

Pál Engel:

St. Stephen and his age

The age of St. Stephen was outstandingly significant, not only from a Hungarian, but also from a European perspective. A generation before, during the Hungarian ramblings the Christian civilization, even in its broadest sense, ended by the river Elba on the West, and by the Lower Danube on the South. Beyond these rivers lands of barbaric peoples stretched who were pagan in regard to their faith without any stable political organizations. The most important and most surprising development of the times around the turn of the millennium was the sudden expansion of the Christian Europe. The Scandinavian peoples, together with the Czechs, the Poles, the Russians and the Hungarians independently, but almost at the same time decided to follow the route of developing from barbaric peoples to countries following the Christian pattern. A hundred years later, in the middle of the 11th century, most of the present day Europe became part of the Christian community both from a religious and a political point of view. So the Christian Europe was actually born around 1000 and the founding of the Hungarian kingdom was a phase of this important process.

In Hungary the process was started under the rule of Árpád's great-grandson, Prince Géza (972-997). He created the political conditions of state-foundation and he made the first, decisive steps towards the christianization of the people. Around 973 he was christianized with thousands of "nobler" Hungarians and "he vowed that he would christianize all his subjects". He kept his vow, he did a lot "to abolish the unholy ceremonies" and put down "the rebels" roughly, he, however, could not become a real Christian, as a matter of fact he continued to practise the pagan ceremonies of his ancestors. The creation of the strong principal power was also the result of Géza's work, who was represented as a violent, "ruthless" ruler by the chronicles, "his hands sullied by human blood". According to all indications he exterminated his populous kinsfolk, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Árpád, and Koppány, son of "Tar" (~ Bald) Zerind was the only survivor, whom Géza trusted with the governing of a part of Transdanubia, as "the Prince of Somogy".

At his deathbed in 997 Géza appointed his elder son, Vajk to be his successor, who was named Stephen ("István") in christianization and lived in a Christian marriage with the Bavarian princess, Gizella of the German imperial family. The first act of Stephen's ruling was the completion of the unification of the country. The occasion was provided by Koppány's coming on who asserted his rights to the throne on the basis of the principle of seniority. In 998, in the battle by Veszprém Stephen defeated Koppány, whose body was quartered and the parts were hanged on the gates of Veszprém, Győr and Esztergom to manifest the strength of Stephen's power. The fourth quarter was sent to his uncle on his mother's side, Gyula, a ruler in Transsylvania, to inform him that his rule would not last long. And it did not, Stephen took his country already in 1003 and a governor was appointed to lead that province.

Since then Stephen ruled the whole Carpathian Basin. In order to legitimate his sovereign rights, he made the most decisive and most long-lasting step of his rule: he solemnly had himself crowned king on the Christmas Eve of 1000 in Esztergom. He counted his rule from that date and took the title "King of the Hungarians".

The background of coronation was one of the most debated questions of early Hungarian historiography. Around 1100 in Hungary people remembered that Stephen asked the crown from the Pope through the abbot Astrik, although the contemporary and confidential information of Thietmar, Bishop of

Merseburg seemingly contradicts the previous version, because it says that Stephen received "the crown and the blessing" by "the grace and encouragement" of the emperor, Otto III (983-1002). This version is sometimes interpreted as if it made Stephen the vassal of the emperor, and that it was supported by the fact that he used the royal spear as the symbol of power and not the crown, the spear that was allegedly given to his father by Otto III. In fact it is the spear that is represented both on his coins and on the coronation cloak picturing him made in 1031. But the conflicting opinions are reconcilable. By the year 1000 the emperor was staying in Rome and was working on the restoration of the Roman Empire with his ally, the Pope, Sylvester II. We have no reason to doubt that the crown was coming from the Pope, but it is evident that Otto also had his contribution to it. Giving Stephen the royal title and this way including Hungary in the empire could fit perfectly into their policies without inflicting a real dependence onto the Hungarian king. However, in spite of any illusions of the contemporaries about the symbols, such things are untraceable in the policies of the king.

