and South Transylvania, the south of the Great Plain and Syrmia were under Bulgarian control. In 894, the Hungarians formed an alliance with one of these three controlling powers, the Moravians, and scored military victories against the other two. There was therefore more to these two campaigns than the adventurous campaigns that had been repeating themselves ever since 862 and targeted at the west of the Carpathian Basin. Particularly notable was the bloody campaign in Transdanubia, whose horrors were painted in vivid colours in the Fulda Annals. The “pacification” of an area spied out for occupation – burning the fields, destroying and driving out the population, i.e. eliminating every possible source of resistance – was a standard procedure in nomad warfare.

But what could have prompted the Hungarians to prepare to leave Etelköz? György Györffy argues very convincingly that the causes are to be sought in the east. The Pechenegs, who lived east of the Volga, between the Volga and the Ural rivers, suffered a defeat from another steppe nomadic people, the Uzians (also known as the Torks), in 893, and were forced out of their habitation. Fleeing to the west, they probably crossed the Volga around 893–894, and appeared at the eastern boundary of the dwelling place of the Hungarians. The newcomers' fearsome military strength was not unfamiliar to the people of this land. In the 9th century, in alliance with the Khazars, they had fought with the Magyars and, on one occasion, dealt them a serious defeat. That was when one section of the Hungarian people broke off and moved to the country south of the Caucasus (the Savard Magyars). The Magyar chieftains must have realised that the broad Etelköz plain, divided by rivers, could not be defended against a powerful nomad attack, because the mounted warriors of the steppe could cross rivers easily – on animal bladders in the summer, and on the thick ice in winter.

A new homeland had to be found, easier to defend from the eastern threat, but with geographical conditions suited to the semi-nomadic life. The Carpathian Basin, with its broad expanses of the Great Plain protected all round by high mountains, met these requirements perfectly. In addition, the Magyars had become familiar with the area since 862, and set up outposts on the passes of the North East Carpathians. They assessed their strength as sufficient to deal with the situation there and take possession of the almost uninhabited Great Plain. The Hungarian Conquest was thus preceded by thorough political and military preparations and was a well-planned military operation.

page: 24–25: Hungarian Conquest, the arriving peoples. In the left corner of the picture, Kúsid greets Svatopluk and on behalf of his people presents him the finest of Árpád's horses.
Viennese Illuminated Chronicle





It was almost certainly in spring 895 that the main Magyar army under Árpád's leadership crossed the Verecke Pass and descended to the Great Plain. (Nomads nearly always started their major campaigns in spring, when their horses could build up their strength from the lush pasture.) Despite their victory over the Bulgars, they did not choose the shortest path along the Lower Danube, because it would have been extremely difficult to defend the baggage train, carts and matériel, from ambush. They also definitely planned that the people would follow the army's route after the first military successes.

The intention of the Magyar chieftains could not have remained a secret. The Bulgars, having in the meantime made peace with the Byzantines, came to the sober assessment that Magyar success would mean the irrevocable loss of their interests in southern Transylvania and the south of the Great Plain, including the strategically-important salt mines along the River Maros. They therefore formed an alliance with the Pechenegs, who were at the Magyars' backs, and launched an attack from two sides on Etelköz, where only the civilian population and a small rearguard were present. An attack of such ferocity no doubt caused the complete disintegration of the rearguard, and forced the people to flee, leaving behind their herds and all their possessions. In their flight, they could not of course follow the long route taken by the van, but hurried directly through the Transylvanian passes and defiles. It is no doubt this historic episode that the later Hungarian chronicle preserved in its account of the womenfolk's passage into Transylvania.

Although the Pecheneg-Bulgarian attack inflicted serious losses, it did not achieve its primary goal of forcing the army back, and neither did it prevent the Magyar people from taking control of the new lands. The careful plans may have been thrown out of line by this unexpected and distressing defeat, but the first phase of the Conquest was nonetheless decisive: the Magyars took possession of the Great Plain and Transylvania in spring and summer of 895. For the following five years, the sources are silent on what happened to the Hungarians. This was the time required to build up their strength anew, and replenish their livestock (especially horses, essential for any military operations). Hungarian armies set off again in 900, this time to Italy, in alliance with the Franks. After this victorious campaign, they invaded Transdanubia and the west of the northern highlands, taking the entire Carpathian Basin into Hungarian possession.

Archaeological sources have by now made it clear that the Magyars brought with them large numbers of farmers, and the rate of settlement of nomads in their new homeland considerably accelerated, because the land was not suited to the classic itinerant pastoral lifestyle which had evolved in the east. A whole system of Hungarian villages grew up in the 10th century, and archaeologists have discovered the graves for the common people of these villages. This explains why the inhabitants of these villages continued to use their pagan graveyards right up to the late 11th or even mid-12th



Árpád's wife, Feszty Panorama, Ópusztaszer National Historical Memorial Park

centuries, i.e. long after being converted to Christianity, although by then they mostly followed Christian funeral customs. Such graves from the early Árpád Era have been found all over the territory of what became the Kingdom of Hungary.

The idea that the Conquerors were made up exclusively of nomadic herders and warriors sometimes re-emerges even today, but every item of evidence argues against it. The vast majority of the Magyars who came to their new homeland were not mounted adventurers or dreamy animal herders, but horny-handed animal breeders,



Carrying off the women, Feszty Panorama, Ópusztaszer National Historical Memorial Park

ploughmen and craftsmen. They were not high-handed lords living on the backs of a subjugated people, but sweated for their own bread. They were not of a higher order than their new neighbours, but neither were they more humble. There are a thousand relics of their craftsmanship, attesting to a culture which was no more “primitive” than those around them. It was different, having taken shape far off, in the east, like the people themselves, and over the next hundred years they shed this diverse otherness and adapted to their new European environment. In so doing, they lay the foundations for their development – and their survival.



*Latorc, Feszty Panorama, Ópusztaszer National Historical Memorial Park
pages 30–31: The Hungarians' First March into Pannonia, Viennese Illuminated Chronicle*





*Idealised portrayal of Magyar chieftain Lehel,
Nádasdy Mausoleum (reprint)*



he Battle at Pressburg in 907

The Military and Political Background to the Battle

When deciding on the primary aspects of warfare – organisation, defensive capabilities, standing forces and combat readiness – it is vital to assess current threats and prepare to address them.

After the Hungarians had taken possession – or at least military control – of the entire Lesser Hungarian Plain east of the Fischa, Leitha and Morava rivers in 907, they set the background to the Battle of Pressburg and attained the conditions they needed to fight it. The first stage in realising these conditions was the taking of Pannonia by the chieftain Kurszán – leader of the Hungarians together with Árpád – in 900, which pushed the eastern boundary of the western marches out into the Austrian Marches.

The conditions subsequently came fully into place between 902 and 906, when the Hungarians consolidated their positions on the flanks. To the west, on the northern flank, the forces of the Tribal Alliance finally overcame the Frank-aligned Moravians in 906, detaching Moravia from the Empire. There were in fact two major events in the region. One was the extinction of the Principality of Moravia, and the other the final defeat of the Bavarians in Moravia. It is highly likely that some Moravians entered into an alliance with the Hungarians. It was the situation itself, however, that created the tension. The Tribal Alliance (about to become the Hungarian Principality) had to keep its forces on constant alert to defend the lands it had conquered. The permanent threat is conveyed by an entry in the *Annales Alamannici* for 904, telling of how the Bavarians led the Hungarian chieftain Kurszán into a trap, and murdered him and his retinue.

After 899–900, the conquering Hungarians extended their control to the west, on the southern flank, towards Italy. The *Annales Alamannici* record that the Hungarians attacked Italy again in 901. The *Annals of Fulda* noted for the same year that the Hungarians launched a raid into Carinthia. In 904, they allied with King Berengar of Lombardy (against Emperor Louis of Provence) and parted company in peace in 905. In 906, the Hungarians took final possession of the land between the rivers Dráva (Drava) and Száva (Sava), securing unchallenged access to the Po Plain.



*Hunor and Magor, the legendary forefathers of the Huns and the Hungarians,
Viennese Illuminated Chronicle*

After conquering Pannonia in 900, most of the fighting shifted to the flanks. In the Franko-Moravian War, the true actual victors were the Hungarians, allowing them to relocate the defensive marches to the eastern part of the Austrian Marches (now Lower Austria) and thus support military operations in the Danube Valley. In the south, they gained control over the north Italian campaigning grounds, together with the Mura valley connecting to Carinthia. The persistent tension on the western front may be appreciated through accounts in the annals of the Bavarian-Hungarian clash of 903. So all sides were in a state of permanent confrontation between 901 and 906. The Eastern Frankish Empire was forced to recognise it was facing a new, unified power in the Carpathian Basin, one that had taken possession of its most eastern province, Pannonia, and had defeated the Franks in Moravia.

In the south, the Tribal Alliance reinforced its positions at the southern extremes of the Great Plain (the Bánát and Bácska), and taken Syrmia. All of the efforts by Bulgarian Tsar Simeon (893–927) to halt the Tribal Alliance's southern advance ended in failure. He had to swallow loss of the Balkan passage and its surrounding lands to the Hungarians.

In the east, around the turn of the century, the Pechenegs moved into the Etelköz settlements abandoned by the Tribal Alliance and started to advance towards the foothills of the Eastern Carpathians. Their Jazi-Kapan tribe found habitation in the area around the lower reaches of the Danube, and the Kabuskin-Jula tribe around the Szeret (Siret) and Prut rivers, directly adjacent to the Carpathian Basin. Behind them, the Javdi-Erdim tribe settled along the Dniester and the Bug. There was a persistent threat of raids or a joint Bulgarian-Pecheneg attack from the south or south-east.

Through all of these developments, the Tribal Alliance consolidated its position in the north and south and secured its flanks by 907. The threats came from two directions – the east-south-east and the west. Learning from the experience of previous years (Bulgarian attacks, the Bulgarian-Pecheneg raid, the murder of its chieftain Kurszán in 904), it maintained a large and high combat-value force even in peacetime, presenting a deterrent on both of these fronts, close enough to ensure a rapid response in case of enemy aggression.

By the early 900s, then, the conditions were in place for the establishment of a unified, centralised power in the Carpathian Basin. Stopping this became the

The Hungarians ravage Bulgaria, Viennese Illuminated Chronicle ➔



main thrust of Eastern Frankish Empire policy, and it was to put that policy into action that the Bavarians launched a campaign against the Hungarian Tribal Alliance in June 907.

They are hardened to labour and fighting, and have immeasurable physical strength... they kill few with the sword, but many thousand by their arrows, which they shoot so skilfully from their horn bows that there is no defence from their volleys... In character they are haughty and rebellious... They are by nature tight-lipped, and are keener to action than words.

Abbot **REGINO OF LOTHARINGIA** wrote of the Hungarians in his *World Chronicle* (908)

After King Louis the Child called the Bavarian nobles to arms, the forces gathered in the Enns-Markt St. Florian Raffelstetten, behind the River Enns, in May-June 907. The assembled army was ordered to attack the Hungarian Tribal Alliance/Hungarian Principality.

