

The origins and the transformation of the early Hungarian state

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What does the state mean? Why did the state come into existence? Philosophers and scholars have given us many answers from classical antiquity up to the present. Plato asserts that the origin of the state is to be found in that fact that the people cannot provide for their own needs and each of them lacks many things.¹ According to Aristotle, “The state is the highest form of community and aims at the highest good.”² The influence of these philosophers is evident in Cicero’s political thought. In his *De re publica*, the state means the common weal (*Est igitur, inquit Africanus, res publica res populi*).³ Demonstrating the degrees and the changes of political systems, Cicero used the word *status* in a close context with the terms *res publica* and *civitas*, which now meant “state” (*habet statum res publica de tribus secundarium ... praestare nostrae civitatis statum ceteris civitatibus*).⁴ Therefore, Roman antiquity was the starting point of the abstraction of the word *status* from its original meaning to

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¹ Platon, *Politeia – Der Staat. Ders, Werke in acht Bänden*, ed. by Gunther Eiger – Dietrich Kurz – Émile Chambry, Deutsche Übersetzung von Friedrich Schleiermacher, vol. 4, Darmstadt, 1971, pp. 126-127 (369c).

² *Aristotle’s Politics*, trans. by Benjamin Jowett, Oxford 1920, p. 7 (1, 2).

³ Cicero, *De re publica. Librorum sex quae manserunt*, ed. by Konrat Ziegler, Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana, vol. 39, Lipsiae, 1958, p. 24 (1, 25, 39).

⁴ Cicero, *De re publica*, p. 40 (1, 42, 65), p. 46 (2, 1, 2).

that of “state.” This long-lasting process has already been summarized by entire generations of scholars.⁵

Modern scholars have analysed the origins of statehood according to many points of view. From the standpoint of jurisprudence, Georg Jellinek has pointed out three basic components: defined territory, government and population.⁶ From a sociological perspective, Walter Garrison Runciman mentions four necessary conditions which can raise political organizations to the level of statehood: “specialization of governmental roles; centralization of enforceable authority; permanence, or at least more than ephemeral stability, of structure; and emancipation from real or fictive kinship as the basis of relations between the occupants of governmental roles and those whom they govern.”⁷ Henri Claessen and Peter Skalnik assert that “the early state is an independent socio-political organization with a bounded territory and a centre of government. Its economy is characterized by agriculture (and in some cases by pastoralism or a mixed economy), supplemented by trade and a market system, and the presence of full-time specialists.”⁸ In the field of medieval studies, Bálint Hóman and Przemysław Urbańczyk emphasize the strong military character of the early states.⁹ Chris Wickham lists a series of five postulates: “the centralization of legitimate enforceable authority (justice and the army); the specialization of governmental roles, with an official hierarchy which outlasted the people who held

⁵ Georg Jellinek, *Allgemeine Staatslehre*, Berlin, 1914, pp. 129-135; Péter Paczolay, *Államelmélet I, Machiavelli és az államfoglalom születése* [State thought. Machiavelli and the birth of state theory], Budapest, 1998, pp. 114-123; Alan Harding, *Medieval Law and the Foundations of the State*, Oxford, 2001, pp. 1-9; Susan Reynolds, “The historiography of the medieval state,” in *Companion to Historiography*, ed. by Michael Bentley, London – New York, 2006, pp. 109-129.

⁶ Jellinek, *Allgemeine Staatslehre*, p. 71.

⁷ Walter Garrison Runciman, “Origins of States. The Case of Archaic Greece,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24 (1982), p. 351.

⁸ Henri J. M. Claessen – Peter Skalnik, “The Early State. Models and Reality,” in *The Early State*, ed. by Henri J. M. Claessen – Peter Skalnik, The Hague, 1978, p. 637.

⁹ Bálint Hóman, “Az első állami egyenes adó. Adalék az európai adótörténethez” [The first direct tax. Data about the European taxation history], *Történeti Szemle* 1 (1912), p. 162; Przemysław Urbańczyk, *Herrschaft und Politik im Frühen Mittelalter. Ein historisch-anthropologischer Essay über gesellschaftlichen Wandel und Integration in Mitteleuropa*, Frankfurt am Main, 2007, p. 74.

official position at any one time; the concept of a public power, that is, of a ruling system ideologically separable from the ruled population and from the individual rulers themselves; independent and stable resources for rulers; and a class-based system of surplus extraction and stratification.”¹⁰ Therefore we do not have to avoid using the word “state” if we wish to define the population of a constant territorial unit governed by a sovereign and institutional power, even for the medieval period.

There were various forms of continuity between antiquity and the medieval period. The two main types of Greek and Roman political organization were city-states and territorial states (empires). City-states dominated medieval Italy with new functions.¹¹ The most important of them was Rome. On the one hand, Rome held a unique position amongst cities: the papal state with ecclesiastical and secular government from the seventh century on, represented a restored Roman state.¹² On the other hand, Rome was a source of Western imperial restoration, at first for the Carolingian, and later for the Ottonian way of *renovatio imperii Romanorum*.¹³ Moreover, the successor of the Roman Empire – Byzantium – continued to exist in Eastern Europe until 1453. Ostrogorsky describes its three components: “the ancient Roman state, Christian faith, Greek culture.”¹⁴

The aforementioned examples (city-states, kingdoms or empires) were in connection with the political heritage of antiquity (especially the Roman Empire). Nevertheless, not every early medieval state had a

¹⁰ Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean 400-800*, Cambridge, 2005, p. 57.

¹¹ *City-States in Classical Antiquity and Medieval Italy*, ed. by Anthony Molho et al., Stuttgart, 1991.

