

Hungarian Travellers in Inner Asia and in the Area of the Mongols

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Summary: This article provides a brief overview regarding the handful of Hungarians who travelled to the heart of Asia, in particular, to the area of the Mongols. They can be categorized by their aims, motivations, and historical circumstances of the given periods: 1) the Tartar invasion in the 13th century; 2) the geographic expeditions and growing scientific interest of the 19th century; 3) the construction of Ulaanbaatar in the 1920s; 4) academic research, beginning with Louis Ligeti; and finally, 5) cooperation during the socialist era (Comecon). In addition to internationally known scholars, well-known travellers will be briefly introduced with the aim of enhancing general knowledge of European travellers' aims and experience among the peoples of Inner Asia. The present study is mainly based upon Hungarian secondary sources; its second section offers a new contribution to Hungarian–Mongolian connections in the 20th century, as well as listing the institutes that today house the majority of objects from Inner Asia, in particular from Mongolia, collected by Hungarian travellers. This Hungarian sample can be relevant to the general topic of travel interest in Asia, but it also features one recurrent and pre-dominant aspect: the ongoing search for the origin of the Hungarians.

Introduction: The Asian roots of Hungarians

The notion of their Asian roots has been an important part of Hungarians' (Magyars') identity ever since the Middle Ages. The Legend of the Miracle Stag¹ was recorded in the 13th century chronicle *Gesta Hunnorum et Hungarorum*. The Legend of the Miracle Stag is a myth about the journey of the ancestors of the Hungarians from the East to their present home in the Carpathian, or Pannonian basin, the headland of the Euro-Asian steppes in the heart of Europe. The original homeland of the Magyars,

1) For details, see Pintér 1996; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungarian_mythology.

a nomadic tribe from the Ural Mountains speaking a Finno-Ugric language, is referred to as the “Magna Hungaria”. The Magyars arrived in the Carpathian basin (inhabited by the Huns from the 4–6th centuries) in the 9th century, becoming a ruling elite in the territory of modern Hungary and Transylvania. Having adopted Christianity in the 11th century,² the Magyar rulers apparently had not forgotten about their “pagan brethren” living in their last known homeland in the Ural mountains, and several envoys were dispatched to establish connection with them in the 13th century. Some of these embassies indeed succeeded in finding Finno-Ugric speakers in the Urals whose language was mutually intelligible with Hungarian. Although between the 14th and 17th century no more attempts to contact the eastern Magyars took place, the search for the origin of Hungarians was revived during the Enlightenment and Romanticism periods. Alexander Csoma de Kőrös (1784–1842), known as the first Tibetologist, originally left Hungary to look for the relatives of the Magyars in Central Asia.

The Hungarians’ strong awareness of their eastern origins has been unique among the European nations. The reasons for their distinct self-perception are probably connected to both culture and language: living in the Pannonian grasslands, the Hungarians have long preserved many features of nomadic origin, including ancient beliefs and (militant) passion. In addition, Hungarian, a Turkic-influenced Finno-Ugric language, is remarkably different from the surrounding Indo-European languages.

In the following study, I try to show how this specific setting of the Hungarians played a crucial role in the motivation of Hungarian travellers of different eras who set out for Asia.

The period of the Tartar Invasion in the 13th century: Friar Julian’s travels

Travelling European friars played an important part in surveying the Tartar invasion, the lifestyle of the Mongols and Central and Inner Asia in the 13th century. They travelled for many reasons: converting pagans to

2) For details see Kristó 1996, 2001.

Christianity, serving kings and high priests as envoys, and studying the Mongol Khans' behaviour, army, subordinates and customs. Their reports have remained mostly in Latin.

The report of the Italian John of Plano Carpini (Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, 1182–1252) is well-known: he belonged to the Franciscan order and visited the Mongols at the request of Pope Innocent the Fourth. Carpini left Lyon in France in 1245, together with Friar Stephanus Bohemus. A Polish friar, Benedictus Polonus (Benedykt Polak, c. 1200–c. 1280) joined them in Poland and became their translator. Carpini handed over a papal bull to Batu Khan (1207–1255/56) in the royal tent that Batu had seized in Muhi in Hungary in 1241. Then, he travelled further to Karakorum, the capital of the Mongolian empire. He arrived back in Lyon with the response of Güyük Khan in 1247 (Györffy 1986, pp. 91–183).