As domestic affairs took most of his resources, Stephen endeavoured to come on good terms with the neighbouring countries. In 1018 he helped Basileos II to defeat the Bulgarians and he was in friendly terms with his brother-in-law, the emperor Henrik II (1002-1024). But when the Saal dynasty died out, he asserted his claims of his part of inheritance from the Bavarian principedom for his son and it led to war with the new emperor Conrad II. The emperor broke into Hungary in 1030 but was defeated and was obliged to part with Vienna and its surroundings in favour of Stephen.

The real concern was the question of succession after Stephen's only son, Emeric died in a hunting accident in 1031. The obvious successor could have been his nephew, Vazul, son of Mihály, Géza's brother, but the king did not believe him susceptible of being a sovereign. Instead, he appointed his nephew, Peter, on the distaff side to be his successor, who was the son of Otto Orseolo. Vazul was blinded and his three sons ran away to Poland. Stephen died in August 15, 1038, around sixty, and he was put to rest in peace together with his son, Emeric, in the basilica of Székesfehérvár founded by him.

The two main development of Stephen's age were the naturalization of the Christian faith and the domestication of a new political system, the Christian monarchy. The two were closely interconnected. Without a firm royal power the new system was not sustainable, but it was the Christian teaching that granted the king such an authority that elevated him high above the pagan princes and made his domination unquestionable. The new power exercised "by God's grace" was not only firmer than that of the pagan princes, but it has a different nature as well. Religion provided such an authority to the Christian king that was unthinkable by their ancestors, but he was compelled to use that primarily to preserve peace and to consolidate the Christian faith. This way kingship necessarily meant such a system that differed a lot from the usual ones. The exclusive and non-appealable authority of the Christian king replaced the collective sacrality of the Árpáds that presumably formed the basis of the system of the 10th century.

The principles of the new system and proper governing are summed up by a short work, titled *Libellus de institutionem morum*, and supposed to be written by Stephen himself. The work recalling the Karoling mirror-literature but original in its structure, style and conception included Stephen's "moral admonishing" to his son, the successor, that is why it is usually referred to shortly as *Admonitions*. A well-educated Hungarian high priest possibly made it around 1015, but the king also contributed to its content for certain, since it is a well-known fact about him that during his education, probably first among his people, he attained a stage of proficiency in Latin as well. The central concept of the writing is the practice of Christian virtues, but it put special emphasis on two postulates the importance of which was justified by the "then tender and germinal" condition of the Hungarian kingdom: on the one hand the acceptance of the "guests", the knights and priests coming from other countries, because a country of one language and one custom is

weak and fragile", and on the other hand the respect for the ancient traditions. Otherwise "you would find difficult to govern this region of the land" - the king added, presumably not without any reason.

The dual, sacral and profane nature of the early royalty was expressed in the *Admonitions*. According to the well-known conception of the 10th century the Christian king was not only the profane leader of his people, but their religious leader as well. The whole structure of the *Admonitions* indicates that Stephen imagined his ruling according to this dual quality. He regarded the building-up of the ecclesiastic organization of the kingdom to be his task as well as political leadership and he put equal emphasis on ecclesiastic and profane cases in legislation.

Foreign knights supported Stephen in the founding of the monarchy who mainly came from German regions accompanying his wife. The foreign support was so significant in the war against Koppány that contemporaries regarded it to be the battle of "Magyars" and "Germans". However, the role of foreigners should not be overemphasized. It is obvious that Stephen's rule was primarily based on the support of those inland noblemen who were persuaded by Géza or himself to take their side. Their most eminent representative was the latter king, Aba, the governor of the northeastern parts whom Stephen found noble enough to espouse his sister to Aba.

The leaders of the country, foreign and inland lords as well, were titled *ispán* (~ governor). Together they formed the "order of *ispáns*" that was described in the *Admonitions* as the main support of the rules beside the bishops. The lords spiritual and temporal, the bishops and the *ispáns* formed together the royal council, the consent of which Stephen often referred to in his laws. The most eminent member of the council was always the *nádorispán*, the leader of the royal court; the state was filled by Aba during Stephen's rule.