¹² Thomas F. X. Noble, *The Republic of St. Peter. The Birth of the Papal State 680-825*, Philadelphia, 1991, pp. 325-328; Walter Pohl, “Invasions in Context. Power, Identity and Difference,” in *Italy in the Early Middle Ages, 476-1000*, ed. by Cristina La Rocca, Oxford, 2002, pp. 26-27.

¹³ Pohl, “Invasions,” p. 29; Knut Görich, *Otto III. Romanus Saxonicus et Italicus. Kaiserliche Rompolitik und sächsische Historiographie*, Sigmaringen, 1993; Hagen Keller, “Die Ottonen und Karl der Große,” in *Karl der Große und sein Nachleben in Geschichte, Kunst und Literatur*, ed. by Thomas Kraus, Aachen, 2003, pp. 69-94.

¹⁴ Georg Ostrogorsky, *Geschichte des Byzantinischen Staates 324-1453*, München, 1965, p. 22.

Roman origin. Some of the steppe empires based in the Carpathian Basin provided an alternative to the post-Roman model of government. Walter Pohl mentions three Central European steppe empires. "These included: first, the kingdom of the Huns in the first half of the fifth century; then, the Avar khaganate; and finally, the Magyars/Hungarians in the tenth century. They broadly (although with some specific traits) represent a type of state current in the Eurasian steppes from the time of the Scythians in the first millennium B.C. to the late medieval Mongols and beyond."¹⁵ Pohl provides an answer to the debates on the political and social structures that existed in the Eurasian steppe. These formations can be regarded as states because of certain fundamental elements (territory, population, government) that could be found in the steppe from the third century B.C. on.¹⁶

Ssu-ma Ch'ien (Sima Qian), the most important historian of Chinese antiquity, described the process through which Mo-tun became the Shan-yü of the Hsiung-nu Empire. Mo-tun had ordered his warriors to shoot at whatever he ordered them (his best horses, or his favourite wife) and executed whoever would not obey him. Based on blind obedience, he killed his own father and became monarch in 209 B.C. When the "eastern barbarians" asked Mo-tun to let them own a wasteland between their borders, Mo-tun rejected their request because, he said, "land is the basis of the nation" and executed those of his ministers who had advised him to let the barbarians have the wasteland.¹⁷ This information includes some basic elements of statehood: the importance of the territory and the strong supreme power. Ssu-ma Ch'ien described not only the wars, but also the structure of the Hsiung-nu Empire. He mentioned the names of generals, commanders, household administrators, etc. These high ministerial offices were hereditary, being filled by the three highest families. The various leaders came together three times a year to perform sacrifices

¹⁵ Walter Pohl, "A non-Roman empire in Central Europe," in *Regna and Gentes. The Relationship between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, ed. by Hans-Werner Goetz – Jörg Jarnut – Walter Pohl, Leiden – Boston, 2003, p. 572.

¹⁶ Jellinek, *Allgemeine Staatslehre*, p. 144.

¹⁷ *Records of the Grand Historian of China*, trans. by Burton Watson, vol. 2, New York – London, 1968, pp. 160-162.

and to reckon the number of persons and animals. According to the *Shih chi*, the Hsiung-nu Empire had laws, not only customs.¹⁸ Some recent scholars claim that Mo-tun's reign was a process corresponding to the foundation of a state in the steppe.¹⁹ They are right, since many components of statehood can be seen in the Hsiung-nu Empire: permanent institutions, the centralization of supreme authority, the specialization of governmental roles within an official hierarchy, and the paramount importance of loyalty to the state.

As the most important features of statehood appeared in our case-study as well, the "steppe-state" and the "steppe-empire" are both eligible terms for defining the early Hungarian political system.

The birth of Hungarian statehood (c. 850)

Two historical sources explain the process of Hungary's transformation from an oligarchic pre-state entity to a monarchic state. One of them is the *De Administrando Imperio*, the other is the *Gesta Hungarorum*, focusing on the Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian Basin and written by an Anonymous Hungarian clergyman – who might have been a notary of King Béla III (1172-1196) – in the first decades of the thirteenth century.²⁰ These two narrative sources contain a few common features and many opposing statements. At first we should refer to the earlier document. Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus of Byzantium (913-959) compiled a didactic work on the governance of the Empire. This book, entitled *De Administrando Imperio*, contains secret and confidential information on internal and foreign policy, as well as "a comprehensive historical and geographical survey." This information was collected from various sources: documents of foreign relations and internal administration, historical works and reports told by legates. The

¹⁸ Ssu-ma Ch'ien, *Shih chi*, pp. 163-164.

¹⁹ Christian David, *Inner Eurasia from Prehistory to the Mongol Empire*, A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia, vol. 1, Oxford, 1998, pp. 184-185; Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies. The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asia History*, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 175-176.

²⁰ László Veszprémy, "Historical past and political present in the Latin Chronicles of Hungary (12th-13th centuries)," in *The Medieval Chronicle*, ed. by Erik Kooper, Amsterdam – Atlanta, 1999, p. 260.

compilation did not result in a homogenous text, as the separate information was kept in its original form.²¹

“The nation of the Turks [Hungarians] had of old their dwelling next to Chazaria, in the place called Lebedia, after the name of their first voivode (πρώτου βοεβόδου), which voivode was called by the personal name of Lebedias, but in virtue of his rank was entitled voivode, as have been the rest after him. Now in this place, the aforesaid Lebedia, there runs a river Chidmas, also called Chingilous. They were not called Turks at that time, but had the name *Sabartoi asphalti*, for some reason or other. The Turks were seven clans (γενεαί), and they had never had over them a prince either native or foreign, but there were among them *voivodes* ... They lived together with the Chazars for three years, and fought in alliance with the Chazars in all their wars.”²² This description contains several uncertain elements: the location and the duration of Lebedia. According to Romilly James Heald Jenkins, whose commentary summarizes the different opinions of modern scholars, the Chidmas has been sought in Kodyma, Inchul, Donets, Don, etc; “Lebedia itself has been located on the Dnieper, between the Dnieper and the Don, and on the banks of the Meotis and the Kuban.”²³ There is a lot of information that does not appear to be certain. It is sure that the first mentioned land of the Hungarians was in an Eastern European region of the Don and the Azovian Sea. Having neither a native, nor a foreign monarch, their political system could be considered an independent “pre-state,” governed by an oligarchy.

