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LÁSZLÓ LUKÁCS

THE CULT OF KING ST. STEPHEN IN THE HUNGARIAN FOLK TRADITION

During his life and in the decades following his death, our state-founding and church-organising king was not popular among the masses who still clung to paganism, the ancient Hungarian faith. Barely any folk tales were created of him in his life or directly thereafter. However, stemming from ecclesiastical customs and the legends about him, the veneration of our king, canonised in 1083, was very strong for a thousand years.[1] The customs associated with the personality of the state-founding king, his deeds, laws and the Hungarian crown were carefully cultivated by later kings and the nobility as well.[2]

Bálint Hóman repeatedly touches on the development of the cult of St. Stephen: "The roots of the national cult of St. Stephen date back to the time of his canonisation when in the eye of a generation that had lived through every atrocity and torment for half a century, internal and external wars, tyrannical rages and pagan riots, the character of King Stephen had been cleansed of all human weaknesses, only his virtues remained intact, and in light of these, the mighty figure of St. Stephen rose ever higher."[3]

It was the official, national, ecclesiastical veneration of St. Stephen that shaped and nurtured the folk traditions associated with him. His name, deeds,

1 Karsai 1938, pp. 156–256; Kósa 1980, p. 17; Török 1988a; 1988b, pp. 33–43; Török (ed.) 1988; Radics 1988; Sulyok 1989, pp. 41–47; Magyar 1996, p. 2000.
2 Klaniczay 1981, p. 276; 1986, p. 68; Kardos 1989, pp. 21–25
3 Hóman 1938, p. 4

battles with internal and external enemies and with paganism are not only recorded in our medieval legends, chronicles and historical songs, but also in our historical folk tales.

The following folk tale, collected at the end of the 19th century by Lajos Kálmán in Szőreg (Torontál county) illustrates the royal devotion of Stephen as a child: "When St. Stephen was a boy, he used to play a game at the seaside: he'd build a castle from pebbles. Then the king came along with his servants, and when they did not greet him, he became furious: 'I am the lord of my castle, why did they not greet me?!' 'How stupid!', he said. 'They pass me by and don't utter a word.' 'What?', asked the king, 'What did you say?' 'I'm just saying, after all I am a king in my own castle!' God may help you! And finally he became one."[4]

A group of the historic folk tales connected to King Stephen depict his fight with the pagans. Numerous elements of these tales originated from the Saint László and Matthias collection of legends, but were only later connected to St. Stephen.

In 2002, in Hari (Alsó-Fehér county) József Magyar recited the creation of the Torda Rift, the horseshoe print of King St. Stephen's horse in this manner: "As I heard the tale, the Tatars caught up with the king, with St. Stephen, not Saint László, with St. Stephen. And I saw it at the Torda Rift, his horseshoe was precisely imprinted in the stone. The horse galloped through here, and the rock split in two, then the Tatars fell behind, and plunged into the hole, and St. Stephen survived. It was by God's grace. Up there on the edge of the rift, the place is marked with a horseshoe imprint. You can see it properly, there is a circle like a big plate."[5]

King Stephen came across some shepherds offering a pagan sacrifice on the border of Hangony (Gömör and Kishont counties). Their shaman was doubting Christ's miraculous power, one of the shepherds prompted him to make water flow from the stone. Upon King Stephen's strong prayer, water began to sprout from the rock split in the shape of a cross. The spring and well thus created is still called King Stephen's well by the people in the Hangony area.[6]

4 Kálmány 1891, Vol. III, p. 302
5 Magyar 2008, p. 148
6 Balogh 2007, pp. 47–53

According to the tradition of the people of Torda (today: Turda, Romania), Saint László pursued by the Cumans, scattered gold coins to get away. The print of his horse's octagonal horseshoe is still preserved in a rock called "Patkoskő" [Horseshoe Rock] at the Torda Rift.[7] We find the same legendary elements in the following folk tale of Stephen, which explains the building of the Gisela Chapel in Veszprém: "When the pagans charged against Veszprém, only Queen Gisela was at home. Her husband, King St. Stephen was out in the country gathering an army. When he heard of the malady, he strode home immediately without an army. Of course, it was no longer possible to enter the castle from the flat side of the town because the enemy had blocked all the roads. So St. Stephen went around towards the high cliffs. He knew his wife usually took a steep hill to bring water for lunch up from the valley. But he didn't even have time to get off his horse, as the pagans noticed him and charged at him. His wife was praying for him in the big church. By the time she ran out upon hearing the commotion, St. Stephen had already jumped onto the cliff. As the frightened queen, in her haste, had brought a shiny crucifix with her, she began to wave it to show her husband which way to turn his horse. This way he was lucky to find the precipitous walking path, but the pagans would have caught up with him, had he not cast off his cloak, his sword, his pouch and his golden necklace. While the pagans were quarrelling over the precious items, and trying to free his golden horseshoe from the rocks, St. Stephen reached his wife at the top, unharmed. At the news of this, the pagans got so scared that they ran away of their own accord. On that very day, St. Stephen had a chapel built at the site where Gisela was waving the cross. The small chapel and the imprint, where his pursuers tried to free the horseshoe from, are still there today."[8]