William Rubruck (Willem van Ruysbroeck, Guillaume de Rubrouck or Willielmus de Rubruquis, c. 1220–c. 1293), the Flemish Franciscan missionary and explorer accompanied King Louis the Ninth of France, and in 1253 set out from Constantinople at the behest of the king on a missionary journey. “He followed the route of the first journey of the Hungarian Friar Julian, and in Asia that of the Italian Friar Plano Carpini.”³ He arrived back at the King's court in 1255; his description of Karakorum remains the most detailed (Györffy 1986, pp. 201–380).

Even before these famous clergy, one of the first friars to give an account of the Tartar invasion in Europe was Friar Julian. Before his journey, four Dominican friars were sent from Hungary to find the “Magna Hungaria.” They searched for three years, and finally, one of them, friar Otto who was traveling as a merchant, met up with some Hungarians. However, after returning to Hungary with the aim of recruiting others to join him and return to Asia, he suddenly died. Some years later, four more Dominican friars were sent in 1235 to look for the Magyars who remained in the East and convert them to Christianity. Two of them were forced to return, and Gerhardus died during the journey, but Friar Julian met with

3) For details, see Györffy 1986; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_of_Rubruck. He also states that three envoys, namely Plano Carpini, Ascelin of Lombardia in 1245 and André de Longjumeau in 1249 were sent before Rubruck to the Mongolian court.

Hungarians near the River Etil who welcomed him with great pleasure and perfectly understood his words. According to Friar Julian's account, they were brave and great warriors; the Tartars could not defeat them but lived with them in harmony. The Magyars lived in the vicinity of the Tartars, whose neighbours (the Mongols) were said to be aiming at conquering the world. Friar Julian returned to Hungary for two reasons: to inform the Hungarian King, Béla the Fourth of the location of the Hungarians who remained in the East, and because Julian well understood that the Christian conversion of these Hungarians could result in conflicts with their neighbours. Therefore, he returned to Hungary and wrote his report in Latin in 1237. The Pope (perhaps Pope Gregory the Ninth) was also informed of his findings (Györffy 1986, pp. 61–70).

The second trip of Friar Julian took place in 1236–1237. He met the Mongols, and even possessed or at least saw a letter from Batu himself which has since disappeared. Friar Julian's short account is an important source regarding the Mongols' way of living at that time (Györffy 1986, pp. 71–82).⁴

Despite the advance warning in the form of frightening news regarding the Mongolian invasion, Hungarians living in Hungary were defeated on 11 April 1241 on the bank of the river Sajó at the plateau of Muhi. The Mongols ravaged the country, but returned to Karakorum in 1242 as Ögödei Khaan had passed away and a new Khaan had to be enthroned. Hungarian historical sources, poems, and oral history have remained about the first and the second Tartar invasions in Hungary (e.g. B. Szabó 2007; Prebend Rogerius 2001); the second invasion of 1285 remained unsuccessful.

Geographical expeditions to Inner Asia and growing scientific interest in the 19th century

The second chapter in the history of Hungarian travellers to the heart of Asia occurred only in the 18th and particularly in the 19th centuries due to growing interest in the East. The study of the *Gesta Hunnorum et*

4) The reports of Friar Julian are kept in the Vatican. Pater Richardus wrote a report about the first trip (1235–1236), and Julianus himself penned his report *Letter about the Lifestyle of Tartars* regarding his second trip (1236–1238).