According to chapter 38 of the *De Administrando Imperio*, the Hungarians moved from Lebedia to Etelkuzu. Then the chagan of Chazaria confronted Lebedias and “said to him: *We have invited you upon this account, in order that, since you are noble and wise and valorous and first among the Turks, we may appoint you prince (αρχοντα) of your nation, and you may be obedient to our word and our command.* But he, in reply, made answer to the chagan: *Your regard and purpose for me I highly esteem and*

²¹ Romilly James Heald Jenkins, “General Introduction,” in Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio, Volume I, Greek text*, ed. by Gyula Moravcsik, trans. by Romilly James Heald Jenkins, Washington, 1967, pp. 9-12.

²² *De Administrando Imperio*, ch. 38, pp. 170-171.

²³ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio, Volume II, Commentary*, ed. by Romilly James Heald Jenkins, London, 1962, p. 147.

express to you suitable thanks, but since I am not strong enough for this rule, I cannot obey you; on the other hand, however, there is a voivode other than me, called Almoutzis, and he has a son called Arpad; let one of these, rather, either that Almoutzis [Álmos] or his son Arpad, be made prince (αρχων), and be obedient to your word. The chagan was pleased at this saying, and gave some of his men to go with him, and sent them to the Turks, and after they had talked the matter over with the Turks, the Turks preferred that Arpad should be prince (αρχοντα) rather than Almoutzis his father, for he was of superior parts and greatly admired for wisdom and counsel and valour, and capable of this rule; and so they made him prince ... Before this Arpad the Turks had never at any time had any other prince (αρχοντα), and so even to this day [c. 950.] the prince of Turkey [Hungary] is from his family (γενεας αρχων Τουρκίας)."²⁴

Some centuries later, the aforementioned clergyman, the notary of King Béla, wrote that Álmos was elected first. "The Hungarian people (*gens Hungarorum*), most valiant and most powerful in the tasks of war, thus originated, as we said above, from the Scythian people (*de gente Scithica*) that are called in their own language Dentumoger. And their land was so full on account of the host of people born there that it was insufficient to sustain or keep them, as we said above. On account of this, the seven leading persons (*VII principales persone*), who right up to the present day are called the Hetumoger, not tolerating the pressures of space, having taken counsel among themselves to quit the soil of their birth, did not cease seeking by arms and war to occupy lands that they might live in. Then they chose to seek for themselves the land of Pannonia that they heard from rumour had been the land of King Attila, from those line Prince Álmos, father of Árpád, descended. Then these seven leading persons (*VII principales persone*) realized from their common and true counsel that they could not complete the journey begun unless they had a leader and the master (*ducem ac preceptorem*) above them. Thus, by the free will and common consent of the seven leading persons (*VII virorum*), they chose as their leader and master (*ducem ac preceptorem*), and of the sons of their sons to the last generation, Álmos, son of Ügek (...). Then they said with equal will to Prince Álmos (*Almo duci*): *From today we choose you as leader and master (ducem ac*

²⁴ *De Administrando Imperio*, pp. 172-173.

*preceptorem) and where your fortune takes you, there will we follow you. Then, on behalf of Prince Álmos (pro Almo duce) the aforesaid men swore an oath, confirmed in pagan manner with their own blood spilled in a single vessel.”*²⁵

Was Álmos or Árpád the first prince of the Hungarians? Did an independent monarchy come to life by election or was a “puppet state” founded by the Chazars? Several aspects can help us to decide which story best reflects history.

The *De Administrando Imperio* contains doubtful statements. At first, Lebedias had no right to this kind of renouncement without the consent of his own clan. Explicitly absurd is the idea that the son (Árpád) possessed more authority than his own living father (Álmos). In any case, the whole story of the Chagan’s offer is a re-applied model for state-building. The basic version can be found in the *De Administrando Imperio* itself. Chapter 29 explains how the people of Dalmatia got under Byzantine supremacy again. Earlier they “shook off the reigns of the empire of the Romans and became self-governing and independent, subject to none. Princes (αρχοντας), as they say, these nations had none, but only *zupans*, elders, as is in the rule in the other Slavonic regions. Moreover, the majority of these Slaves were not even baptized, and remained unbaptized for long enough.” But Emperor Basil I (867-886), Constantine’s grandfather, sent priests to baptize them, “and after baptizing them he then appointed for them princes (αρχοντας), whom they themselves approved and chose, from the family (γενεας) which they themselves loved and favoured. And from that day to this their princes come from these same families, and from no other.”²⁶ It is obvious that some components were transferred to the Hungarian case (the fact that the Hungarians originally had neither native, nor foreign princes, that the rulers were assigned by a foreign monarch with the right of election, or that the elected vassal dynasties had continued to

²⁵ *Anonymus and Master Roger. Anonymi Bele Regis Notarii Gesta Hungarorum. Anonymus, Notary of King Béla: The Deeds of the Hungarians*, ed. and trans. by Martyn Rady – László Veszprémy, *Magistri Rogerii Epistola in miserabile carmen super destructione Regni Hungariae per Tartaros facta. Master Roger’s Epistle to the sorrowful lament upon the destruction of the Kingdom of Hungary by the Tatars*, trans. by János M. Bak – Martyn Rady, Budapest – New York, 2010, ch. 5, pp. 16-17.