After the conquest, the Hungarian ruling tribe occupied the Bakony region, a protected royal forest estate until the 14th century, where the names Szentkirályszabadja, Királyszentistván, Bakonyszentkirály all refer to our great king ["szent király" - Saint King, "Szent István" - Saint Stephen].[9] From

7 Cf. 1992, pp. 188–190
8 Sebestyén 1906, p. 483
9 Vajkai 1959, pp. 12–13

the diary of Noble János Székely for the years 1808-1866, joint landlord in Csögle village (Vas county): "You can find the village of "Szent Gál" here, that was granted hunting rights by our first King Saint Stephen. There is also a village here called "Szent István" [St. Stephen], where our King St. Stephen used to live. Nearby is Szent Király Szabadja, which was also our King St. Stephen's manor. Szent Gál served him with game and Szent Király Szabadja with food."[10] The royal hunters of Szentgál paid their taxes in game, which they brought up to the royal court for Christmas. Folk tradition considered the Bakony a royal hunting ground, where the people of Szentgál first had to offer royal swineherds, then royal hunters. The name *Szentkirályszéke* preserves one of King St. Stephen's favourite hunting and resting places, where he would take a rest on his way from Fehérvár to Felsőörs. *Királykút* above Lovas also commemorates the great king.

According to local tradition, two geographical names preserve the memory of the battle of 997 between Stephen and the rebel Koppány at the borders of Királyszentistván and Sóly in the field in the Séd valley surrounded by hills. It is the name of a group of rocks on the border of Királyszentistván: *Márton vára* [Martin's fortress] and *Vencel-lik [Wencelas' Hole]*. Before the battle, Prince István asked Saint Martin for help. We know that his military flags were also decorated with the image of Saint Martin. Vencellin, the German knight, was the commander of the prince's bodyguard and the ancestor of the Ják clan.

Travelling minstrels [*regősök* in Hungarian], who kept the pagan tradition alive, and sang of the origins, the battles and the leaders of the Hungarians, were placed under state supervision by King Stephen. In every county, they were moved to one village, which was supervised by the ispán. Their treasured knowledge was no longer up-to-date, their descendants went to serve the new times, Christianity and the Árpád dynasty. So only fragments of our heroic songs and historic tales survived, mostly on the edges of the Hungarian-speaking area or on archaic "enclaves".[11] Such fragments survived as *regölés* in

10 Hudi 2004, p. 139
11 Györffy 1977, pp. 362–363

Western Transdanubia, and *hejgetés* in Szeklerland (today: Romania) [*regölés* and *hejgetés* are folk traditions of singing and reciting Christmas folk songs]. On the day of the martyr St. Stephen, our minstrels went from house to house, most often presenting themselves as servants of St. Stephen, and with their songs they brought prosperity and fertility to the families. In Dozmat (Vas county), the minstrel songs did not feature the protomartyr, but the Saint King:

Where a wide, ornate road appears,
There rise stars of *Pisces* in the sky.
Hey, I hide in song, I hide in song!

It is covered in tiny sedges,
And frequented by the *Miraculous Deer.*
Hey, I hide in song, I hide in song!

»Though, if you went out, oh sire, *King St. Stephen*,
To hunt for game and bird,
And found no game, no bird,
Only caught sight of the *Miraculous Deer*.
Hey, I hide in song, I hide in song!

»Do not rush, do not rush, oh sire, *King St. Stephen*,
To my death.
I'm no game to shoot down,
But a messenger from the heavenly Father,
Who cometh to you.
Hey, I hide in song, I hide in song!

»*The bright rising sun* touches my forehead,
The bright, wondrous moon on my side,
On my right kidney are *stars of the sky*.
Hey, I hide in song, I hide in song!