Hungarorum, the history of the Hungarians, turned the search for Hungarian relatives near the Urals and in Asia into a topical issue again: scientific research into linguistics and geography became lively. Hungarians travelled individually or in groups, including experts in different fields. One of the most famous travellers, Alexander Csoma de Kőrös (1784–1842) aimed at travelling to the area of the Uyghurs to find the Hungarians who had left Dzungaria. During his trip he ran out of funds. Assigned by British representatives to prepare a Tibetan dictionary, he lived seven years (1823–1830) in or near three different Tibetan monasteries in Ladakh: Zangla, Phuktal, and Kanam. (The first two are identified as Tibetan *bzang la* and *phug brag* while the Tibetan name of the third – Kanam – is not clear.) Csoma de Kőrös wrote the first Tibetan-English grammar and dictionary, and informed the West about Tibetan Buddhist culture; he laid the basis for Tibetan studies (Csoma 1834, 1910). He worked in the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta after 1831 and wished to continue his trip to the land of the Uyghurs in the hopes of achieving his original goal, but died suddenly in Darjeeling. His grave became an important pilgrimage site for Hungarians, and his achievements connect Hungarians to the Himalayas: Alexander Csoma de Kőrös is known to all Hungarians as an itinerant scholar of great endeavour and persistence. His testimony is preserved in the Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.⁵

Another Hungarian, Ármin Vámbéry (1832–1913) also focused on discovering the origin of Hungarians, resulting in accounts of Central Asia, especially Buhara. He wrote linguistic comparisons of the Turkic, Tartar and Hungarian languages. His testimony is also preserved in the Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.⁶

Sir Aurel Stein (Stein Aurél, 1862–1943) who led four expeditions from 1900–1930 to the oasis towns of the Silk Road, especially to Dunhuang, was also of Hungarian origin. A part of his findings is housed at present in the British Museum, whilst others are preserved in the Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.⁷ His expe-

5) https://konyvtar.mta.hu/index.php?name=v_3_2_1_csoma.

6) https://konyvtar.mta.hu/index.php?name=v_3_2_1_vambergy.

7) https://konyvtar.mta.hu/index.php?name=v_3_2_1_stein.

ditions strengthened the connection of Asia and Hungary; he was also a researcher who had connections with Buddhism.

Other research expeditions, such as the journeys of György Almásy (1867–1933, father of the famous explorer Count Leslie Almásy), and many other expeditions took place in China and in Tianshan: Jenő Cholnoky (1870–1950) travelled in China near the Yellow River; Jenő Zichy (1873–1906) travelled in the Caucasus;⁸ and Gyula Princz (1882–1973) travelled to Tianshan.

Among these travellers were nobles, sons of noble families, gentlemen and talented individuals such as the above-mentioned Alexander Csoma de Kőrös, who studied at the University of Göttingen. The majority of them became members of the Hungarian Geographical Society, founded in 1872, which had its own geographic bulletin; they also became members of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which had been founded in 1825. Their main purposes were the search for the origin of Hungarians in addition to their interests in geography, linguistics, and adventure.⁹

Scientific interest to Mongolia grew stronger in the 19th century. Joseph Budenz (1836–1892) studied at the University of Göttingen, and was one of the first linguists to compare words in Ugric, Turkic, and Mongolian: what we today refer to as Altaic studies. He wrote a book on Finnish (Finno-Ugric) Grammar, Mongolian grammar, and completed a Chuvash word list.

Ágnes Birtalan's most recent publication (Birtalan 2016) relates the biography and research of Gábor Bálint de Szentkatolna (1844–1913). Gábor Bálint de Szentkatolna lived in Urga for five months in 1873 collecting Khalkha materials after studying the Kalmyk language in Kazan, and visiting Kalmykia.

Louis Lóczy (1849–1920) was a famous geographer and geologist, who carried out research in the area of the Gobi Desert as well as other parts of Inner Asia in 1877–1880 as part of the expedition led by Count Béla Széchenyi (1837–1918) (Kreitner 1882).

8) For details, see Slobodník 2013.

9) There were many travellers in the 19th century searching for the ancient roots of Hungarians in Siberia as well.