²⁶ *De Administrando Imperio*, pp. 124-127.

hold power till the present). The role of the emperor in this story was played by a Chagan, even though in reality he could not have had enough power to subjugate the Hungarians. Ibn Rusta, an Arab author from the first part of tenth century, recorded that the Chazars had to fortify themselves against the Hungarians and other neighbouring nations.²⁷ This event is connected with the building of Sarkel, as *De Administrando Imperio* refers to it in chapter 42.²⁸ And when the Kabars – “the race (γενεας) of the Chazars” – had escaped from the khaganate after a civil war and joined the Hungarians,²⁹ the Chazars were not able to prevent the escape of the Kabars or force them to return. We do not know when the Kabars left the Chazars and joined the Hungarians, but in 881 the Kabars were fighting on the side of the Hungarians near Vienna.³⁰

Why was the Chagan’s offer made? Perhaps Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus or his imperial court knew about the existence of two forms of the Hungarians’ early political system: an oligarchic pre-state with Lebedias, and the monarchy of Árpád (in fact, Álmos). Composing the *De Administrando Imperio*, the authors wanted to unite these two fragments into one story, without knowing the transition. That is why the state-organizing model from chapter 29 was transferred into the narrative. It is quite possible that Lebedias and Álmos were not contemporaries: Lebedias lived in the eighth century, or even earlier.³¹ The Anonymous notary of King Béla asserts that Álmos was born in 819.³² The year is approximately correct, because his grandson Liountikas [Levente] was an adult person, a warlord, c. 895, therefore Álmos could be elected c. 850.³³ We also cannot find the reason for denying the information on the supreme power of Álmos given by the *De Administrando Imperio*. In any case, other sources – the chronicle of

²⁷ Joseph Marquart, *Osteuropäische und ostasiatische Streifzüge*, Leipzig, 1903, p. 28.

²⁸ *De Administrando Imperio*, pp. 182-183.

²⁹ *De Administrando Imperio*, pp. 174-175.

³⁰ *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptorum*, vol. 30/2, Lipsiae, 1934, p. 742.

³¹ József Deér, “A IX. századi magyar történet időrendjéhez” [The chronology of the Hungarian history in the ninth century], *Századok* 79-80 (1945-1946), pp. 7-9.

³² Anonymus, *Gesta Hungarorum*, pp. 12-13.

³³ *De Administrando Imperio*, pp. 176-177.

Albericus Monachus *Trium Fontium* from the thirteenth century³⁴ and *Chronicon Zagradiense* from the fourteenth century³⁵ – recorded the reign of Álmos. The mythical tradition of the Hungarian chronicles focuses on Álmos, too. “In Scythia a son was born to Eleud, who was the son of Ugeg, by Eunodbilia; and this son of Eleud was given the name of Almus. For when his mother was big with child, she dreamed that a bird flew towards her which had the likeness of a hawk, and that from her womb a torrent gushed forth and spread itself over strange lands; and this was a sign that renowned kings would be born from her womb. Because in our language a dream is called ‘alm,’ and because the birth of this child was foretold in a dream, he was called Almus.”³⁶

Considering all of these arguments, in this case we have to accept the internal tradition. As the *Gesta Hungarorum* states, Álmos was the first Hungarian monarch and his election was initiated by no foreign power. How did Álmos get the opportunity to acquire monarchic power? The Byzantine and the Hungarian narrations equally say that he was one of the seven leading persons, not a newly arrived foreigner. But the *De Administrando Imperio* contains a remark: at the time of Lebedias, the Turks [Hungarians] were originally known as “strong Sabirs.” The Byzantine text did not give a reason for this change. It is possible that the renaming was caused by the monarchy of Álmos, as a new clan leader used to bring a new identification for an ethnic group, but the self-designation was “Magyar” not “Turk.” Designating them as “Turks” reflected Constantine’s external point of view. Furthermore, we do not know the exact circumstances of the election. The Anonymous notary of King Béla brought into connection the need for a new (the highest) governmental structure with the need for a new homeland.

Things are much less complicated when it comes to the name of the new monarch. The ruler was mentioned in the same way by independent authors. On the one hand, in *De Administrando Imperio*, Árpád can be found as “the great prince of Turkey” (μέγας Τουρκίας

³⁴ Georg Heinrich Pertz, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptorum*, vol. 23, Hannoverae, 1874, p. 748.

³⁵ Emericus Szentpétery, *Scriptores Rerum Hungaricarum*, vol. 1, Budapest, 1937, p. 206.

³⁶ *The Hungarian Illuminated Chronicle. Chronica de Gestis Hungarorum*, ed. by Dezső Dercsényi, trans. by Alick West, Budapest, 1969, p. 98; *Scriptores* 1, p. 284.

αρχων),³⁷ while on the other, a half century later, Bruno of Querfurt alluded to a mission which was sent to Árpád's great-grandson Géza, "the Great Lord of the Hungarians (*ad Ungarorum seniore[m] magnum*)."³⁸ As *megas arkhon* and *senior magnus* mean *great prince* equally, the political formation which existed between c. 850-1000 can be defined as the Hungarian Great Principality.