The new royal power was founded on a series of brand new forts. Esztergom, Székesfehérvár and Gyula that had been intended for the king's or the queen's residences were made of stone, or sometimes were based on the ruins of some late Roman *castellum*. However, the usual royal castles of the age were the timber-framed plank-fortresses that were fortified by ramparts and later stonewalls were built over them very often. These forts were all in the hand of the king and they fulfilled the role of local centres of governing. A district belonged to most of them, called the "county of the castle", in Hungarian *vármegye*. The original meaning of the word of Slavic origin was "border", so it is very likely that well-defined borders divided the counties from the beginning; that is why they served as the basis of both governing and the organization of ecclesiae. According to the royal diploma of 1009, the jurisdiction of the bishopric of Veszprém spread over 4 castles, which should be understood as the districts of the four castles, in other words 4 counties.

The *ispáns* were trusted with the castles and the counties all along. The relationship between the *ispán* and the castle was so tight that many of the castles were named after their first *ispáns*. The origins of most of the present day counties trace back to those founded by Stephen and many of their borders remained unaltered until the 20th century. The number of the castles and counties founded by Stephen can be around 40 - 45, but presumably some of the *ispáns* administered more than one county through their deputies. *Ispáns* are referred to as equal factors of power compared to bishops in the historical sources, so we are supposed to believe that province of the *ispán* did not differ much from a diocese in size. The same explains why the *ispáns* were often titled "prince".

The rule of Christianity was secured by the creation of the ecclesiastic system. Surely, this was one of the greatest shocks for the descendants of the ramblers. The introduction of the ecclesiastic hierarchy and

jurisdiction entrained that the pagan noblemen had to share their power with new partners, the bishops, and the pagan warriors and communities had to accept such new lords who not only propagated, and even enforced, ideas out of accordance with the traditions, but, worse than that, did it in foreign languages, having been foreign themselves. The earliest priests known by name were German, Italian or French and the first known Hungarian high priest was Mór, the bishop of Pécs; Stephen himself appointed him shortly before his death.

While some researchers claim that Géza called the first bishopric, of Veszprém, into existence, the development of the ecclesiastical system was Stephen's merit. As it is written about him, he founded ten dioceses with two archbishops heading them. The archbishopric of Esztergom was consecrated to the Czech St. Adalbert, who had visited Géza's court as well in 995, and who was Stephen's godfather according to the traditions. The archbishop of Esztergom has always been the highest priest of the Hungarian Church and as the most important privilege he was trusted with the coronation of the king. In the first times five *suffraganeus* were subordinated to him: the bishops of Eger, Pécs, Veszprém, Győr and Vác, and fortunately we happen to know that the borders of their dioceses, at least in Transdanubia, were created in 1009. The other archbishopric was founded in Kalocsa, its first subordinates were the bishops of Csanád, Transylvania and Bihar. That of Bihar was later called the bishop of Várad after its seat, however, the bishop of Transylvania kept its original name, although it had its seat in Gyulafehérvár.

It is the legend of St. Gellért that informs us about the way the formerly described county- and ecclesiastical system was organized parallel in its description about the founding of the bishopric of Csanád. As we learn from the text, a "prince" named Ajtony governed Csanád, then called Marosvár, the provinces of whom stretched from the Kőrös rivers to the Lower-Danube. Ajtony was Christian, but was Christianized according to the Byzantine rites. He founded a Greek monastery at his seat and otherwise "he was imperfect in the Christian faith", since he had seven wives of his own. His great stud was full of rompish horses, he had great herds and a lot of good warriors, the power of whom he valued so much that he dared to confront Stephen, and tolled the royal salt transported from Transylvania on the river Maros. As a result, the king declared him enemy and sent his captain, Csanád against him around 1030. Ajtony fell in the battle and Csanád took his place as "the prince of the king and Ajtony's house". A bishopric was found in Marosvár that took the name of Csanád then, and the king invited the Italian Gellért, who lived as a hermit in the forests of the Bakony, to lead it. The diocese of the church of Csanád was formed out of the province of Ajtony.