The forces were divided into two columns and started their advance along the two sides of the Danube on 17 June 907. The column on the north of the river was led by the general leading the campaign, Count Luitpold, and that on the south by the Archbishop Theotmar of Salzburg. The advance and the military actions were supported by a strong Danube flotilla.

The southern column – taking advantage of the better marching conditions – overtook the northern, and on 24 June reached and crossed the Wienerwald. Then, following the bank of the Danube, it continued at speed towards the eastern area of the Viennese Basin.

At the same time, Hungarian scouts observing the western entrances to the marches got wind of an imminent attack by Bavarian forces marching through the Greifenstein area, and immediately set out to inform the border defence forces and the troops waiting at the encampments. By 27 June, the reconnaissance-communication chain had raised the immediately deployable troops on both sides of the Danube (border

defence forces, main Transdanubian forces, armed retinues of tribal and national dignitaries). In accordance with prearranged agreements, these contingents immediately set off south towards the threat.

Meanwhile, the Bavarian column led by Theotmar had reached the River Fischa, and on 26 June it clashed with the newly-arrived border defence forces. This was the area where the Hungarians mounted their defence in strength. The first echelons of the main forces went into action on 28 June. The Bavarians were forced to deploy the second echelon of their schedule (the second column). Facing attackers in superior numbers, the Hungarians employed the tactic of repeated surprise attacks and withdrawals (holding manoeuvres) and succeeded in slowing down the Bavarian advance, giving time for the rest of the main forces to arrive from the interior.

On 27 June, the northern Bavarian column reached the western entrance to the marches in the Stockerau region, and accelerated their march through Morvamező, so that they could overtake the Hungarian forces and reach the border river, the Morva, in time to effect a crossing.

The Bavarians on the south side of the river made further ground, and by 29 June reached the Hainburg area, where they took control of a section of the riverbank suitable for crossing. That was when action stepped up in scale. Further echelons of the main Hungarian forces arrived from more distant settlements on the first days of July, and took up ambush position at various points.



*Bowl with Turkic runiform script,
Nagyszentmiklós Treasure*

In the meantime, things were turning sour for the Hungarians on the north side. Despite the timely reconnaissance, it had not been possible to raise enough troops to engage Luitpold's column, most forces having been deployed on, or marching towards, the south of the Danube. So when the border defence troops, together with some mounted forces who had remained in depth, engaged the Bavarian units along the border river, they were heavily outnumbered. Luitpold's army crossed the Morva and approached to within about 15 km of Pressburg, its Dévényi Gate entrance. The magnitude of the threat must now have been clear to the decision-maker(s) left on the north of the Danube, and they would have immediately informed the leader of the forces fighting on the other side.

The operational lag had to be made up without delay. There was no option but to force a victory over Theotmar's forces and hurry to the assistance of the battlers on the other side. The Hungarian detachments engaging with the Bavarians, who had already been fighting continuously for seven days, drew the attackers on, luring them into an area where they could be encircled by the troops lying in ambush. The decisive clash between the two sides took place on 4 July. The Hungarians fell on the Bavarians from all sides, causing enormous losses, and destroyed their battle lines.

Those units which had retained their combat capabilities crossed the Danube that night, and in the area to the south-southeast of Pressburg, at dawn, using the tactic of surprise, destroyed the army of Luitpold as it lay in camp.

There is another aspect of the battle to be considered – how the Bavarian flotilla was deployed. The analysis of the marching conditions along the route suggested that the southern column, following the Roman limes, would hardly have had need for the flotilla's logistical backup until Tulln. It could have marched completely under its own support. The Bavarians would also, however, had to maintain contact between the columns, and the flotilla could have provided this without having to rely on crossing points.

It is reasonable to assume that the difficult relief of the northern route would have prevented surface carriage of Luitpold's supplies, and his forces may have been supported from the flotilla. The role of the boats in transporting infantry has been pointed out in the discussion of the manoeuvres: the infantry they carried would primarily have been there to support Luitpold's combat objectives (investing and retaining ground). Waterborne infantry transportation would also have contributed to maintaining the composition of the columns.

The military terrain analysis shows that the north-north east area of Hainburg (Dévény west-south west) offered the first good place for mooring the flotilla after Vienna. The calculations for deployment of the northern column show that this point demanded a concentration of forces and disembarkation of infantry, because it was where engagement with the enemy would be expected.

The flotilla also had a key part in securing the river crossing. On reaching the Pressburg area, Luitpold had to cross the River Morva. He would have known that this river marked the border between the two territories, and as an experienced soldier, he would have reckoned with its providing the Hungarians with their first zone of resistance. This is where the flotilla could demonstrate its combat role, because by sailing down the Danube, it could take the infantry past the confluence of the River Morva, secure a bridgehead on the left bank of the Morva, and cover the crossing of the land troops. This model supports the version which places the Hungarians' first zone of resistance along the River Morva, and the fighting up to Pressburg only subsequent to this.

The documented events between 28 June and 5 July 907 suggest a protracted military operation, of which the reliable contemporary sources date the decisive days as 4 and 5 July. The documents also tell us there was a major clash on 28 June, the date entered in the Weissenburg Annals for the death of Bishop Udo. The Freising Book of the Dead records a secular dignitary, Margrave Luitpold, as having died on 5 July. Although the dates in the books of the dead do not necessarily correspond to the battle dates, since death may not have occurred on the day of battle, it can be fairly safely inferred that major clashes, with high-ranking casualties, started on 28 June, and that the battle came to an end in decisive actions on 4 and 5 July. It may also be inferred from the names given in the sources that operations were directed by two commanders, Theotmar and Luitpold. This does not directly imply, however, that one column fought on the south and the other on the north side of the Danube.

The sources, and the high offices held by the participants, suggest that the column involved in the first clash was that led by Theotmar, which had advanced along the Roman limes road along the south of the Danube. The battle probably took place near the riverside, opposite Pressburg. The fact that they took place on consecutive days supports the conclusion that the two clashes occurred at a short distance from each other. This is consistent with the attacker's need to concentrate his forces in

space and time. We can also infer how the defensive forces deployed in the area by the Tribal Alliance would have been grouped, or regrouped, as they faced up to the concentrations of the attacker. Consequently, neither the Bavarian columns nor the principal Hungarian forces could have been spaced out by more than a day's march.

The Pressburg area and the Dévény corridor were of substantial strategic significance, and had to be captured. This would have been very risky following a direct crossing of the Danube, so that there would be good operational grounds for a northern column whose primary task was the capture of the militarily-important Pressburg area. The Bavarian forces on the south side of the Danube were executing an operation to secure the flanks, taking key river crossing points and riverbank sections usable for mooring.



The Wondrous Hind of the Magyars

The Battle of Pressburg and the Hungarian military

Analysis of the Battle of Pressburg tells us much about Hungarian military affairs of the time. Prime among these is movement of the Hungarian war machine: reconnaissance on the *gyepű* principle, alarm and communication, holding manoeuvres by the border defence forces, and the final battle of the main armies, still in the *gyepű* zone.

The course of the battle shows us how the border defences worked. The model has confirmed previous views of the double function of the *gyepű*, i.e. that the Hungarians regarded the zone to the west of the border rivers as their defensive zone. The forces stationed in the zone were entrusted with keeping the area under surveillance, reconnoitring foreign movements and calling out the border defence forces when needed. The depth of the security zone between the Wienerwald and the River Fischa permitted the Hungarians to maintain real-time reconnaissance, and take timely action against any hostile intrusion. East of there started the defensive zone of the *gyepű*, the border guard zone, in which the Hungarian light cavalry, repeatedly employing the tactic of deliberate retreat, slowed down the pace of advance of hostile forces, their constant harassment causing losses among the enemy, tiring it out, wearing down its reserves of morale, breaking down its discipline, and then making the decisive blow at a place of the Hungarians' choosing. The function of the border defence zone was therefore to destroy the enemy. The two zones were separated by the border rivers. The border rivers were the first line of resistance. The River Fischa marked the border – and separated the two *gyepű* zones – on the south of the Danube and the Morva on the north.

The *gyepű* emerges from the study of the battle as having served the integrated functions of reconnaissance, alarm and border defence. In all probability, reconnaissance was part of border defence, and neither the concepts nor the actual activities in their modern sense were distinguished at that time.

The Hungarian forces did not gather in to concentrate a single mass before going into battle. They prepared for deployment in reserve camps distributed so as to be close to their allotted positions, at one or two days' distance from planned site of the decisive encounter. The main forces were placed so that they could bring the enemy into the final confrontation before it penetrated the *gyepű* zone and entered the settled areas. The model of the battle also supports the view that the Hungarians attacked the enemy's marching column and camp, a tactic familiar from the sources.



The model also indirectly suggests the presence of another important military feature. This concerns the Hungarian system of mobilising the army. The dates when the contingents arrived in their forward camps are such that they could not have been mobilised in response to intelligence, even assuming early reconnaissance around Enns. This implies that the force deployed in the Battle of Pressburg was immediately available, i.e. mobilisable even in peacetime! The modelled course of the battle also proves that victory was won by disciplined, battle-experienced troops of high combat value. The events tell of an extremely well-organised military leadership structure with solid central direction.

To meet the threat from two sides – Pechenegs and/or Bulgars from the east, and Eastern Franks from the west – military power had to be regionally separated, and the natural division of the Carpathian Basin made this practically possible. The chieftain's guard, a force which remained combat-ready even in peacetime, was therefore divided between these centres to keep the instruments of war in order and ensure they always served the interests of the united Tribal Alliance. The study of armed conflicts in the years preceding the battle of Pressburg has clearly shown that the Tribal Alliance and its tribes must have had a significant "peace complement", a standing army that could be immediately deployed. The demands of armed defence for the conquered lands made it essential to keep an immediately-deployable standing force in Pannonia.

The rapid deployability of the Hungarian troops is another indication that the Tribal Alliance operated two power centres in the Carpathian Basin at this time: one in the Upper Tisza area, the other in Transdanubia. The resolute and rapid response to the Bavarian attack highlights the fact that there was a local (Transdanubian) western power centre, and this bore responsibility or had delegated decision-making powers over Pannonia. The course and outcome of the Battle of Pressburg proves that behind the victory lay a highly centralised control organisation.

The standing armed force whose duty was to defend Transdanubia had a centralised command structure. Its components included the border defence stationed in the gyeprü zone, the troop contingent under Kurszán's direct command and forming his standing retinue, some of which may have been a detachment from the chieftain's guard. Troops stationed there from the tribes and the allied peoples also came under his command – as the chieftain's representative – in case of enemy attack.

The first canonisations in Hungary: Stephen, Ladislaus, Emeric, Nicholas ←



The Hungarian king and people are powerful, rich in treasure, triumphant in war and capable of standing up to any king of the world.

Bohemian **BISHOP KOZMA** of Prague was in Hungary during the reign of Coloman I (the Book-lover), and wrote in his chronicle in 1110

Aventinus is the only one of the sources which describes the main events in any detail. Aventinus was writing long afterwards, and as with many other of the events he covered, the sources he drew upon cannot be identified. His credibility should thus be checked in each instance. From the model, there clearly emerges a picture of manoeuvres involving combat on the *gyepű* principle before the decisive clashes, and Aventinus bears this out, indeed describes it in detail. To check the credibility of his details, we will do a brief comparative analysis of the text and the military manoeuvres.