The structure of the Hungarian steppe-state before 1000

A durable possession of a territory is one of the fundamental requirements of statehood. From this point of view the Hungarian Great Principality was an unusual historical phenomenon: soon after its beginnings it gave up a territory for another. The original place called *Etelköz* (*Etel-kuzu*, "between the rivers") or *Dentümogyer* (*Dentumoger*) can be located by means of its rivers the Barouch, the Koublu, the Trullos, the Broutos and the Seretos,³⁹ nowadays the Dnieper (?), the Bug, the Dniester, the Pruth and the Seret; *Etel* itself could have been the name of a specific river (the Volga, the Dun or the Dnieper).⁴⁰ This land was held by the Hungarians, whilst they moved into the Carpathian Basin in ca. 862-895.⁴¹ This study will not analyse the well-planned and long-lasting process of the Hungarian conquest,⁴² but will limit itself to emphasizing that the Hungarian Great Principality represented a type of Eurasian steppe-empire in Central Europe until ca. 1000, when it was re-organized as a Christian kingdom. Thus, Hungary existed in the Carpathian Basin with the governmental structure of a steppe-state for a century.

Emperor Leo VI, the Wise (886-912), father of Emperor Constantine VII, described the different political systems of the East and Central

³⁷ *De Administrando Imperio*, pp. 178-179.

³⁸ Jadwiga Karwasińska, *Monumenta Poloniae Historica*, ns, vol. 4/2, Warsaw, 1969, p. 19.

³⁹ *De Administrando Imperio*, pp. 172-175.

⁴⁰ Jenkins, *Commentary*, pp. 148-149.

⁴¹ Béla Miklós Szóke, *The Carolingian Age in the Carpathian Basin*, Budapest, 2014, pp. 111-116.

⁴² For more details, see: György Szabados, "A magyarok bejövételének hadtörténeti szempontú újraértékelése" [The new interpretation of the Hungarian conquest from the side of military history], *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 123 (2010), pp. 215-235.

European steppe-people in this way: “The Scythian nations are one, so to speak, in their manner of life and their organization; they have a multitude of rulers, and they have done nothing of value, living for the most part as nomads. Only the nation of the Bulgarians, and also that of the Turks [Hungarians], give thought to a similar military organization, which makes them stronger than the other Scythian nations as they engage in close combat under one commander.”⁴³ Although the text of his *Taktika* is mainly based on the *Strategikon*, which was probably written by Emperor Maurikios (582-602),⁴⁴ and although the Avars and the Turks were characterized the same way,⁴⁵ the *Taktika* is useful as Leo supplemented the basic text with current information. One of these supplements referred specifically to the Hungarians. “This nation has a monarchical form of government and is subjected to cruel and oppressive punishments by their rulers for their offenders.”⁴⁶ Emperor Leo’s description proves, without a doubt, that the Hungarians were ruled by a strong, centralized power.

Much more difficult is defining the social groups within the Hungarian steppe-state. The starting point is the *Taktika* again: “until the day of battle they are spread about according to tribes and clans” (κατὰ γένη καὶ φυλάς).⁴⁷ This description was taken from the *Strategikon*, including references to the system of the clans and tribes of the Avars and Turks.⁴⁸ Generally “clan” was used in the sense of a genuine social formation based on kinship ties, while “tribe” was an artificial association of clans for political and military reasons.⁴⁹ All the interpretations are faced with difficulties stemming from the inconsistent terminology of the sources and the secondary literature, as

⁴³ George T. Dennis, *The Taktika of Leo VI*, Washington, 2014, pp. 452-453.

⁴⁴ Gyula Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica. Die byzantinische Quellen der Geschichte der Türkvölker*, vol. 1, Leiden, 1983, pp. 402-404.

⁴⁵ *Das Strategikon des Maurikios*, ed. by George T. Dennis, Wien, 1981, pp. 360-361.

⁴⁶ *The Taktika*, pp. 454-455.

⁴⁷ *The Taktika*, pp. 456-457.

⁴⁸ *Das Strategikon*, pp. 362-363.

⁴⁹ Bálint Hóman, *Geschichte des ungarischen Mittelalters, I. Band, Von den ältesten Zeiten bis zum Ende des XII. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin, 1940, pp. 61-63.

well.⁵⁰ These problems appeared in chapters 39-40 of the *De Administrando Imperio* concerning the *geneas* of the Hungarians and the Kabars. The Kabars, “the race (γενεας) of the Chazars,” joined the Hungarians and “they have been promoted to be first clans (γενεαι). There is one prince among them, I mean, among the three clans of the Kabaroi (...). The first is this aforesaid clan (γενεά) of the Kabaroi which split off from the Chazars; the second, of Nekis; the third, of Megeris; the fourth, of Kourtogermatos; the fifth, of Tarianos; the sixth, Genach; the seventh, Kari; the eight, Kasi.”⁵¹

The Hungarian governmental system was discussed as a heterogenous matter, including political and military history, the family tree of Árpád’s descendants and the three levels of the highest dignities: “These eight clans (γενεαι) of the Turks do not obey their own particular princes (αρχοντας), but have a joint agreement to fight together with all earnestness and zeal upon the rivers, wheresoever war breaks out. They have for their first chief (αρχοντα) the prince who comes by sucession of Arpad’s family (γενεας), and two others, the gylas and the karchas, who have the rank of the judge; and each clan has a prince (γενεα αρχοντα). Gylas and karchas are not proper names, but dignities.” Then the Emperor mentioned Termatzous, Árpád’s great-grandson, “who came here recently as a *friend* with Boultzous [Bulcsú], third prince and karchas of Turkey (τρίτου αρχοντος και καρχα Τουρχίας). The karchas Boultzous is the son of the karchas Kalis, and Kalis is a proper name, but karchas is a dignity, like gylas, which is superior to karchas.”⁵² Three levels of the ranks are mentioned by *De Administrando Imperio*: Arpad, the great prince of Turkey (μέγας Τουρχίας αρχων) and his descendants; two other princes, the gylas and the karchas (although gylas was superior to karchas, therefore karchas Bulcsú was the third prince); on a lower level, eight princes of the eight clans, with weaker authority. Correlating these eight (earlier seven) princes with the “seven leading persons” of the *Gesta Hungarorum* we

⁵⁰ Richard Tapper, *Frontier Nomads of Iran. A Political and Social History of the Shahsevan*, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 5-10; Jonathan Karam Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbours. Culture, Power, and Connections, 580-800*, Oxford, 2012, pp. 34-35.