Constructing Ulaanbaatar in the 1920s¹⁰

Historical reasons are to thank for the third chapter in the history of Hungarians living for some time in Asia. During and after World War I, Hungarian soldiers were transported to Siberian labour camps. Some prisoners of war crossed into Ulaanbaatar and remained there for some time when escaping or returning home. The years 1919, 1920, and 1921 are extremely important in the history of Mongolia, due to the Chinese invasion, the presence of the White Army of Ungern von Sternberg (1886–1921), the entry of the “liberating” Red Army, and the revolution, which took place in 1921. It was exactly in this pivotal historical period that some Hungarians arrived and strived to be of assistance in the construction of Ulaanbaatar. In addition, some “red” Hungarians seem to have arrived directly from Russia with the purposes of training the modern Mongolian army.

Prisoners of war returning from Siberian labour camps known by name were: Joseph Geleta (living in Mongolia from 1920–1929), Andor Radnóti-Roth (1922), Pál Báder (1924–1958), and his son, Jenő Báder, and Jenő Sallai or Szalay. Training the People’s Revolutionary Army were János Mészáros and a man whose surname was Pánczél.

Among them the most famous is Joseph Geleta (1893–1964), an electrician living in Mongolia cc. 1920–1929; he was the planner of the first Mongolian Parliament building (*Bömbögör Nagoon*, ‘the round green one’). Geleta had been an officer in World War I, and as a prisoner of war he was deported to Siberia. He did not join the October Revolution in 1917 and the Red Army, but wished to escape home through Mongolia and China. He arrived in Mongolia before Ungern von Sternberg, and perhaps fought in the Kuomintang army of the Chinese. He lived in Kyakhta where he married, then moved to Urga, becoming the chief electrical engineer for the Ministry of National Economy. He arrived in Hungary with his family in 1929. His notes were published as an adventure chronicle by Leslie Forbáth in Hungarian and in English, and translated into Mongolian as well (Forbáth 1934, Geleta 1936, Forbat 2016).

10) This section of my paper is drawn from my previous research concerning Hungarians who lived in Ulaanbaatar in the 1920s (Teleki 2012, pp. 110–111).

Andor Radnóti or Andor Roth (Andor Radnóti-Roth, 1893–1964) was a medical student at the University of Budapest. He was captured by the Russians, and worked in the hospital of Verhneudinsk (Ulan-Ude), becoming a doctor for the Hungarian soldiers of the Soviet army in Siberia, as well as near the River Selenge. He married a Russian woman, Ada Abramovna, and wished to return to Hungary via Mongolia and China. The Chinese troops invading Mongolia and the incursions of White Russian gangs in Mongolia hindered his plans. With the support of the writer-politician Ts. O. Dambadorj (1892–1932) and the Buryat scholar Tseveen Zhamcarano (1880–1942), Radnóti met the key figures of the revolution, including D. Sükhbaatar (1893–1923). He fought in Kyakhta in 1921, and was also a member of Kh. Choibalsan's (1895–1952) Committee of Assessment of Damages, subordinate to the provisional Mongolian government. He was an adviser to the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Army's Health Department until August 1922. He received permission on 1 April 1922 to use his three photographic cameras to take photographs of "non-military subjects." He arrived back in Hungary at the beginning of the 1930s. He revisited Mongolia as a veteran of revolutions before his death in 1964 (Kara 1971, pp. 1–8). His private documents and 66 photographs are preserved in the Hungarian National Museum.¹¹

The names of a handful of other Hungarian travellers have remained: for instance, Károly Nagy made three journeys to Mongolia and recorded an interview with Jenő Báder who shared his childhood memories of Hungarians living in Ulaanbaatar (Nagy 1985, pp. 307–316.). His account includes the following details:

Pál Báder was a young mason in Budapest. He became a prisoner of war in 1915, and lived in a prisoners' cell in Ulan-Ude where he worked as a repairman. He participated in the Revolution in October in 1917, and became a border guard near Kyakhta. He moved to Altanbulag in 1924, then to Ulaanbaatar. Being a mason, he participated in the building of several buildings of the modern city, such as the university, hospitals, schools, and other new buildings. He lived in Ulaanbaatar with his family and arrived in Hungary in 1958. His wife was Russian. Their son, Jenő

11) An interesting fact is that he took photos at the same Maitreya procession in Urga as the American explorer, Roy-Chapman Andrews (1884–1960).