But the Hungarians did not remain inactive and oblivious, displaying great preparation in everything that could be to their advantage, placing weapons, soldiers and horses in readiness well in advance, and since they were fighting for their lives rather than for glory, put up robust resistance. In the meantime, they sent some of their soldiers to lure the Bavarian forces into combat. Both royal generals attacked the bishops' columns with the largest numbers of cavalry they could muster. As if trying to break through the line with their spirited horses alone, they attacked with great strength, releasing a huge cloud of arrows. They covered the Bavarians with arrows shot from their horn-bows, and then withdrew. They were faster than our heavily armoured army, and when we thought they were far away, they were still shooting; as fast as they came, they disappeared. When you think you have won, you find you are in the greatest danger. The Hungarians attacked their enemies with arrows from a distance, and had not yet learned open combat, the infantry battle, lines facing up to each other, close combat with swords; siege and blockade of towns, urban siege. They preferred to fight by ruse, alternately withdrawing and harassing their enemies, and all with so much inborn skill and so great speed and military experience that it was difficult to decide when they were more dangerous for us: when they were present, or when they had moved off, or whether they were fleeing or attacking, feigning surrender or fighting. As suddenly as they appeared with a sweeping charge, they would disappear, first feigning retreat, then turn their horses and attack, and whatever they did, shooting arrows, throwing lances, galloping from right, left, front or back, they tired our own men, and then fell on us from every side, assaulted the fatigued Bavarians, got the better of them, cast them down, and killed them.

Detail of the crown brought from Byzantium ←

The war of 907: a textbook example of early Hungarian warfare

The first component of the manoeuvre was the long retreat. It was similar to the tactic employed by the Hungarians before the Battle of Brenta in 899, when they withdrew from the Piave to the Brenta. The Mongols also used it in 1221 at the River Kalka against the united Russian–Cuman army and in 1241 before the Battle of Muhi, when they withdrew from Pest to the Sajó. During the several-day retreat, small, highly mobile formations constantly harried and attacked the marching column, constantly forcing the enemy to maintain his combat readiness. The flying mounted formations also obstructed the enemy's reconnaissance, making it difficult for the leaders, starved of information, to make decisions. The soldiers were gradually worn down, their fighting spirit drained, and they became less attentive. Their stocks dwindled during the march and could only partially be replenished locally, the battle zone having been burned before them, and the wells poisoned. Similar purposes were served by the broad uninhabited strip in front of the *gyepű*, and a system of natural and artificial barriers on which the campaigns of Conrad II in 1030, Henry III in 1042, 1043 and 1051, and Henry IV and Solomon in 1074 came to grief. The

attacker gradually lost the initiative during the long retreat, having no information on the forces he was facing, and could not plan the decisive strike.

The retreat involved a sacrifice on the part of the defenders, who were obliged to let the attacker into their own lands and to destroy part of these lands. The attacking army had to be allowed to penetrate deeper and deeper, depending on its size, until the moment came to attack or the aggressors gave up their intentions and turned back.

Leo the Wise also wrote of this technique of the Hungarians' custom: "if some enemy they are pursuing flees to a fortified place, they can accurately divine what both their horses and men are lacking, and do everything they can that to tighten these and put their enemies at their mercy or present them with an agreement to their liking by first setting mild conditions, and if the enemy accepts, coming out with further and harder terms." The light cavalry were unsuited to frontal attack at consolidated positions. As is clear from this quotation, they relied on the techniques of psychological warfare. This is what must have happened at Pressburg. The Hungarian horsemen completely surrounded the Bavarians' strongly-defended camp and isolated them from the outside world. They harried them constantly, day and night. On expedition, the Hungarians used a similar technique in the siege of fortified places: in 1051, Andrew I's knights induced the Germans to abandon their armour. In 1241, Batu Khan's warriors forced Béla IV to abandon a reinforced camp. We can form an impression of the methods employed and their effects from a description in the Illuminated Chronicle of the sufferings of Henry II's soldiers in 1051: "the Hungarians and the Pechenegs mercilessly harassed them night after night, slaughtering them with poisoned arrows, lobbing looped ropes among their tents and carrying off men out on some service. The Germans were terrified and worn down by the hail of arrows descending on them. They dug themselves in, their shields above them, the living and the dead in one grave."

What follows is an attempt to reconstruct from the sources how the Hungarians fought during the era of expeditions. The battle order followed what seemed to be a simple schema. The larger part of the army took up a closed-front order of battle, segmented in depth, on open terrain giving good scope for shooting. The closed front enhanced the effectiveness of the shower of arrows shot from the whole formation, and segmentation in depth permitted control, because a charge by heavy cavalry was often averted by opening the closed front. This made up the bulk of the army. The smaller



Conquest-era yurt ←

part, about a third of the whole, remained apart from the main corps and attempted to disrupt the enemy's battle order. They acted as the "lure", riding in close and firing in arrows, a provocation for the enemy to break their closed order and charge.

Considering that a Hungarian quiver held 15-17 arrows, the lure probably executed its action in two stages, in order to keep up a stream of arrows and replace what had been shot. The horsemen had to keep a reserve of at least 5-7 arrows in their quivers, because the action was successful only if the enemy lost its patience and charged at the lure, which would feign retreat, shooting from behind, and lead its pursuers towards the waiting main army. The battle order of the Western army usually broke up as soon they set off in charge and pursuit. The general was thereafter only able to intervene in events if he had reserves. Henry I was well aware of this Hungarian tactic (which shows what a brilliant soldier he was) and at the Battle of Riade (Merseburg), he issued effective counter-orders. Before the battle, he ordered that "nobody will try to overtake his comrade, even if his horse is faster." The Saxons maintained closed order as they charged, holding off the arrows with their shields.

In most cases, however, generals were unable to direct the charge, and the army became scattered and disordered as it launched itself towards the main army. When they were about 150-200 m from the battle front, the main Hungarian army started up a shower of arrows, opened up the front to let in the lure, and engaged the confused, leaderless pursuers in close combat. The configuration of the main army was of course influenced by the terrain. It did not always receive the enemy face on, sometimes shooting the volley of arrows from the side, after which the lure turned back. The hail of arrows was one of the key elements of the tactic.

At Riade, Henry warned his men of this: "take the first volley on your shields, and then charge at them at the gallop and with the greatest momentum, so that they cannot shoot more arrows before they feel the wounds inflicted by your weapons." The defeat of 933 clearly followed from the ineffectiveness of the hail of arrows, which upset the timing. A volley of arrows usually held the attackers up about 100-150 metres from the battle front, giving the main Hungarian army enough time to open up and let in the lure. It was this time, while the enemy hesitated, that was absent at Riade: after the volley, the Saxons spurred their horses into the charge, and caught the lure as it was held up before the battle front.

This apparently simple schema demanded an extremely experienced general and disciplined troops. It was difficult for the enemy to appraise. Even Henry derived his success from the orders he gave in advance, and not his generalship during the battle.

Although the western armies also had some light cavalry, they usually came off the worse against Hungarian marauders/skirmishers, so that the Hungarians controlled almost the entire battlefield during the battle. Standing in closed battle order, the Western troops saw flying groups of mounted archers coming from all sides, and suffered a constant hail of arrows. This, as well as injuries, caused a feeling of hopelessness and incarceration/being surrounded, which provoked them to charge.

When the charge and pursuit started, the Western or Byzantine soldiers saw only the fleeing mounted archers before them, who turned in the saddle to shoot at their pursuers. The pursuer held a shield in one hand and a lance or sword in the other, a spear hanging from his neck, because there was no real need to direct the horse with the spurs, it went with the crowd, and tried to defend himself from the arrows being shot backwards, and before he knew what was happening was standing in front of the main army and caught in a hail of arrows, with heavier than average tips. The wounded horses faltered, the pursuing mass piled into a confused congestion and only its own momentum carried into the sack being prepared for it by the army. The slowing of the enemy charge gave the archers a space to renew their volley.

Hungarian generals routinely employed this schema. This is proved by the Battle of Augsburg. At the first battle there, in 910, Louis the Child was defeated by a model application of the schema. The lure surprised the German army in its camp at dawn. ("... 'before Aurora had left the saffron-coloured bed of Tithonus,' the Hungarian people, thirsty for a blood and lusting for a fight, surprised the yawning Christians, because the arrow awakens more than the shout.") Forty-five years later, Lehel and Bulcsú set out to fight the army of Otto I in the same way. The lure attacked the German camp at dawn. They did not know that Otto had already set the army on its way ("Rising at dawn, after they made their peace with each other and first the commanders and then each and every soldier pledged under oath their provide mutual assistance, they marched out of camp with flags raised.") They moved in units of 300-400 over difficult broken terrain. ("The army was led over uneven and difficult terrain, denying the enemy the chance to disturb the troops with their arrows.") The camp

was guarded by the Bohemians, together with two Saxon contingents. They were mainly concerned with striking camp. The lure fell on them and captured the camp after a brief skirmish. They could not resist the temptation of booty, and started looting. They thought the whole German army had fled.

When Otto heard of the attack, he sent Conrad the Red back to recover the materiel. In the meantime Bulcsú and Lehel heard that the Germans had been defeated. The army started to break out of battle formation. In the meantime, the rain started and Conrad returned to the camp, where he dispersed the unwitting soldiers of the lure. While the rain was falling, the main army loosened their bowstrings, whereupon Otto's forces appeared out of the bushes in full battle order and started the charge ("fell on them while it was raining and soon defeated one of their formations, close to the city.") After a brief resistance, the main army made an orderly retreat. They caused severe losses among the pursuing Germans with several volleys of arrows. The reasons for the defeat must have lain partly in Otto's stratagem, starting off his army unusually early and marching hidden from the Hungarians, but there were also deficiencies in Hungarian reconnaissance.

We have seen, therefore, that the Hungarian army in battle was divided into the constantly-moving "lure", and the static main army, in closed formation, awaiting

→ *Portrait of Géza I on the Greek crown*





the enemy attack. The number of volleys the soldiers could shoot at the approaching enemy depended on the range of their bows. The bow and arrow, however, was not the sole means of defeating the enemy. It could break up the battle order of the opposing army, but victory could only be secured in close combat.

The main events were concisely recorded in the Swabian *Annales Alamannici* by the monks of St Gallen: “907. The Bavarians’ desperate war with the Hungarians, Prince Luitpold was killed, the unbridled arrogance of his men was broken, and very few of the Christians escaped. Most of the bishops and counts were killed.” The same annals in another text tradition summarised the events in a single sombre sentence: “907. The Bavarians’ entire army was destroyed by the Hungarians.”

Among the fallen on the battlefield was imperial palace chaplain Archbishop Theotmar of Salzburg, Bishop Zacharias of Brixen-Säben, Bishop Udo of Freising, and three abbots. The temporal dignitaries among the casualties included 19th Count of the Empire, Prince Luitpold of Bavaria. Although the Bavarians undoubtedly lost some of their highest dignitaries, underlining the severity and significance of the defeat, we know relatively little about the battle itself or the events preceding it.