⁵¹ *De Administrando Imperio*, pp. 174-175.

⁵² *De Administrando Imperio*, pp. 178-179.

can regard these *geneas* as clans rather than as tribes, according to Jenkins and his translation cited above. This ancient organization of the leading clans had been shadowed by the rising central power in the mid-ninth century when Great Prince Álmos was elected. This conclusion is strengthened by further aspects of diplomacy, military history and archaeology.

The foreign policy of the Hungarian Great Principality was significantly active during the tenth century. It was manifested by offensive wars, on the one hand, and alliances, on the other. In many cases these two components complemented and strengthened each other. Although the Hungarian archers terrified Christian Europe, their raids were not simply marauding campaigns, but strategically well-organized expeditions, serving their interests and helping the allies, for example King Berengar I of Italy (904-924), Duke Arnulf of Bavaria (913-921).⁵³ The Hungarians were significantly different from the Norsemen and the Arabs. While the Norsemen or the Arabs could fight between among themselves as mercenaries of inimical powers, the Hungarians never turned against each other.⁵⁴ Regularity can be found in the directions of their military expeditions, too. Most of them were led towards the west, some of them to the south-east, but not towards the northern and eastern neighbourhood of the Carpathians, even though there were important commercial routes.⁵⁵ All of these circumstances prove the centralized political will of a strong state.

Last but not least, it would be useful to look back at the theoretically postulated components of this early statehood and identify them in the sources. When the seven leading persons chose Álmos as their leader and master to occupy a land that they might live in, they fulfilled Aristotle's postulate, according to which "the state is the highest

⁵³ Szabolcs von Vajay, *Der Eintritt des ungarischen Stämmebundes in die europäische Geschichte (862–933)*, Mainz, 1968, pp. 81-84.

⁵⁴ László Révész, *Emlékezzetek utatok kezdetére... Régészeti kalandozások a magyar honfoglalás és államalapítás korában* [Remember the beginning of your journey... Archeological adventures of the age of the Hungarian conquest and foundation of the state], Budapest, 1999, pp. 187-188.

⁵⁵ Csanád Bálint, "A kalandozások néhány kérdéséhez" [Some remarks on the Hungarian raids], in *Nomád társadalmak és államalakulatok* [Nomadic societies and state development], ed. by Ferenc Tókei, Budapest, 1983, p. 358.

form of community and aims at the highest good.” The persistence of the human community in space and time was realized when the Hungarians moved from Etelköz into the Carpathian Basin and became its inhabitants for generations. Both of these territories were ruled permanently (in the case of Etelköz, relatively permanently). Their centralized power and military force were emphasized by Emperor Leo VI. The sovereignty of the Great Hungarian Principality was unambiguous not only in terms of its strong warring attitudes; its independence was recognized by other similarly constituted states and empires with the high titles of *megas arkhon* and *senior magnus*. The governance had permanent institutions: (great) prince, *gylas* and *karchas*, and lower leaders (heads of the main clans). *Gylas* and *karchas* had the rank of judge, so a specialization of governmental roles could also be seen. These dignities show more than an ephemeral stability of the structure, and as neither the *gylas*, nor the *karchas* was a descendant of Álmos, they were both emancipated from the kinship of the ruling dynasty. The monarch had the supreme authority and as the eight clans did not obey their own chieftains, their loyalty turned from their particular leaders to the supreme power holder. Thus, the Hungarian Great Principality was a centralized steppe-empire and the basic components of statehood can be validated by recourse to the sources.

The cause of the transformation

At the turn of the first millennium there was no longer any possibility to go on with this archaic organization. On the one hand, the warring Hungarian Great Principality had to finish its raids (in 955 to the west and in 970 towards the east), because the two Christian Empires (Germany, Byzantium) had been strengthened by this time and they did not tolerate a heathen steppe-empire in Central-Europe. On the other hand, Great Prince Géza (c. 972-997) baptized himself and his son, later King Stephen I the Saint, causing a conflict between the heathen and the Christian lines of the dynasty. Which line was to inherit the supreme power? How could Hungarian politics be steered? As Géza entered into an alliance with the Saxon dynasty of Germany and his son Stephen

married princess Gisele in 955,⁵⁶ it became clear that their succession would lead to an irreversible transformation of the political system.

Soon after Géza's death in 997, the final battle between Stephen and his kinsman Cupan (Koppány) took place. Cupan descended from one of the oldest lines of the dynasty. It is not clear which elder son of Árpád's was his ancestor, but it is sure that Cupan was a kinsman of Stephen's, otherwise he could have had no right to fight for the supreme power. Thus, their battle was a struggle for the throne and entailed a clash between the heathen (Cupan) and Christian (Stephen) lines of the dynasty.

"In his adolescence and to his great glory King St. Stephen waged war against the brave and powerful Duke Cupan. Now Cupan was the son of Zyrind the Bald, who in the lifetime of Duke Géza, father of King St. Stephen, held sway over a duchy. On the death of Duke Géza, Cupan desired to enter into an incestuous marriage with the mother of King St. Stephen, and to kill St. Stephen and to possess himself of his duchy. He was the duke of Symigium."⁵⁷ Our sources did not give any further information about Cupan's lineage, but two data in the aforementioned text prove that Zyrind and his son Cupan were the descendants of Álmos. On the one hand, an "incestuous" marriage was actually a wide-spread custom in the steppe: when the head of a dynasty or a clan died, his eldest kinsman had to marry his widow to keep her clan within the alliance. On the other hand, Cupan wanted to acquire supreme power over Hungary, and his effort would have been impossible, if he had not been a patrilinear member of the dynasty. Thus, when Stephen defeated Cupan, he became the last Great Prince (997-1000) and, after the royal coronation, he was the first king of Hungary (1000-1038). His coronation was supported by the Pope and the German emperor as well, and thus

⁵⁶ Georg Heinrich Pertz, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptorum*, vol. 5, Hannoverae, 1844, p. 117. On Géza's dynastical foreign policy generally, see Szabolcs von Vajay, "Großfürst Geysa von Ungarn. Familie und Verwandtschaft," *Südostforschungen* 21 (1962), pp. 45-101.