Báder lived in Mongolia until the 1970s; he was a doctor, later working as receptionist at the Hungarian Embassy. He states: "Another escaped prisoner of war was Sallai Jenő (or Szalay) known by the Mongols as the 'German Sallai' as he was a smith and could handle instruments in a precise manner. After leaving Ulaanbaatar Sallai lived in Altanbulag until the 1950s." (Nagy 1985, p. 313.) He adds: "Military experts who assisted in organising the new Mongolian People's Revolutionary Army also resided in Mongolia for a while, such as someone whose family name was Pánczél and János Mészáros (residing in Mongolia in the early 1920s), who was a tall, thin man. He is said to have started as the leader of the guards of the Lenin Mausoleum in Moscow and to have become a military adviser in Mongolia a few years later. In Hungary he became an officer in the Horthy regime (lasting from 1919–1944), and died in 1956" (Nagy 1985, p. 313.). The bequests, if any, of these latter-named Hungarians in Mongolia remain unknown today.

Academic research beginning with Louis Ligeti

Much more detailed and more accurate information is certainly available concerning academic research work carried out in the area inhabited by the Mongols in the 20th century. The researchers who completed this work went on to develop Oriental studies at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Hungarian universities. Professor Louis Ligeti (1902–1987), who established the Department of Inner Asian Studies at Eötvös Loránd University in 1942, spent almost three years (1928–1931) in nine different monasteries in Inner Mongolia, including Malgai miao, Ke'erqin wang miao, Linyue si, Sifo miao, Longquan miao, Guangfa hongfo si, Hong miao, Wangzi miao, and Beizi miao. At these locations he studied monastic life, the Mongolian Kanjur and other sacred texts. Ligeti published reports and monographs resulting from his research expeditions (Ligeti 1933, 1934, 1942). He did fieldwork among the Moghols in Afghanistan from 1936–1937 (Ligeti 1939). Ligeti was a linguist who paid great attention to clarifying the words of Turkic origin in the Hungarian language. He defined three periods when Turkish elements were added to Hungarian: 1) during the migration and settlement of the Magyars

in Hungary; 2) before the Tartar invasion; and 3. during the century and a half of Ottoman rule in Hungary (1541–1686). He also paid close attention to questions of the Hungarian nation and the Hungarian language. He published the majority of his collected materials, and proposed research topics to his students. His bequest is secured in the Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and will be available to the public as of 2027. The texts, artefacts and other materials which he gathered on his various trips are held in such collections in Hungary as the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts.¹²

Byambiin Rinchen (1905–1977), professor of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences visited Hungary in 1955 and defended his PhD thesis. His thesis is preserved at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Rinchen invited some of Ligeti's students to visit the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, an especially meaningful gesture after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Therefore, in 1957, three students could visit Ulaanbaatar and also travelled to the countryside: András Róna-Tas (b. 1931), who went on to become a world-renowned expert in Altaic studies; Katalin Kóhalmi (1926–2012), a specialist of Manchu-Tungus languages, and György Kara (b. 1935), similarly a world-renowned Mongolist. The first expedition, in 1957, by these three students is considered as foundational for the present-day fieldwork of Hungarians in Mongolia: this research is continued by Alice Sárközi, Géza Bethlenfalvy, Mária Magdolna Tatár, Ágnes Birtalan, and many others. Professor András Róna-Tas has written a detailed monograph about this journey (Róna-Tas 1961), and, in recent years, has turned his attention to the prehistory of Hungarians. Another famous scholar of the period was Vilmos Diószegi (1923–1972). Diószegi was an ethnologist, interested in the shamanistic faith of the pagan Hungarians. He conducted research in South Siberia and in North Mongolia from 1957–1964, publishing several books related to shamanism (Diószegi 1958, 1960, 1962, 1967). He also researched the geographical occurrence, in Hungary, of belief in the magical consequences of being born with “surplus bones”.