The imperial army had a clear objective: to put an end to the campaigns mounted against their lands by the Hungarians who had settled in the Carpathian Basin some ten years before, and to restore the status quo ante. The lands to the west of the Danube, the former Roman province of Pannonia, had belonged to the Eastern Frankish Empire for a century, forming part of the Eastern Marches (Ostmark). The new arrivals from the eastern steppes, the Hungarian tribes, had taken possession of the province in summer 900, and the Eastern Frankish court was determined to take it back.

The imperial lords no doubt harboured a vivid memory of the campaign against the Avars in 791, led by their legendary predecessor Charlemagne (768–814). Or rather they preserved a version of these events which, by the early 10th century, had become elaborated, exaggerated and distorted, swelled by a multiplicity of accumulated or deliberately-added legends. They would have been better off knowing more of the real events and their outcome, without the elaborate veil of myth. It was a war which, although led by the founder of the dynasty, an almost canonised figure, had effectively ended in failure. Marching with armies along both banks of the Danube,

Hungarian Conquest-era women's clothes ← 

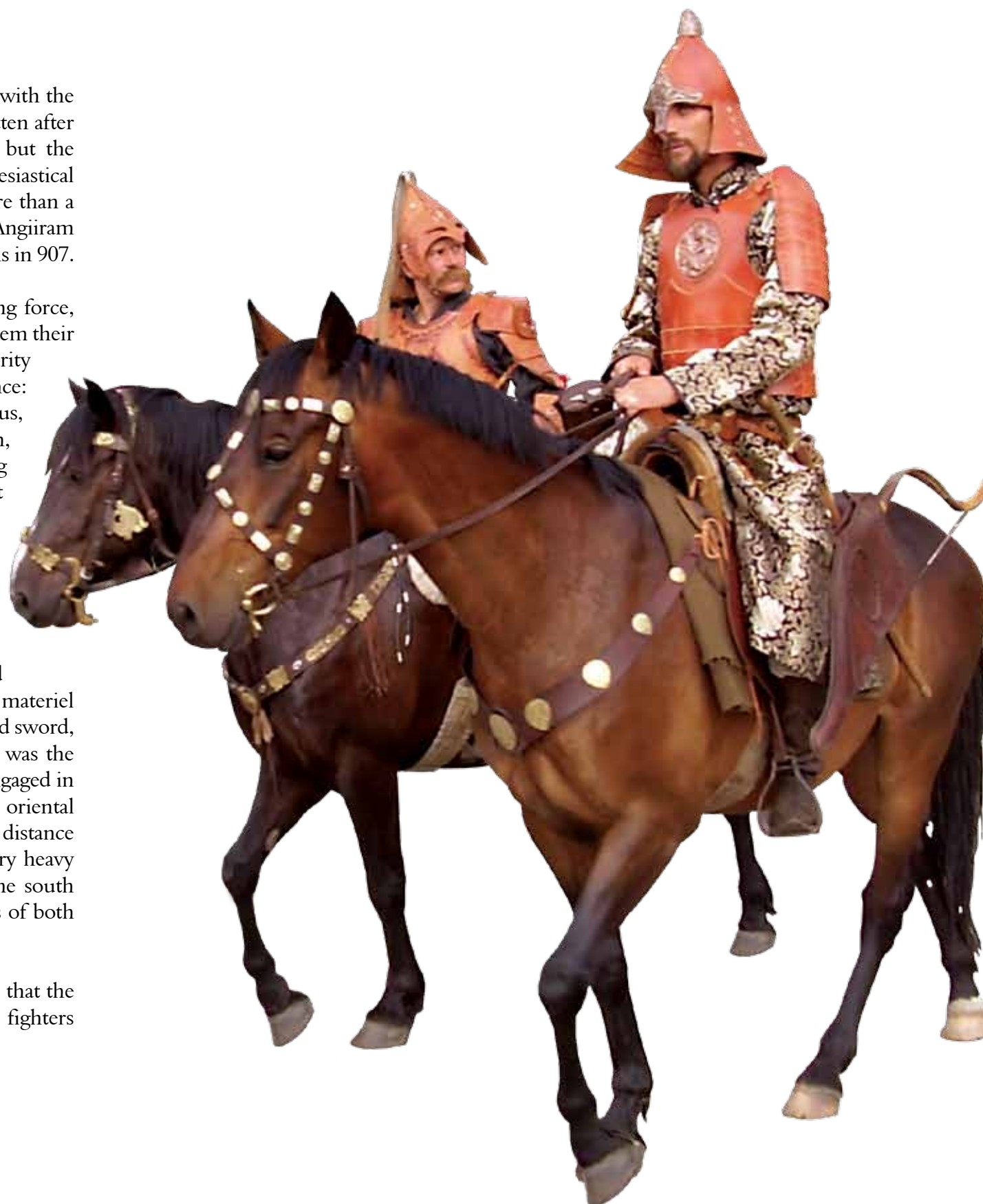
Charlemagne had got as far as the Rába line, from where the Avars, fighting with the classic nomadic scorched-earth tactic, forced them to retreat. Chronicles written after the mid-9th century immeasurably exaggerated Charlemagne's successes, but the entries in contemporary necrologies are revealing: several men of high ecclesiastical and secular office met their deaths in that war, foreshadowing events of more than a century later. One of these was the palace chaplain of the time, Archbishop Angiiram of Metz, the predecessor of Theotmar, who fell to the blows of the Hungarians in 907.

The Bavarian attack on the Hungarians, planned to be of overwhelming force, was launched in summer 907. Certain of their victory, they took with them their 13-year old ruler, Louis IV the Child (899–911), but placed him in the security of St Florian's Abbey between the Enns and Traun rivers. (Eerie coincidence: Charlemagne also took his designated heir with him, the later Louis the Pious, but quickly sent him to Regensburg after the first clash with the Avars.) Then, too, the army attacked in two columns, on each side of the Danube. According to the written sources, the open battle took place between 4 and 6 June at Berzalauspurc, a place named after the last – Slavic-born – Frankish governor of Pannonia, Braslav dux, and many modern historians identify it as the site of Bratislava. Nothing is known of the course of the battle, but the large number of high-ranking Bavarian casualties indicates how hard and bloody it must have been.

What is certain that the Bavarian army marched along the north and south banks of the Danube, and a flotilla carried troops, victuals and materiel on the river. The attackers carried the customary weapons (lance, double-edged sword, battleaxe, helmet, chainmail or scale armour, and shield). Their basic tactic was the attack in a solid mass, but after clashing with the enemy, the cavalry usually engaged in single combat. The Hungarians obviously tried to avoid this, and used their oriental tactics to surround the enemy, break up its battle order and destroy it from a distance by volleys of arrows. The success of these tactics is demonstrated by the very heavy Bavarian losses. First they dispersed the Bavarian troops marching along the south of the Danube, and next day those on the northern bank. The commanders of both divisions of the Bavarian army fell.

The fact that so many of them were left dead on the battlefield indicates that the Hungarians successfully enclosed the attacking armies, or caught any fighters

→ *Hungarian mounted archer's clothes of the Conquest era*



who managed to break out of the ring. After the battle, the Bavarians bore their young king to the well-defended Passau (this is only reported in Aventis, and so is non-contemporary and thus unreliable information). There remained no doubt that the Hungarian tribes, newly settled in the area, could confidently assume governance of their new homeland. It is no exaggeration to say that the Battle of Pressburg was one of the most important, fateful events of Hungarian history.

Botond's heroic action at the gate of Byzantium, Viennese Illuminated Chronicle

The outcome on the Hungarian side

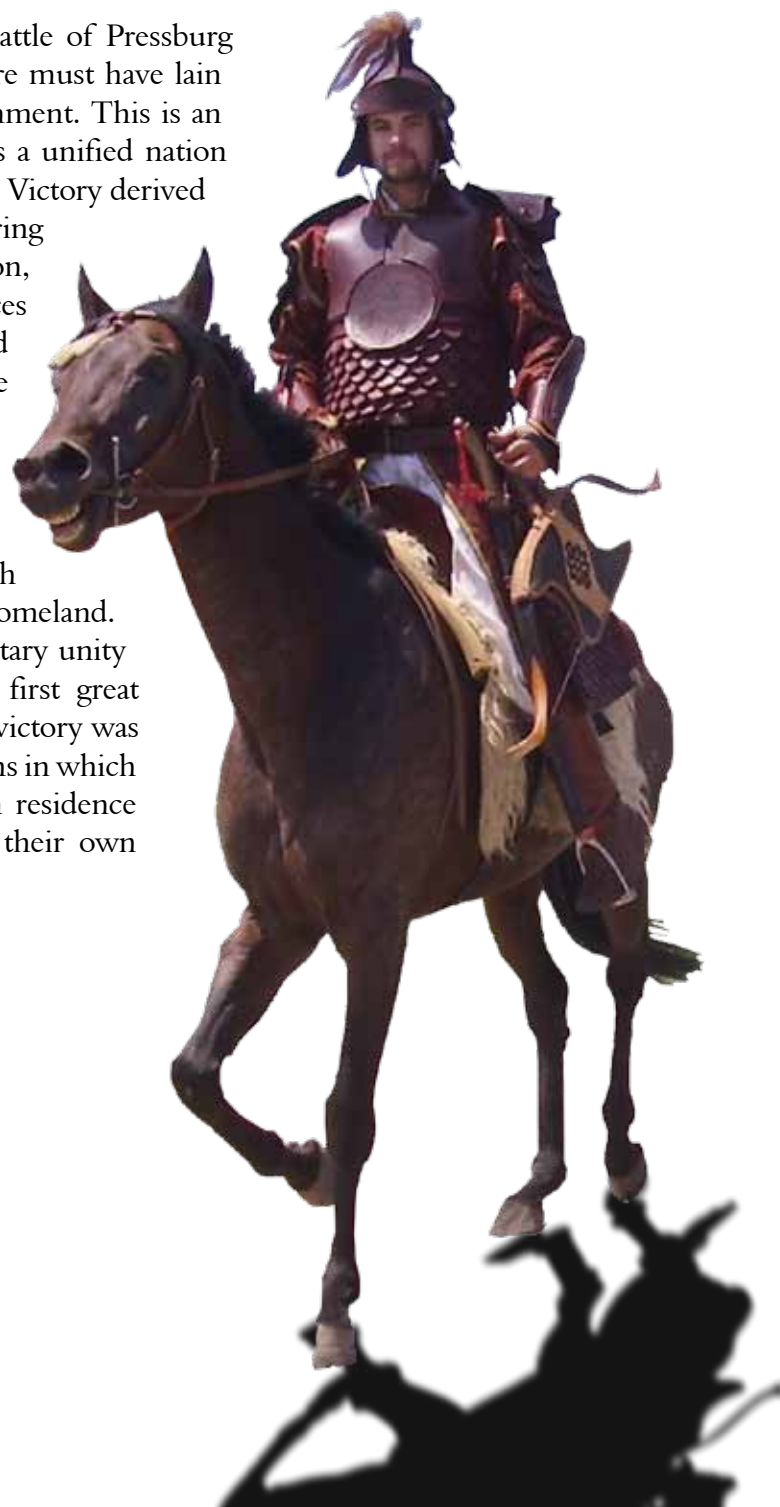
The Pressburg victory pushed out the western border of Pannonia (the border of the gyepű principle) to the River Enns and consolidated the occupation of the east of the former Moravian Empire (the areas of modern Slovakia and North Hungary, and the eastern areas of Lower Austria).