I have antlers, with a thousand branches,
And the tips of my antlers like *myriad torches*,
Light up without a spark, go out without a blow.
Hey, I hide in song, I hide in song![12]

István Zsírai (1889), born in Dozmat, was a farmer and a village judge who served with Szekler soldiers in the First World War. From local tradition he knew that a group of the pagan Hungarians from Olad in Vas county migrated back to their "motherland", to the embrace of the Transylvanian mountains, to avoid Christianisation. They are the ancestors of the Szeklers. He noticed the kinship between his fellow Szekler soldiers and the Hungarians of Dozmat through the popular language, folk customs (*regölés*), and the expectation of the returning hero. The intelligent peasant, who had completed six years of elementary school, drew a parallel between the western and the eastern "guards" (people from the Őrség [a western region of Hungary today] and the Széklers), and discovered the relationship between them due to their common origin. "Dozmat was not always such a small village. In old times, this used to be the centre of the region, because King Stephen had earlier had a church built here for ten villages. Olad, Sé, Ondód, Torony and Bucsu also belonged here, and some other villages, that have since perished. In truth, Olad would have been the centre, many say, because it is next to Szombathely, but King Stephen was a Christian man, and did not like pagans, and Olad was a pagan centre. On the bank of a stream on Hosszúrét stood a huge, ancient oak tree. The elderly say its roots reach down to the centre of the Earth, and its branches up to heaven. Here, under this tree, our ancestors sacrificed white horses because the people of Olad were famous horse-breeders. Even our father Árpád took over the country with their horses. When the Hungarians had to convert to Christianity, many in the ten villages packed their belongings, rose up and set off on a journey back to their motherland. The runaways were mostly young people. They crossed over to a faraway land, over the Danube

12 Sebestyén 1902, pp. 42–43

and the Tisza to reach the Transylvanian mountains. They settled down, and have lived there ever since. I know all this because I was with them on the Russian front during the war. They talked like us, even their minstrel singing was the same as those of the lads in Dozmat. They are awaiting Prince Csaba, like we are waiting for Rudolf. The rocks are still there on the bank of the stream. No longer are white horses sacrificed under the tree. But the souls of our ancestors have remained here like images of fairies. They moved into the "Malomfej", played on the Hosszúrét, and bathed at the rock. The village people used to bathe here in the summer heat, and the children played here all summer long."[13]

The folk tale from Ságújfalu in Palócföld, depicts King Stephen as a man with magical powers, a shaman, i.e. a 'táltos' in Hungarian: "King St. Stephen was a shaman king. He was chased after all the time. He was still in Ágasvár when the bells started to toll, and when they stopped he was already at Szentkút (at Verebély) [today a sacred site at Mátraverebély-Szentkút], and the four hooves of his horse are still imprinted there in the natural stone. It is called King Stephen's jump."[14]

In the historical tale from Regöly in Tolna county, elements of the Matthias collection of legends are associated with the figure of King Stephen. One such element is the carriage driver requesting entrance to the besieged castle with an ironless wheel. The folk tale from Regöly, which describes the defeat of Koppány who rose up against Stephen, is also the tale explaining the name of the village of Oroszló in Baranya county: "This is a tale about King Stephen and Prince Kupa, and about the fortress of Regöly, which had an iron gate in front of the present-day church, and a deep ditch filled with water in front of it. From Majsa and Koppány, the fortress was lined with ramparts recessing inwards to the fortress, where the guards could hide unharmed, no men could be seen from these recesses. Prince Kupa and his soldiers defended the fortress, and Stephen occupied Szigetdomb with his soldiers. Then Stephen, dressed as a beggar, requested entrance to the fortress with a rim-less wheel to have iron

13 Landgraf 1998, p. 67
14 Kálmány 1891, Vol III, p. 303

fitted to it. At the inn, he had three eggs, and left a paper on the plate saying that Stephen had been there. Then they stormed the fort, first firing some low projectile cannons from Szigetdomb, then shooting at the aforementioned gate, and finally storming in. Prince Kupa fled on his speeding horse, which understood the human voice. Around where Oroszló is today, Stephen told the horse that he did not want to hurt him, only his owner. And then he said to Kupa's horse: Ó, rossz ló! [Oh, bad horse!] – Since then the village where Stephen cut down Prince Kupa is called "Oroszló".[15]