⁵⁷ *The Hungarian Illuminated Chronicle*, p. 105; *Scriptores* 1, pp. 312-313.

his kingdom became a member of the Western-European Christian world.⁵⁸

Transformations of the Roman world⁵⁹

King Stephen I brought new components and customs into his realm. He not only started to issue laws or charters, but elaborated a state-theory, too, in a treatise which was dedicated to his son, Prince Emeric the Saint, and based on the spiritual and political heritage of European antiquity and the Carolingian era.⁶⁰

In the preface to the royal law and in his *Admonitions*, Rome appeared as the model or the source-root of his realm. On the one hand, in his introduction to the royal law he stated: "Since every people use their own law, we, governing our monarchy by the will of God and emulating both ancient and modern caesars, and after reflecting upon the law, decree for our people too the way they should lead an upright and blameless life."⁶¹ On the other hand, in his state-theory, he pointed out the Roman heritage: "Guests and newcomers bring so much profit that they can stand properly in sixth place in the regal dignity. For the Roman Empire waxed in the beginning and the Roman kings became loftly and glorious because many noble and wise men came to them

⁵⁸ Ferenc Makk, *Ungarische Außenpolitik (896-1196)*, Herne, 1999, p. 32; Kornél Bakay, "Hungary," in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 3, ed. by Timothy Reuter, Cambridge, 1999, p. 548.

⁵⁹ The title of this chapter was inspired by the series of books entitled *Transformations of the Roman World*. These volumes analyse the political, cultural and economic changes of early medieval Europe.

⁶⁰ László Havas, "Sulle corrispondenze dell' *Admonitio* di Santo Stefano con l'epoca carolingia," *Camoenae Hungaricae* 7 (2010), pp. 5-11; László Havas, "A Szent István-i *Intelmek* mind a teokratikus keresztény monarchia eszményének úttörő jelentőségű metaforikus műfaji megszólaltatása" [St. Stephen's *Admonitions* as a metaphoric expression of the significance of the ideal of Christian theocratic monarchy], *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 115 (2012), pp. 363-379.

⁶¹ János M. Bak – György Bónis – James Ross Sweeney, *The Laws of the Medieval Hungary, 1000-1301. Decreta Regni Mediaevalis Hungariae, 1000-1301*, vol. 1, Idyllwild, 1999, p. 1.

from different regions. Rome would still be servile had the sons of Aeneas not made her free.”⁶²

This new era began not only in the theoretical spheres, but in the practices of governance, too. None of the old dignities could survive: new dignities and new institutions were initiated by him and his successors. It was a process that lasted throughout the eleventh-thirteenth centuries, but some basic components were established by King Stephen.

The Hungarian Great Principality operated without any specific territorial division (probably with the self-governance of the clans under the aforementioned central power of the monarch): on the contrary, Stephen I started to organize the administrative units of the Kingdom of Hungary.⁶³ The basic territorial unit was called *comitatus*, and these counties were not inheritable. This fundamental characteristic originated in their function: a *comitatus* was not to allow a local landlord to resist the royal power, on the contrary, it was established by the king to enforce his supreme authority over the local spheres. Thus, the *comes*, or the head of a *comitatus*, was not a hereditary count: he was just a royal officer.

This basic difference between the western and the Hungarian practices can be measured at the level of the higher dignities as well. The highest secular dignity after the king was the count palatine (*comes palatinus*) or the palatine (*palatinus*) in the short version. Although this office reflected the contemporary Bavarian and early Frankish model, this institution would soon undergo alterations in the Hungarian circumstances.⁶⁴ First, the count palatine was the head of the judicial administration: he replaced the king in court and governed the royal

⁶² Előd Nemerkenyi, “The Religious Ruler in the Institutions of St. Stephen of Hungary,” in *Monotheistic Kingship, The Medieval Variants*, ed. by Aziz Al-Azmeh – János M. Bak, Budapest, 2004, p. 238; László Havas, *Sancti Stephani Regis Primi Hungariae Libellus de institutione morum sive Admonitio spiritualis. Szent István Erkölcstanító könyvoecske avagy Intelmek I*, Debrecen, 2004, pp. 34-37.

⁶³ Gyula Kristó, *A vármegyék kialakulása Magyarországon* [Development of counties in Hungary], Budapest, 1988.

⁶⁴ Tibor Szócs, *A nádori intézmény korai története 1000-1342* [The early history of the institution of the count palatine, 1000-1342], Budapest, 2014.

estates as *comes pallacii*.⁶⁵ This institution was established before 1038 and the first palatine was Samuel Aba, a *sororius* (actually, a nephew, not a brother-in-law) of King Stephen I.⁶⁶ Samuel Aba, later the King of Hungary, was the only palatine during the Árpáadian period who shared the king's bloodline. None of the following office-holders was of royal kin. This change may have been related to the crisis of the kingdom. Stephen I imprisoned and later blinded his cousin Vazul and expelled Vazul's three sons. As Stephen survived his own sons, Emeric was succeeded by his two nephews on the female line: Peter Orseolo (1038-1041, 1044-1046) and Samuel Aba (1041-1044). Nevertheless, the three dukes mentioned above returned, two of them became kings, Andrew I (1046-1060) and Béla I (1060-1063), and all the kings who ruled Hungary from 1046 until 1301 were thus patrilinear descendants of Vazul. It is remarkable that Aba was palatine during Peter's first reign, too, and therefore King Andrew I wanted to reform the designation practice: neither his two known palatines,⁶⁷ nor any of the later ones were consanguineous with the kings. Because the palatinal institution was separated from the royal kin, the governance of the state became more impersonal.