The victory was so destructive that it was a full 123 years later, in 1030, that the Germans launched another attack against the Kingdom of Hungary.

The course and outcome of the Battle of Pressburg prove that behind the victory there must have lain a regime with a highly organised government. This is an important clue to the transition towards a unified nation and the formation of national awareness. Victory derived from cooperation between the conquering Hungarians and the native population, through the coordination of armed forces from the Hungarian Tribal Alliance and the allied peoples. Three years after the death of Prince Kurszán, something different might have been expected, but instead of recriminations and pursuit of conflicting local interests, all sides were spurred to a united military effort through the awareness that they possessed a homeland. The struggle entered into with this military unity might well be called the Hungarians' first great war of national defence. The Pressburg victory was instrumental in establishing the conditions in which the early Hungarians, having just taken residence in the Carpathian Basin, could found their own country.

Conquest-era men's clothes



Galgóc pouch plate from grave of a 10th century knight, Hungarian National Museum



Dealised portrazal of Prince Géza, Nádasdy Mausoleum (reprint)



*European Expeditions of Hungarian
Army in Tenth Century*

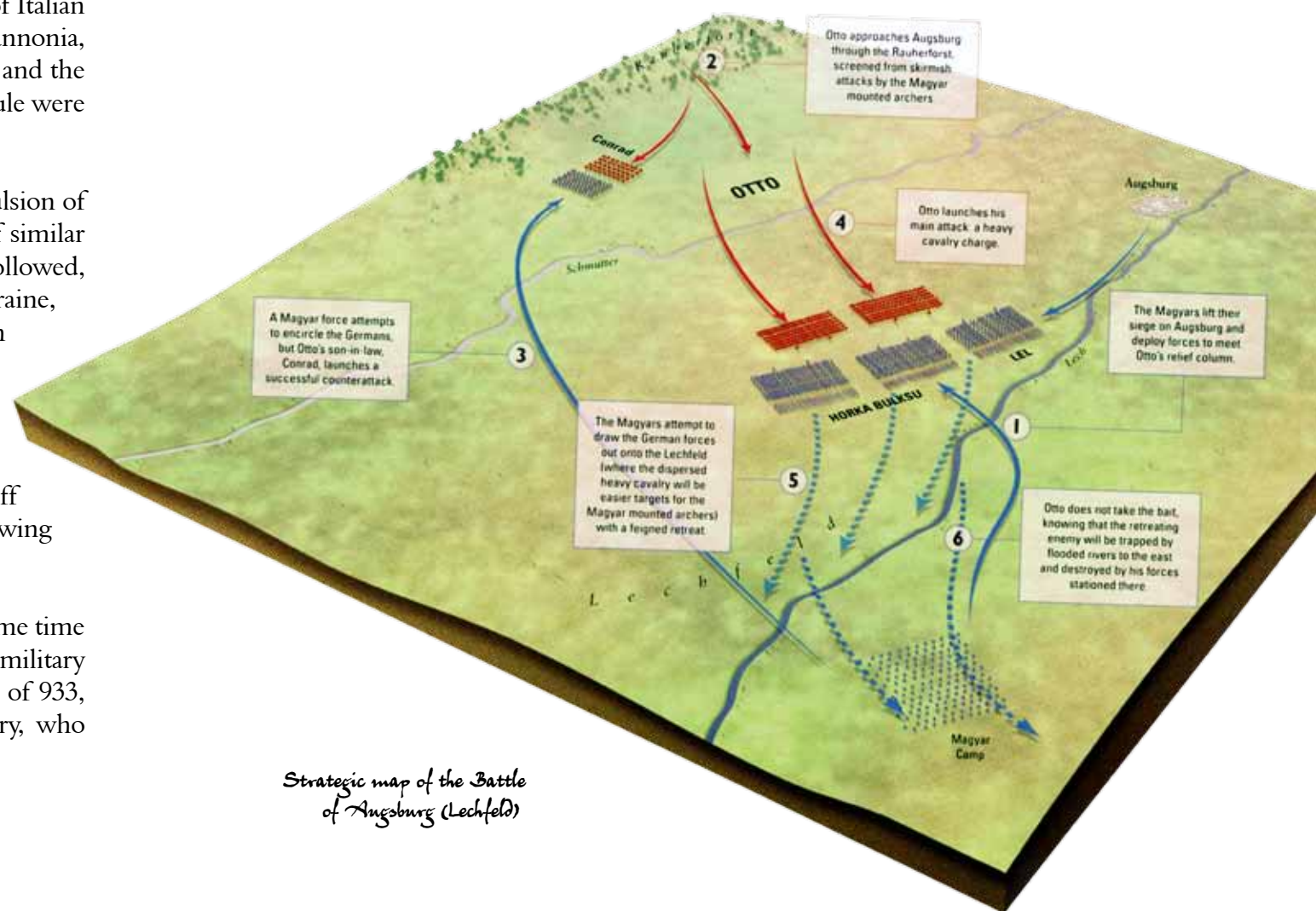
There is a very close link between the Hungarian Conquest and Hungarian expeditions into Europe. Even in the Carpathian Basin itself, the warriors of the Hungarian Tribal Alliance first appeared as expeditionaries: in 862 at the invitation of the Eastern Franks; in 881 alongside the Moravians “ad Weniam”, i.e. to Vienna; in 892 at the request of the Eastern Frankish King Arnulf against the Moravians; and in 894 in alliance with the Moravians against the Franks. By 895, the traditionally accepted date of the Hungarian Conquest, they were very familiar with part of the Carpathian Basin and the lands to the west, indeed some historians consider it very likely that some of them had settled in what was to become Hungary many years before the “great Conquest”.

The expeditions after 895–896 followed organically from these earlier campaigns, and may rightly be regarded as the rearguard actions of the Conquest. Continuity was assured in the person of King Arnulf (887–899), at whose call the Hungarians pillaged Italy in 899–900, and on 24 September 899 they destroyed the army of Italian King Berenger I at a major battle beside the River Brenta. The conquest of Pannonia, i.e. Transdanubia, may be dated to the period following the Italian expedition and the Bavarian expedition of 900, when the last vestiges of Frankish and Moravian rule were finally eliminated.

The key feat of arms in the first decades of the 10th century was the repulsion of the Bavarian attack in 907. It was so effective that no another attack of similar strength was to come from German lands until 1030. In the decades that followed, Hungarians ventured to Saxony, Thuringia, Swabia, Italy, Alsace-Lorraine, Burgundy, the borders of Denmark, St Gallen, the Nîmes area, distant South Italy, the shore of the Atlantic Ocean and Hispania. Particularly interesting are the Italian expeditions of 942, from where they marched on to the Iberian Peninsula. Thanks to the precision of Arab bureaucracy, we can follow the Hungarians’ route almost to the day. They spent a month pillaging and unsuccessfully besieging a city before, laden with valuable captives, they set off for home. The Arabs also recorded the names of the Hungarians’ leaders, but owing to the peculiarities of Arab script they cannot now be definitely deciphered.

After 910, the Germans paid tribute to the Hungarians, although at the same time the German King Henry the Fowler was making political moves and military reforms in preparation for striking back. In 932, just before the decisive year of 933, the Hungarians, tried to negotiate the renewal of tribute payable by Henry, who

refused it. The expeditionary force started its campaign early in 933, attacking Saxony in January or February. Again they looked to Slavic tribes for assistance against the Germans, but this time they were left on their own. Although the Hungarians were well informed of political developments in Europe, they had not taken proper account of Henry’s fundamental reform of his military system, specifically with this war in mind. According to the account by the famous historian Widukind, he built castles and garrisoned them with soldiers, and fortified the towns with walls. He trained his warriors in the techniques of heavy cavalry, and provided them with the appropriate weaponry. Armed with chainmail, lance, sword, shield and helmet, and mounted on a fighting horse, the German knight, in a highly trained army, posed a new threat to the Hungarians. Given the costs of each one, there could not have been all that many well-equipped heavy horsemen; the armament weighed 125 tonnes per thousand cavalry troops. This military force was complemented by light cavalry and infantry formations.



Strategic map of the Battle of Augsburg (Lechfeld)



Horn attributed to Lehel, Jász Museum, Jászberény

The Hungarians, it appears, were unsuspecting, as suggested by their embarking on raids in three directions: one to Italy and two to German lands. One army was thrown back by the combined Saxon and Thuringian forces, and the second faced the King Henry's main army at Merseburg. The Germans' approach did not come as a surprise, because they had already given up a siege of a nearby town and, according to a contemporary source, *left their camp and according to their custom, giving enormous fire and smoke signals, gathered up their scattered troops*. The battle took place on 15 March, somewhere near Merseburg. The site of the battle was later given the name Riade, meaning ox-ford.

Before the battle, Hungarian reconnaissance approached the German camp, and shortly after the battle-criers raised their voices: *on the Christian side, the shout of the holy and wondrous Kyrie eleison – God have mercy! – was much heard, while on their side, the coarse and satanic 'hui, hui'*. The German king appreciated that the Hungarian archers were trying to break up the battle formation of the cavalry. In response, the Saxons, *in battle order, charged all at once, and there was not one with a speedier horse that overtook the slower, but as the king had pronounced, closed on the archers from the flank, defended by shields, rendering them ineffective*. Afraid the Hungarians would take flight, the Germans employed a special tactic:

The king was afraid that – as indeed happened – the enemy, the Hungarians, at the sight of the heavily armed soldiers would immediately take flight. He therefore sent the Thuringian legion ahead with a very few heavily armoured troops, so that the Hungarians would give chase to these weak troops, and be lured up to the main army. And so it happened, but nevertheless the Hungarians, at the sight of the armoured main army, ran away. Even the contemporary chronicler admits that few Hungarian warriors were destroyed, but their camp and its prisoners were taken. The chronicle claims that the Hungarian threw away their weapons in flight and even removed their pectoral ornaments so that they could run faster. We have no clue as to the size of the armies. Later German writers estimated the Hungarian force at fifty thousand, of which, they claimed, only ten thousand got away; the truth is that the Hungarians would have been doing well to raise five thousand. Henry was proud of his victory and had the battle painted on the wall of his palace, but the Hungarians, who retreated in time, suffered only minor losses.

The Italian expeditions continued with undiminished intensity after 933. It is telling that of the coins found at grave sites in Hungary, 67% are of Italian origin, 21% French and – surprisingly – only 7% German. On German lands, however, continuing defeats (948, 950, 951-2) were conveying a message to the Hungarians. It is

a curious contradiction that Hungarian warriors, who piled up victory after victory, are remembered by the world for a lost battle. The event that gained most fame and had the greatest influence on European history was the Battle of Augsburg or – as it is known in international historical literature – Lechfeld. It has the most detailed documentation of any 10th century military event, several mutually independent contemporary German scholars having written about it, in addition to the usual entries in the annals.