The people of the village of Bény in Esztergom county [today: Slovakia], known for its Romanesque church, also believe that King St. Stephen captured the rampart fort of Bény from the pagans by means of a trick. This is how my data source, Ferenc Csókás, related to me the historic tale of Bény in 1989: "It happened before the coronation of King St. Stephen that a group of pagan Hungarians nested themselves in the rampart fort of Bény. Since Bény lies not too far north of Esztergom, near the Garam river, Stephen was greatly disturbed by the fact that pagans were camping near him. He ordered a large number of wagons to be loaded with rocks. He said not to grease the axles of the wagons. And on each side of the wagons, put as many straw men dressed as soldiers as would fit in a row. Each wagon had to be drawn by two pairs of oxen. There was only one human on each wagon to drive the oxen with a large whip. When they were ready, he set them off towards Bény. They were approaching on the old Roman road at the border of Kéménd, then they turned towards Bény under Várhegy. The wagons loaded with heavy cargo were screeching, squeaking and rattling. The drivers were fiercely cracking the whips, calling on and nagging the animals with loud cries. The guards on the Cénepart in Bény heard them, looked in that direction, and were surprised to see the army approaching from Várhegy. They quickly retreated to the rampart fort, reported to their commander, that Stephen was coming towards them with a large army, and would soon reach the Cénepart, and through it the southern entrance not far away. Inside the fort, huge alarm broke out among the pagan Hungarians.

15 Hegedüs 1987, p. 6

The commander issued the order to flee quickly through the main western entrance. By the time the wagons reached the outer rampart, the scared pagans were nowhere to be found, they were running away. St. Stephen immediately marched into the rampart fort at the head of a small group and easily occupied the central main square."

Another group of historic folk tales associated with King Stephen depict a deeply religious ruler who distributes alms, forgives even his assassins, builds churches, is eager to visit pilgrimage sites, and who deservedly earned his place among the saints with his life.

In Fejér county, the establishment of the popular pilgrimage site in Bodajk is attributed to King Stephen and Prince Imre and their zealous acts there. In Székesfehérvár-Felsőváros, it is often mentioned that King Stephen travelled from Fehérvár to Bodajk on a raft, because in his time, everything between Fehérvár and Bodajk was still marshland and water. In Bodajk, my data source Mária Takács, born in 1931, told me the story with these words:

"The older people always said that King Stephen and Prince Imre often came to Bodajk together. In their time they prayed here, and that is why the Bodajk pilgrimage site is so famous. Some people said they came from Fehérvár by boat, because at one time there was water here. I heard from the elderly that once there was water here. I also heard that some people came on foot."

The origin tale of the village of Moha near Székesfehérvár also preserves the memory of King St. Stephen's pilgrimage to Bodajk on waterways. It was collected by József Gelencsér in 1992 from József Szűcs, a resident of Moha, born in 1914, who heard the following from his father: "The easiest way for the king and his entourage to get from the then capital Fehérvár to the holy place of Bodajk was by boat. On one occasion they crossed the waterland this way, on the Gaja river, which had a lot more water then. Suddenly, however, a giant beluga weighing some 2-300 kg disrupted their peaceful journey, capsizing the king's boat. The monarch fell into the water, fainted, but was saved from drowning by one of his knights who dragged him out onto a nearby mound rising out of the marshy landscape. When the king regained consciousness, he woke up and said to his soldier: 'My son, you saved my life, so I give you this land. And build a church on top of this mound.' This is how the church in

Moha was founded, which is actually situated slightly higher, on a hill. Then the village was established around it, and since the soldier was called Mohai, the village was named after him."[16]

There is a tradition in and around Bodajk that there are no frogs in the lake in Bodajk, because their croaking disturbed King Stephen in his prayers, so he cursed them.[17] A beautiful version of the folk tale was collected by János Udvardy in Csákberény, near Bodajk, before the First World War: "When Stephen was king, he went to Bodajk to pray in the holy church. Then there were frogs in the lake, busily squeaking (croaking). And since the church was close, the croaking could be heard in there too. He sent his servant or valet, or whoever was loitering around, to tell the frogs to be quiet. The servant went out, then informed the frogs that King Stephen sent word to be quiet. The servant went back, but the frogs did not stop croaking. He sent his valet out for the second time to order the frogs to shut up, because King Stephen is saying his prayers inside. The servant did the same, but the frogs kept on croaking. Now King Stephen commanded him to go out, and tell them to shut up. Get out of there! The servant went out to the lake for the third time, and said 'King Stephen says you'd better shut up now! Get out of there forever!' Upon this, all the frogs disappeared. I was over there at the fair last Sunday because I had to buy a pair of boots for Ferus, I looked, but I could not see any frogs in that lake. They have all disappeared."[18]

The formation of the human-shaped stones in the sand quarry in Fehérvárcsurgó is explained by the fact that God turned the Tatar enemy – who outnumbered the Hungarians – into stone at the plea of King Stephen. This is an element taken over from the Saint László collection of legends. In the Érdy Codex written in the first third of the 16th century you can read about King László turning the fleeing Tatars into stone by the power of strong prayer. I collected a historic tale of a similar act by King Stephen in Bodajk, Fejér county, told by Mrs Barabás Pálné born in 1909: "Well, my life was definitely not easy