The next postulated factor of statehood can be the specialization of governmental roles. In Hungary this happened during the reign of King Stephen II (1116-1131), when the former function of the palatine was split into two functions. While the development of the palatinal institution led towards the public administration of justice,⁶⁸ a new dignity appeared ca. 1127/1131. Originally it was called the *curialis comes*,⁶⁹ but during the 1230s it was renamed to judge royal (*iudex curiae regiae*). This institution was established for replacing the king in court

⁶⁵ *Scriptores* 2, p. 500.

⁶⁶ *Scriptores* 1, p. 325; György Szabados, *Magyar államalapítások a IX–XI. században. Előtanulmány a korai magyar állam történelmének fordulópontjairól* [The Hungarian state formation from the ninth to the eleventh century. Introductory study on turning points of early Hungarian state history], Szeged, 2011, pp. 306-309.

⁶⁷ György Györffy, *Diplomata Hungariae Antiquissima accedunt epistolae end acta ad historiam Hungariae pertinentia* (henceforth DHA), vol. 1, Budapest, 1992, doc. 43/1, p. 52, doc. 46, p. 62.

⁶⁸ Szócs, *A nádori intézmény*, pp. 33-49.

⁶⁹ DHA 1, doc. 157, p. 424.

and governing the royal estates, but almost a century later (c. 1219) the economic functions were taken over by the master of the treasury (*magister tavernicorum*).⁷⁰ In the first part of the thirteenth century, the highest dignities were specialized and the two judicial ranks were clearly defined and separated by the Golden Bull (1222) of King Andrew II (1205-1235). "The count palatine shall judge without differentiation all the men of our realm, but cases concerning nobles condemned to capital punishment and loss of possessions shall not be concluded without the king's knowledge. He shall have no deputy judge except for the one at his own court (...). Our judge royal shall be able to judge all while he resides in our court and shall have the right to pass sentence anywhere in cases initiated at the court, but when he stays on his estates he shall not be able to dispatch bailiffs or cite parties to a suit."⁷¹

Because of the strong centralized state-power, offices were not inheritable during this period. Not only the palatine, but all other governmental dignities were dependant on the royal grace: besides the already mentioned ones, this was also true for the governors of the larger territorial units of the kingdom (the bans of Slavonia, Croatia and Dalmatia, the voivodes of Transylvania, etc.). Thus, even the count palatine could not reach the position of the *maior domus* in the early Frankish history and could not "upgrade" his rank to the royal level. After the extinction of the first Hungarian dynasty, three external princes struggled for the royal throne, and they were all matrilinear descendants of the Árpáds.

Conclusion

At the turn of the first millennium, a Central-European steppe empire became extinct and a Central-European Christian kingdom – based on the post-Roman political tradition of governmental system – started its existence. The year 1000, as the turning point, cannot represent a long-lasting process, of course. It is only a symbolical date for separating two eras in the Hungarian past. However, if we consider the political phenomena (the two types of early Hungarian statehood

⁷⁰ Gusztáv Wenzel, *Árpádkori Új Okmánytár. Codex Diplomaticus Arpadianus Continuatus*, vol. 6, Pest, 1867, doc. 247, p. 401.

⁷¹ *Decreta Regni Mediaevalis Hungariae*, p. 33.

and the path of its evolution) in their complexity, there can be found important characteristic features which are in contradiction with each other. On the one hand, the territory of the state and the dynastic legitimacy of the supreme power – and the dynasty itself – remained the same, the population remained the same, too (or, at least, its changes caused by immigrant groups were independent from political and governmental changes). On the other hand, royal legitimacy was completed by a new component: the Christian king could rule only “by the favour of God.” The supreme authority of the King of Hungary was controlled by the Christian faith and the royal council of the prelates and aristocrats (both of them were emphasized in the *Admonitions* of King Stephen I). Furthermore, new dignities had been initiated and the elder ones could not survive. Item new institutions had been initiated by the kingdom (e.g. territorial units, official literacy, including the codified laws) which had no antecedents in the principality. (Important aspects, which can represent or at least summarize the components of continuity and innovation, are given in the Appendix below.)

Thus, the Kingdom of Hungary was forged by the forces of continuity and innovation as well. Although it was a Christian monarchy based on the post-Roman tradition, the strong central power and high authority incorporated the ruling customs of the former steppe-empire. The synthesis of the old and the new characteristic features of the realm united in the Hungarian dynastic state.

Appendix. The components of continuity and innovation in the formation of the Hungarian state

	Great Principality	Kingdom
Form of state	monarchy	monarchy
Type of state	steppe empire	Christian kingdom, based on the post-Roman model
Territory of the state	“Etel-kuzu” earlier, Carpathian Basin later, ca. 862-1000	Carpathian Basin, from 1000
Population	conquering Hungarians and Kabars, Avars and Slavs	Hungarians, immigrating groups from east and west
Legitimacy of the highest power	to be a descendant of Almus	to be a descendant of Almus, <i>dei gratia</i>
Dignities	gylas, karchas, heads of clans	palatine, later judge royal, etc.
Inheritable dignities	+	–
Dignities as the members of the ruling dynasty	–	–
Territorial units	–	counties
Official literacy	–	Latin charters
Judge	customs	codified laws (Latin), customs