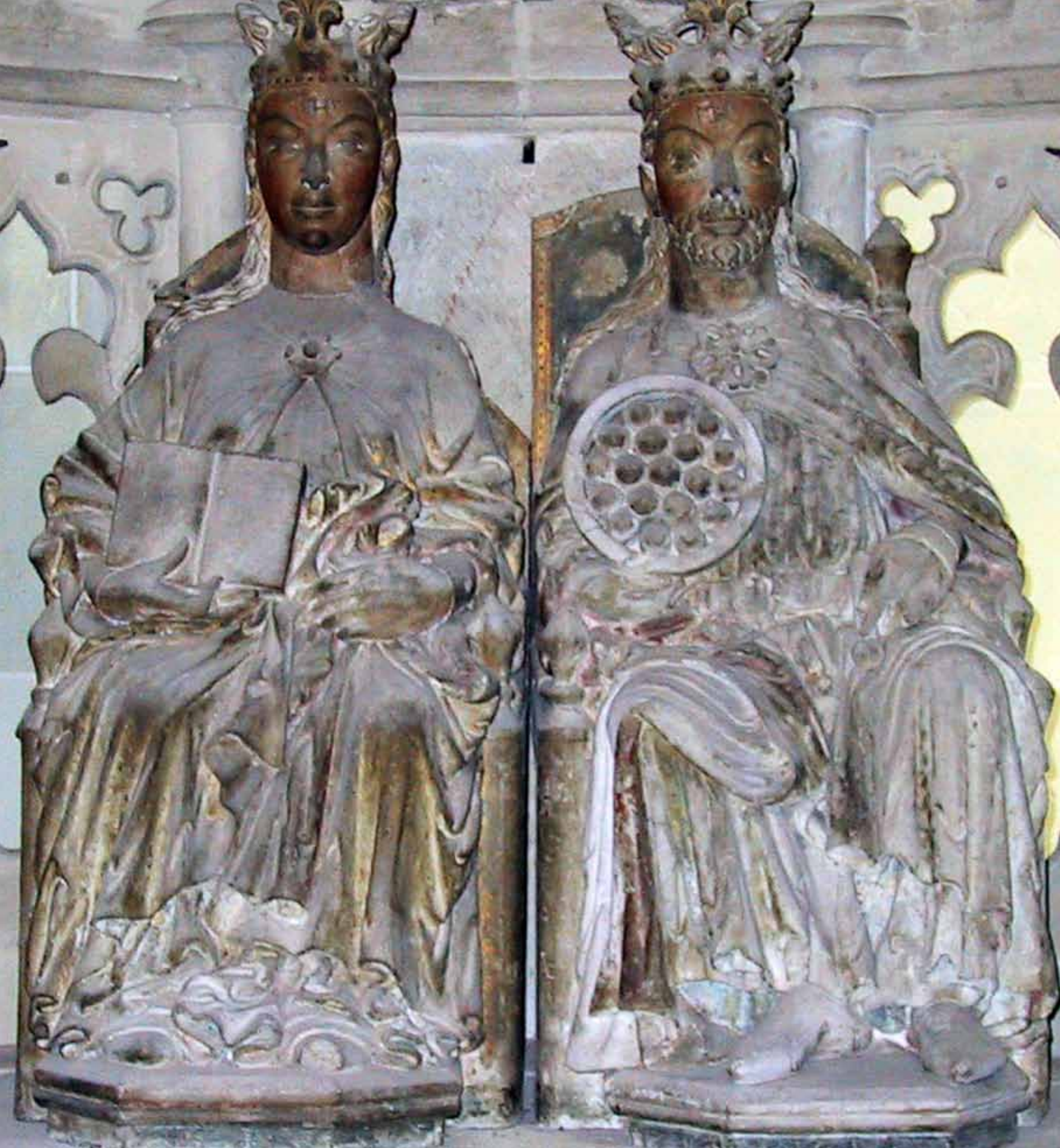
Their wealth is sumptuous and conspicuous. They can raise an enormous army! The whole army starts and turns to the sound of the horn. They ride for days, with spare horses. When they go into action, the earth beneath them moves. They are unmatched in fighting spirit and courage. They have no fear of death. They die with a smile on their face. They are invincible.

BERENGAR OF FRIULI (845–924), King of Italy (887–915),
Holy Roman Emperor (915–924), the Lombards' emissary to the Hungarians in 921.

In 955, the internal affairs of the German Kingdom seemed promising for the Hungarians. At the beginning of the year, King Otto I was in open war with Bavaria, and was forced to personally take control of a siege of the rebel city Regensburg. Compounding his troubles were the Slavic chieftains in league against him. In such circumstances, the leaders of the Hungarian Tribal Alliance could not be faulted on the timing of the campaign, because the participants in the Germans' internal struggles must have appeared as reliable supporters of the Hungarian attack. The Hungarians did not, however, reckon with the strengthening of the German king, who had liquidated the power centres of several princes rivalling the dynasty, Bavaria being one of these. Albeit that the German provinces were willing to provide only a part of the military contingents demanded by the king, Otto possessed a heavily-armoured army that represented fearsome military strength. A surviving register, prescribing how many heavily armoured soldiers the German provinces – *regnum* – had to muster, shows that the army may have had up to 15,000 of them. In the medieval political and economic circumstances, of course, it was not possible to mobilise anything approaching the full complement. Nonetheless, the 3–4,000 strong German heavy cavalry estimated by modern researchers could have been decisive in the action at Augsburg.



Lehel kills the Emperor with his horn, Viennese Illuminated Chronicle



We know for certain that the Hungarians surrounded the city of Augsburg on 8 August. The Germans pitched their camp to the north, and the Hungarians to the south, on the subsequently much-mentioned heights of Gunzenl. There could not have been a substantial military force defending the city, but the Hungarian expeditionaries, unpractised in siege warfare, attempted only to starve them out. They were left insufficient time for this, however, owing to the successful defence of the city led by Bishop – latterly Saint – Ulrich. The Hungarians attempted one assault, on 8 August, on the eastern gate. This ended with fall of a Hungarian leader, and at the appearance of the German army next day they abandoned the siege. The battle took place next day, on 10 August, the day of the deeply revered martyr, St Lawrence. This suggests that the Germans consciously chose this day, hoping that the intervention of the saint would boost their army's confidence and determination. There was in these days unquestioning faith that God decided the outcome of battles.

The fighting started well for the Hungarians. Some crossed the River Lech at night, went round the German army and successfully attacked what contemporary sources described as the Bohemian “legion” allied with Germans, a rearguard which was defending the baggage train. The Hungarians broke up the defenders' battle lines and successfully attacked the next two German formations: *The Eighth Legion comprised Bohemians, whose weapons were better than their fortune. That legion bore all of the matériel and baggage. [...] Making no delay, the Hungarians crossed the River Lech, circumvented the army and began to disrupt the last legion with their arrows. They launched their attack with a thunderous outcry, and after cutting down some of the soldiers of the legion [...] forced the remainder to flee. In the same way, they attacked the seventh and sixth legion, and after scattering most of them, sent them fleeing.*

Holy Roman Emperor Otto I (the Great) and his wife, Editha, Magdeburg





The Western cavalry drive off the mounted archers, 11th century illustration

King Otto then sent the best-trained and best-equipped royal legion, under Prince Conrad, against the Hungarians attacking from the rear. We can only guess the reason for the Germans' sudden advance. Perhaps the Hungarians, after their early successes, started looting, or the Germans simply displayed a tactical and technical superiority. What is certain is that for some reason the main Hungarian army delayed in its frontal assault and did not sufficiently tie down the main German forces.

After frustrating the Hungarian attempt at encirclement, the Germans launched a general attack. The Hungarian expeditionaries responded with their usual tactic: after realising that resistance was hopeless, they turned their horses and attempted to retreat. There was at first no obstacle to this.

Contemporary sources relate that people observing the events from the Augsburg city walls at first did not notice the Hungarians' defeat, although they did see them retreat. This is supported by the failure to find any archaeological remains of the battle, in fact even the site of the battlefield remains uncertain. Neither did the Germans pursue the Hungarians at first, but concentrated on releasing their prisoners. This implies that the Germans also had few losses, and were shaken by the death of Prince Conrad.



Idealised portrayal of Vértulcsú, Nádasdy Mausoleum (reprint)

It was later in the retreat that the Augsburg defeat turned into a tragedy. The day after the main attack, the Germans attempted to hold up the fugitives at riverbanks, crossing points and other places. A much-disputed event of that day was another clash between the Hungarians and the Bohemians. It is possible that the Bohemian contingent marched in two columns, and the fleeing Hungarians ran into the second, suffering a defeat. This would also explain why the guarding of the baggage during the battle had been entrusted to the small number of Bohemians. There is a view that the splitting of the Bohemian auxiliaries into two was deliberate, and the German command had planned to prevent the Hungarian retreat. Whatever happened, it was through frustrating the retreat that the Germans clinched complete victory, and caused severe bloodshed among the Hungarians. We can only guess how many Hungarians there were. Certainly not the 100,000 recorded by the Germans. The number should be compared with the 3-4000 German army, and could not have been many more than this. Together with a substantial number of reserve horses, the Hungarians may still have constituted a fearsome force, and it is understandable that the Empire's entire military strength had to be concentrated against them.

The leaders of the 955 expedition are known mainly through those who were captured and executed. First of all Lél (Lehel), and then Súr and Bulcsú, who were all executed shortly after the battle in Regensburg. The story of Lehel's Horn recorded in the chronicles and the legend of the seven grieving Hungarians convey the deep impression the defeat made on the Hungarian people. By ordering the leaders to be executed, and rejecting the customary exchange of prisoners, Otto was displaying his intention to settle the issue once and for all. It seems probable that the named leaders were at the head of tribes from western Hungary, and it was warriors from these tribes that bore the brunt of the defeat. This may explain why, after 955, although expeditions continued, there were none in the western direction. We cannot overstate the political significance of the battle. It led to the legitimisation of the power of the Saxon dynasty in Germany, the coronation of Otto as Emperor in 962, and thus the foundation of the Holy Roman Empire; the relic of the Holy Cross they had taken into the battle, set into the imperial lance, took a place among the coronation insignia. In Hungarian history, the Battle of Augsburg provided the fateful impulse towards Europeanisation, setting it on the direct path to the Hungarian embassy to Quedlinburg in 973, the symbolic act which normalised German-Hungarian relations.