16 Gelencsér 1992, p. 8
17 Szendrey 1925, p. 49
18 Udvardy 1912, p. 199

because my sister and I would carry white sand, that's how we provided for food. My sister and I would both carry the white sand from Fehérvárcsurgó. We were orphans. We took the sand to Balinka where we traded it for food. The Germans used it for whitewashing. So as a child I was very fond of it, and I was interested in everything. I saw there stones in the shape of men and so I asked the old people why they were there? Once an old man told me: 'You know, at the time of King Stephen, there was so much fighting here, and the Tatars could count more men. Then King Stephen bowed down, and asked the good Lord to turn them into stone.' I always remembered it when I was a child and whenever I filled my sack, King Stephen, the founder of the country, turned the Tatars into stone."

The donation letter of King St. Stephen issued in Sóly in 1009 for the diocese of Veszprém already mentions Úrhida near Fehérvár. According to the folk tale tradition, the Hungarian king visited this place too. Anna Borbála Józsa, who was born in Szabadbattyán in 1945, recited a tale she heard from her ancestors from Úrhida: "They found a stick with a shrike-head on it, and this shrike-head also decorated a stamp. It is placed in the National Museum. [A stick end or whip handle with a bird head carved in bone dated to the early 10th century and found in the cemetery from the conquest period in Szabadbattyán can be seen in the permanent archaeological exhibition of the King St. Stephen Museum in Székesfehérvár: Hatházy n.d., no page number. Photo disclosed by: Dienes 1972, image 71]. When King Stephen went to Veszprém by boat, he lost it here somewhere in the rushes and reed, where boats used to travel along the Sárvíz and the Séd streams. He lost the stick here, somewhere around Úhida, because they usually stopped in Úrhida on the way from Fehérvár to Veszprém.

The noblemen of Csallóköznyék (Bratislava county) derive their privileges from our King Saint Stephen. The origin of the privilege letter was cleared by Arnold Ipolyi. "Near Várkony lies *Nyék*, a tiny village and famous only for the old donation of its noble owners which they received from Stephen III in 1165. The story of this document is even more interesting. Several of the princes receiving it later thought it was St. Stephen's document, and had it transcribed as such, due to the name and particularly because Stephen III's father, Géza,

was mentioned in it. His landowners boasted about it the same way St. Stephen's noblemen did up until more recent times, when a more accurate investigation cleared up the misunderstanding. It was also an interesting scene when in the last century [18th] the document was shown as evidence at a Pozsony (today: Bratislava, Slovakia) tribunal by its owner, a squire at the time, and the entire tribunal stood up to pay their deepest respect for the relic, which they considered a document of our holy king, ceremoniously warning the modest noblemen that this document is such a treasure regarding his family ancestry that no renowned family in Hungary can boast to possess one."[19]

The majority of the Hungarian population in the village of Fajsz (Bács-Kiskun county), bearing the name of Prince Árpád's grandson, survived the Ottoman era, so it has existed continuously in the Kalocsa region.[20] Its nobility is also derived from King St. Stephen. In the 1960s, Mihály Petróczki Sr. recounted in the nearby Foktő how the people of Fajsz earned their nobility from the king: "The nobility of Fajsz comes from when King St. Stephen was captured by his enemies, whether they were German or pagan no-one knows, but they wanted to take him out of the country on the Danube. The people of Fajsz learnt about this, and did not want to let the king be taken. They headed for the forest. With their axes they cut down countless stolons, so many that when they weaved them together they blocked the waterway. Not even the boats could get through. Then with their "bodon" boats [special fishing boats carved from one piece of wood] they surrounded the boat and freed King Stephen, who rewarded the people of Fajsz by eliminating their debts towards anyone as long as they lived in Fajsz. (But things were not always the way he ordered them.) And the people of Fajsz even named their church after him. That is why they have a fair on King Stephen's day."[21]

At the end of the 19th century, Lajos Kálmán recorded a folk tale about the Holy Right in Deszk, which was created independently of the influence of the church: "When King Stephen was travelling to Babylon with his mother, she

19 Ipolyi 1993, p. 61
20 Bárth 2005, p. 574
21 Kuczy 1980, p. 77

said to him: "Not even God could pull it (the Tower of Babylon) down'. Saint Stephen became so angry that he slapped his mother, and for that he cut off his own hand, which is still preserved today."[22]

The cult of King St. Stephen spread to the whole Carpathian Basin, where his veneration is still alive in Hungarian folklore, as attested to by the folk tales presented herein.

Photograph of the corridor of the exhibition
"Kings and Saints - The Age of the Árpád Dynasty"

22 Kálmány 1891, p. 302

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