12) http://hoppmuseum.hu/hopp_ferenc_en/.

His archive is preserved at the Institute of Ethnology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Museum of Ethnography.¹³

We must also mention the archaeologist István Erdélyi (b. 1931) co-leader of Mongolian-Hungarian excavations in Mongolia from 1961–1990, as well as the Turcologist István Vásáry (b. 1945) whose research focuses on the Turkic elements of the Golden Horde. József Terjék (b. 1941) studies Tibetan Buddhism and sacred texts written in Tibetan, whilst Judit Vinkovics (1952–2019) was a specialist in Mongolian Buddhist art.

Cooperation during socialism

Diplomatic relations between Hungary and Mongolia were established in 1950. Another group therefore is comprised of Hungarian statesmen and experts who visited Mongolia during the socialist era. Mongolian statesmen were in the habit of presenting gifts to their foreign guests, including Buddhist artefacts maintained now in various scientific institutions and private collections. In addition, archival documents and photographs exist concerning these diplomatic visits in both Mongolian and Hungarian archives.¹⁴

Within the framework of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) Hungarians worked in Mongolia to support herders and to assist in establishing factories, for example the Biokombinat in Songinokhairkhan district in Ulaanbaatar and the Meat Factory in Darkhan. Among others, Hungarian electricians worked in Ulaanbaatar, and geophysicists worked all over Mongolia, including the Gobi Desert.¹⁵

13) Dávid Somfai-Kara has published certain materials from this collection. Cf. Diószegi et al. 2002.

14) Zsolt Szilágyi and L. Altanzaya are currently preparing a monograph concerning this material.

15) Some brief accounts and old photographs are available at <https://mongolia.gportal.hu/>.

Collections in Hungarian libraries and museums

Unfortunately, not too much tangible heritage of Mongolian culture has remained in Hungary from the period of the Tartar invasion. Apart from the chronicles and reports of Friar Julian, other forms of literature and oral history commemorate this event; some contemporary weapons are available in the Hungarian National Museum. The Hungarian National Museum also preserves 66 photographs taken by Radnóti-Roth Andor around 1922 in Ulaanbaatar, as well as his private documents.

The Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, largely its Oriental Collection, preserves materials written or collected by Alexander Csoma de Kőrös, Ármin Vámbéry, Gábor Bálint de Szentkatolna, Aurél Stein, Louis Ligeti and other travellers, as well as Tibetan, Mongolian and Manchu manuscripts and block prints that were brought mainly from Mongolia during socialism.¹⁶

Whilst the shamanic data collection of Vilmos Diószegi belongs to the Institute of Ethnology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the items he collected from the Mongolian areas are housed in the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest. This museum also preserves about 700 Buddhist objects (statuettes, painted scrolls, etc.) collected by the Austrian traveller, Hans Leder (1843–1921) from Mongolia at the beginning of the 20th century (Lang-Bauer 2013).¹⁷ The Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts includes artefacts collected by Louis Ligeti as well as by other travellers to Tibet and Mongolia.

A selection of materials from the above-mentioned collections awaits publication (Birtalan, in preparation). In addition, there exist also other small, individual collections of statesmen, researchers and experts who visited Mongolia during socialism.

16) For catalogues see Kara 2000, Orosz 2009.

17) Cf. <http://gyujtemeny.neprajz.hu/neprajz.01.01.php?bm=1&kv=343866&nks=1;https://moncol.net>.

Conclusion

The interest of Hungarians in the East was very much connected to history and the origin of the Hungarian nation, language and religion, but at times resulted in the discovery of extraordinary new topics instead. Several scholars who focused on history or Altaic studies also ended up researching Hungarian origins, whilst others followed in the wake of pioneering travellers. The interest of Hungarians in the East is unbroken: even nowadays many researchers study historical, linguistic, religious and cultural connections to recall the meeting points with Asian nomadic nations.

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