From that time, the Hungarians directed their campaigns only to the south, towards Byzantium, continuing until their defeat at Arkadiopolis (now Lüleburgaz in Turkey) in 970. Owing to the peculiarities of Byzantine historiography, we know almost nothing of the southern expeditions. If we compare them with the 35 western expeditions up to 955, there must clearly have been more than four launched to the south. In the Botond story, the Hungarian historical tradition preserves the memoir of an expeditionary attack which got all the way to Constantinople. The chronicles record that Botond got the advantage in single combat with a Byzantine knight, and *is said to have struck such a blow to the gate, making such a hole in it, that a five year-old child could easily have passed in and out*. The story ends with the looting and sacking of Greece. Constantinople did indeed have a “Golden Gate”, now part of the Jedikula, through which victorious generals paraded. Piercing the gate was a ceremonial declaration of war, and symbolised the humiliation of the city (the same was done by Prince Bolesław I the Brave on the gate of Kiev in 1018). The tradition of the real Hungarian expeditions has interestingly merged with the Pecheneg dream of taking Byzantium, because it was the Pechenegs who used the mace at that time, not the Hungarians, and the name “Botond” is telling, the Hungarian word *bot* meaning “stick”. Fortunes frequently reversed. We know that the Hungarians took 500 prisoners near Thessaloniki in 968, but also that Emperor Nikephoros Phokas enlisted 40 Hungarian prisoners into an army sent to fight the Arabs the same year. Hungarians – referred to at that time as Turks – appear among the imperial guard in several years, together with other foreign soldiers. In the west, the last clash before the millennium year took place in the Wienerwald between 985 and 991.

Contemporary authors, such as Emperor Leo the Wise and the Arab al-Masudi, described the classic tactics of the Hungarian light cavalry: the regiments followed closely on one another, and the cavalry troops rotated like a mill-wheel, maintaining a continuous rain of arrows. There were always reserve detachments, and they always marched with a great many reserve horses, partly to make the army appear larger, and partly as victuals. Their main strengths were in encircling the enemy, feigning withdrawal and retreat, and turning on their horses to shoot arrows backwards. The description by Leo the Wise fully confirms this: *They have reserves beside the main army, which they send to trap those standing guard against them or hold to assist sections which are under pressure [...] They favour fighting at a distance, lying in ambush, encircling the enemy, feigning withdrawal and retreat, and spreading out their forces. If they put their enemy to flight, they put everything else aside and mercilessly throw themselves in pursuit, thinking of nothing but the chase.*

It was with the Bavarians that the closest political relations emerged. Prince Arnulf of Bavaria fled to Hungary in 914 and returned with Hungarian assistance to recover his throne in 917. The campaigns generally went under tribal organisation, but the tribes provided intelligence and political assistance to each other. These campaigns were undoubtedly instrumental in making the Hungarians more successful than the other state formations in the region – the Bohemians and the Poles – enabling them to maintain their independence from the Holy Roman Empire for a longer time. Another consequence of the campaigns was that the Germans restrained from applying military pressure even after 955. The Germans and the Hungarians made a symbolic reconciliation in Quedlinburg in 973, and at the turn of the millennium, the son of Prince Géza, the later Stephen I (St Stephen) married Gizella, daughter of the Prince of Bavaria and sister of Emperor Henry II, raising the relationship into one of true friendship.



Illuminated letter P, Viennese Illuminated Chronicle



Idealised portrayal of St Stephen, Nádasy Mausoleum (reprint)



Saint Stephen



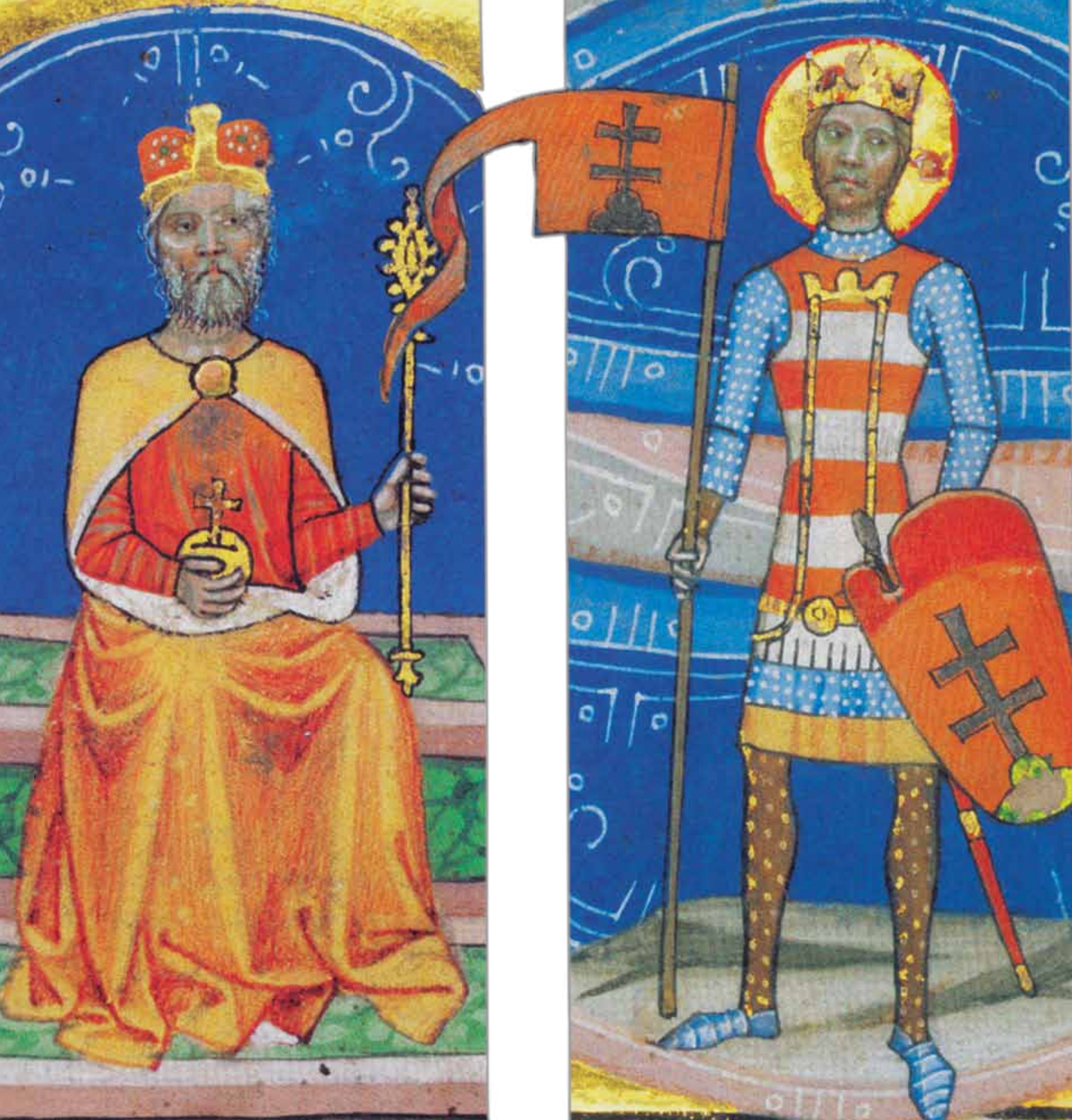
St Stephen's admonitions to his son include the lines: *be obedient, my son, thou hast been brought up amidst delights and treasures, and knowest nothing of the arduous labours of war and the perils of hostile invasions by foreign nations in the midst of which nearly my whole life has been passed.*

The King's confession reveals the prominent role of arms in establishing the Christian state of Hungary.

The first test came in 997, upon the death of Prince Géza, when Stephen had to prove he was capable of holding on to his inherited power. Koppány, Chieftain of Somogy, wanted to force Stephen's mother into an incestuous marriage, and attempt to seize power through an attempt on the young ruler's life. This event is preserved in the legend of St Stephen: *Certain nobles took up arms against him. They destroyed his towns, laid waste to his farms, looted his estates, slaughtered his servants, and not speaking of what else was done, they assaulted the King himself. When they refused to desist from their erroneous ways, and their rage did not subside, the King, trusting in the eternal virtues, set off with great armies to put an end to the unbridled fury of his enemies. In these days the city known in the common parlance as Veszprém was besieged to turn it to his humiliation: they took occupation of the place where the king often resided, so as to gain an easy path to occupy other strongholds. The King, led by the mercy of God, struck them; one side trusted in their faith, the other merely in the force of arms, and both sides entered the struggle. In the end, the enemy was defeated, some were killed, some taken prisoner and bound, and the victorious King with his followers took home the emblems of victory.*

Europe looked on in anguish at the toils of Hungarian Christianity. In October 997, Gerbert, later Pope Sylvester II, warned Emperor Otto III he must not abandon the Hungarians, because that would afford a triumph to paganism. The news of the victory, however, reached Aachen in November, where it was interpreted to mean that the Hungarians were ready to enter the Holy Roman Empire.

Stephen, however, was aiming to establish an independent Hungarian kingdom. With the support of St Adalbert and Pannonhalma Abbey, where Adalbert's pupils had settled, and helped by the clerics he had invited into the country, he set up ten bishoprics. At the encouragement of Emperor Otto III, in the second half of 1000, Stephen sent Astrik, a pupil of St Adalbert, to petition Pope Sylvester II for the grant of a crown and the authorisation to establish an archbishopric. The Pope's ready



accession to both requests was acknowledgement of Stephen's success in setting up the church in Hungary. The coronation took place in Esztergom at the turn of the millennium, where the ceremony was performed by the recently-ordained Archbishop of Esztergom. It involved first ordaining Stephen as a bishop, and then, with the crown, conferring on him worldly power.

Stephen's primary means in attaining his political ambitions, however, was the army, which operated on a regional principle. The counties into which the lands under his rule were divided each provided 300–400 troops for the royal army. The King appointed an *ispán* or bailiff in each county to take charge of administration, keep order, and to supervise training and supplies for the soldiers, and lead them in war.

Wars of consolidation

Gyula, who controlled the territory of Transylvania, realised that Stephen was a rival to be reckoned with in the struggle for control of the Carpathian Basin. Since he could not rely on the military support of Byzantium, he tried to use diplomatic means. This ultimately prompted Stephen to military action, by which he captured Gyula in his own province of Transylvania in 1002, and took him to Hungary. He annexed Transylvania to the kingdom, and the conversion to the Roman Catholic faith began.

Stephen's last rival was Ajtony, who ruled the lands of Maros. In Vidin, he adopted Greek Christianity and founded his own church in honour of John the Baptist in Marosvár (now Cenadu Vechi,



Romania). This did not prevent him from keeping all of his seven wives or breaking from his pagan customs. He led the life of a nomadic ruler on his lands. His people were animal herders, with many horses, cattle and sheep. His retinue and armed herders made up a substantial military force.

Although he enjoyed the support of Byzantium, Ajtony was not a threat to Stephen, because the King reigned over a much greater territory. He did, however, have control of the salt carriage route along the River Maros. On acquiring Transylvania, Stephen took possession of the most important salt mines of the Carpathian Basin, and thus of the major strategic commodity of the time. Ajtony regularly levied customs on the royal salt, and was in a position to block its movement in a critical situation. He would have been quite free to do so, owing allegiance to Byzantium rather than to the King.

For a long time, Stephen avoided a trial of strength, but fortune came to his aid. One of Ajtony's senior lieutenants, Csanád, had proved himself in a brilliant military career. Csanád's enemies made an accusation against him which caused Ajtony to set about having him executed, but he escaped to the King and disclosed all of his former lord's secrets. According to the Legend of Gellért, Stephen's men chose, Csanád to lead the army sent against Ajtony.

The attackers successfully crossed the Tisza, but the first battle ended in victory for Csanád. The royal army was dispersed in the scrubland of the Kököny Stream and the forests along the Tisza. The troops under Csanád, the later "Lions", pitched camp at the foot of a hill. For a whole night, without sleeping, sunk in meditation, he pleaded for help from the martyr St George. Meanwhile, Ajtony pitched his own camp in the field of Nagyősz. Scouts from both sides surveyed the surrounding lands.

Ajtony also gathered his strength. After his first success, he sent out his heralds to gather together his forces. The command was received and companies of soldiers arrived in the Nagyősz camp one after the other during the night. Ajtony's camp was like an overturned beehive. Scouting parties came and went. Camp fires crackled, everyone prepared for next day's clash, and from time to time a larger company arrived and pitched their camp.

Csanád listened to his scouts' reports, *whereupon in tiredness and exhaustion he fell into a deep sleep, and in his dreams a lion appeared, standing at his feet, and spoke thus: "O man, why are you sleeping. Arise forthwith, have the trumpets blown, fly to battle and you will defeat your enemy."* Csanád got the message. The same night he attacked Ajtony's camp, taking advantage of the confusion among the gathering troops.

With his knowledge of his enemy's customs, he had no difficulty in entering Ajtony's camp under cover of the night: he merely had to act like one of the arriving companies. The night assault was devastating. *Ajtony's army lay on the field, tangled up in the night, one man attacking the other, and eventually was put to flight.* After the battle, the bodies of the fallen Christian soldiers were taken to the Greek monastery in Marosvár for burial. According to the Gellért legend, Csanád's men killed Ajtony at the scene of the battle.

German–Hungarian war

Changes in European political affairs in 1024–25 were to have adverse consequences for Hungary. Emperor Henry II died, and with him the Saxon dynasty. A violent Frankish count was elected Conrad II (Salian), and broke with the peaceful rule of his predecessor. Relations with Hungary were unwittingly poisoned by Queen Gisella, who, upon the death of Henry of Luxemburg, Prince of Bavaria, in 1026, announced her son's claim to the Bavarian throne by the female line. Conrad hurried to Regensburg and held an election, having his 10 year-old son proclaimed Prince of Bavaria. This added Stephen to the list of Conrad's enemies, a development which was inevitable in view of Stephen's ambitions to extend his control into the sphere of influence of the Holy Roman Empire. This was followed in December 1025 by the death of Emperor Basil II of Byzantium, with whom Stephen had fought against the Bulgarians. Conrad lost no time in seizing the opportunity of an alliance with the new Emperor against the rival Hungarians. In 1027, he sent Bishop Werner of Strasbourg to Byzantium disguised as a pilgrim, but Stephen got news of the mission and its purpose, and prevented the bishop from passing through Hungary.

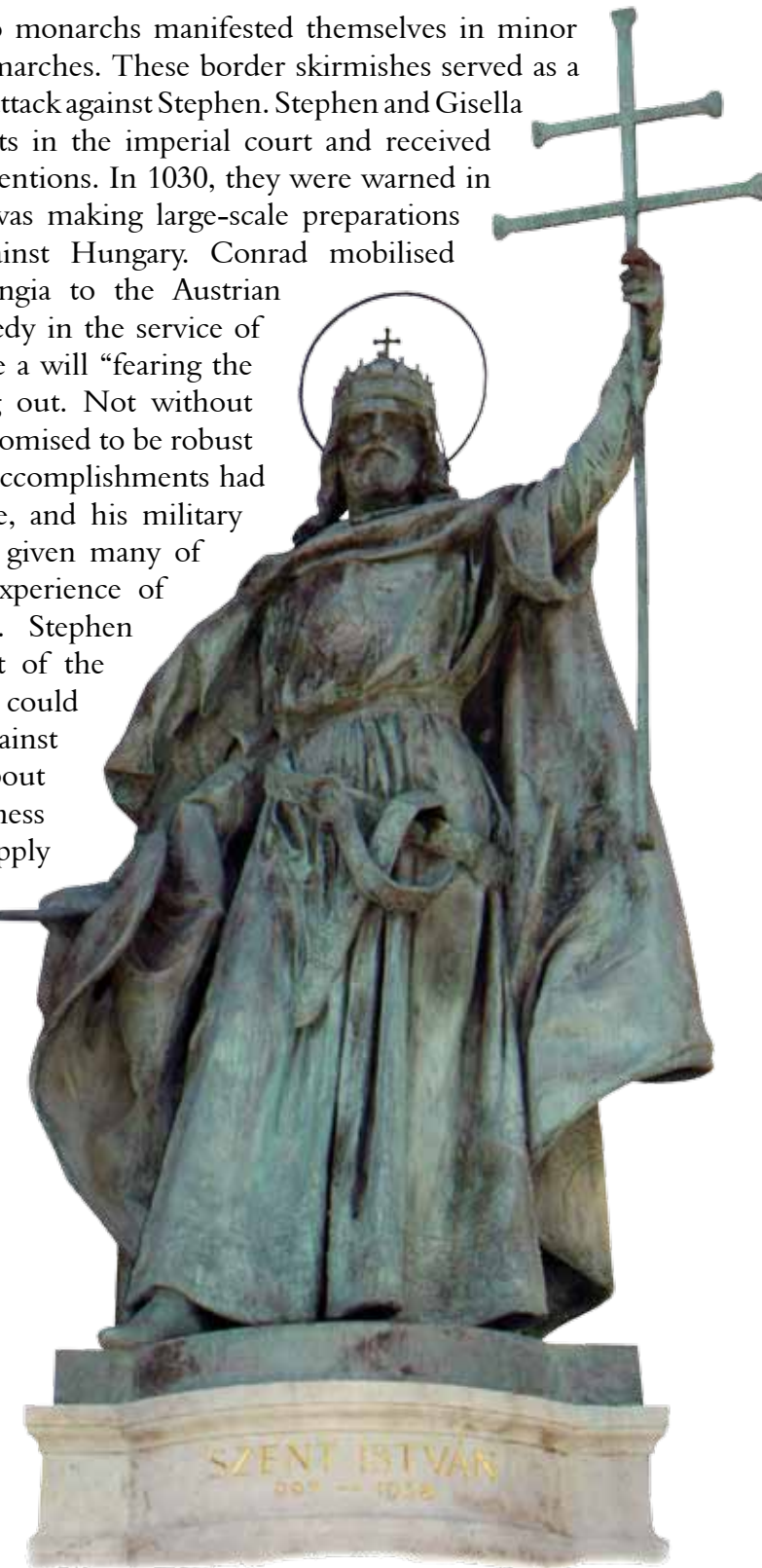
Miklós Melocco: Bishop Astrik crowns Stephen I, Esztergom



Tensions between the two monarchs manifested themselves in minor clashes in the defensive marches. These border skirmishes served as a pretext for Conrad to launch an attack against Stephen. Stephen and Gisella probably still had good contacts in the imperial court and received regular reports on Conrad's intentions. In 1030, they were warned in good time that the Emperor was making large-scale preparations for a military expedition against Hungary. Conrad mobilised imperial armies from Lotharingia to the Austrian Marches. A noble from Malmedy in the service of the Prince of Luxemburg made a will "fearing the end of his life" before setting out. Not without good reason: the Hungarians promised to be robust opponents. Stephen's military accomplishments had earned him fame far and wide, and his military cooperation under Henry had given many of the German generals direct experience of how the Hungarians fought. Stephen was realistic in his assessment of the relative strengths. He knew he could not withstand an open battle against such a great power, and set about taking advantage of the weakness of a large Western army, its supply lines.

Stephen mobilised the entire Hungarian army and burned the land all the way to the River Rába. The Altaich Annals recorded: *1030. Emperor Conrad marched with his army to Hungary on St Alban's day, Sunday (21 July) and spent the night in Abbey of Altaich. But he returned from Hungary*

György Zala: St Stephen, Millennium Memorial, Heroes' Square, Budapest



without his soldiers and without result, because his army suffered from hunger and he was caught by the Hungarians in Vienna.

The Hungarians are valiant, handsome and commanding. Their clothes are made from dyed silk, their weapons covered with silver, and have an inclination to grandeur.

GARDEZI, Persian writer, c. 1050

According to the Greater Legend of St Stephen, envoys were sent to the German generals carrying the Emperor's command to withdraw. The disappointed and exhausted generals humbly fulfilled the command to retreat, even if they doubted its genuineness.

Stephen's army pursued the retreating Germans to Vienna, and surrounded them there. The Emperor himself fell into captivity and was freed only after promising peace.

The emissaries sent to negotiate peace from the German side were Prince Henry of Bavaria, son of Conrad II, and Bishop Egilbert of Freising. Peace was signed in 1031, granting the land between the Leiter and Fischa rivers, and the west bank of the Morva, to the Hungarians.

The wars of unification and national defence made the Kingdom of Hungary into a major factor in European politics. At the end of Stephen's reign, however, his succession

turned into a serious problem. According to the Greater Legend, the royal couple had several sons. The eldest was named Otto, suggesting that he was born before 1002 and was christened out of respect for the Holy Roman Emperor. His early death meant the loss of the heir apparent. A few years later, around 1007, fortune

Coronation robe of St Stephen and the crown attributed to him (11th–12th century)







granted Stephen another son, christened Henrik after Stephen's brother-in-law and Holy Roman Emperor. His name later transformed in the Hungarian language: Henricus – Emericus – Imre (Emeric). The succession issue seemed solved. Emeric was brought up strictly in the Christian spirit, and his mind increasingly turned away from worldly affairs. This probably betrays the influence of his mother Gisella, who in her childhood had prepared to be a nun. Stephen was pleased to see his son's Christian commitment, but soon realised that his son was interested only in spiritual matters. This filled him with vexation, knowing that the work was still unfinished, and that building up a Christian state demanded a strong ruler. The Prince must have been about eight years old when Stephen took his upbringing into his own hands. This may be inferred from the opening lines of the Admonitions: *The time has arrived to leave behind thee those pillows of luxuriousness which are apt to render thee weak and frivolous, to make thee waste thy virtues and to nourish thee in thy sins. Harden thy soul in order that thy mind may attentively listen to my counsels.* The Prince was appointed to the head of the royal guard, which at that time consisted of a large number of Russian (Rus) knights. This follows from an entry in a Western chronicle which refers to Emeric in connection with Conrad's attack of 1030, as *dux Ruizorum* (lord of the Russians). A tragic accident, however, put paid to Stephen's plans. On 2 September 1031, Emeric fell victim to a wild boar while hunting in the Igfon forest of Bihar.

Compounding the pain of the founder of the kingdom was an attempt on his life by his nephew Vazul. In reprisal, Vazul was blinded and his sons banished. Stephen designated Peter Orseolo, son of his sister and her husband the Doge of Venice, as his successor.

page 90-91: Stephen's fight against Prince Gyula of Transylvania, Viennese Illuminated Chronicle

The blinding of Vazul by Stephen, Viennese Illuminated Chronicle

page 94-95: Death of St Stephen, Viennese Illuminated Chronicle





Attila Dani's drawing after Sándor Györfi's statue of King Etele (Attila) the Hun.

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