In modern historiography, Ajtony is mostly described as an independent prince similar to the Transylvanian Gyula, although it is most likely to be an erroneous concept. Unlike Koppány and Gyula, his person is unfamiliar to the chronicles, indicating that his defeat in that time was not an outstanding deed at all. Anyway, it seems absurd that Stephen would have tolerated the ruling of an independent prince in the heart of his country for decades. Ajtony was more likely to be the representative of the pagan aristocracy, who governed his "country" as a heritage, but did it as the king's *ispán*. So, his situation was similar to that of Aba, in spite of the small difference that he could not overcome his pagan habits that led to his withdrawal.

Parallel to the development of the ecclesiastical system, the Benedictine order also found home in Hungary. The building of its first and most famous monastery in Pannonhalma was started under the rule of Géza in 996 dedicated to the memory of St. Martin of Tours, but it was Stephen who provided it with riches. It was also him who founded the abbeys of Pécsvárad, Zalavár, Bakonybél and of Zobor by the Nyitra. In the beginning some Orthodox convents were also founded, like the one Stephen founded in the valley near Veszprém for the Greek nuns. The local, indigenous Slavic people must also have played an important role in the conversion, since the basic concepts of the new faith (*keresztény* - Christian, *pogány* - pagan, *keresztel* - Christianize, *bérmál* - confirm, *püspök* - bishop, *pap* - priest, *barát* - monk, *szent* - saint, *angyal* - angel, *oltár*

- altar, *bálvány* - idol) were introduced into the Hungarian language through Slavic mediation, as well as four of the week days' names (*szerda* - Wednesday, *csütörtök* - Thursday, *péntek* - Friday, *szombat* - Saturday).

The existence and authority of the Church had to be assured in every possible way. Here, as in any other places, the ecclesiastic personalities did not fall under lay jurisdiction, however, the ecclesiastical juries could, in some cases, such as cases of marriage, rule over lay juries. The tithe was an important existential basis of the Church, the levying of which was already ordered by Stephen in general. The authority of the Church was based on its estates though. Its property enjoyed the king's special protection from the beginning of Stephen's rule, and the promised donations could not be withdrawn. The founding of the ecclesiastic power, similarly to the processes all over Europe, primarily meant the acquisition of significant amounts of land. Stephen provided the abbey of Pécsvárad with 1136 households in 41 villages; later, the wealth of the monastery of Pannonhalma was about 2200 households. Since the bishoprics enjoyed most of the tithes, their estates was usually smaller, that of Eger received only ten villages from its founder.

The precondition of the creation of the new order was the destruction of the institutions of paganism. To ensure the stable perpetuance of the Christian rule, every remnants of the pagan age had to disappear. Naturally, it was primarily about religious conversion, however the pagan age was not only represented by religious beliefs, but by many other relating phenomena. Around 1200 Anonymus believed it to be a pagan custom when the army crossed the river on leather sacs. So the adoption of the Christian faith did not only mean the following of new doctrines, but also the acceptance of the life-style usual among Christian peoples, and those reluctant to accept this life-style were considered pagans in their soul. The initiator of the pagan uprising of 1046, the noble Vata, "dedicated himself to the demons, shaved his head and left only three tails on it according to the pagan custom", his followers ""began to eat horse-meat". These were all appropriate to manifest the pagan feeling, and similarly the belonging to the pagan people.

The pagan beliefs and customs were so tightly interrelated because these represented the earthly and unearthly sides of the same ethnic identity. Every people, who counted Hungarian, followed the same life-style, professed the same faith and that distinguished them most clearly from other peoples. That suggests that the most proper institution of paganism could be the "tribe". It is hardly doubtable that the seven tribes contained the whole of the pagan Magyars, in other words they represented chiefly all that was pagan and Magyar. Probably that explains why the tribal system disappeared totally during the foundation of the State, that the inland sources never mention it and even its memory vanished. Supposing that the former train of thought is right, the radical liquidation of the tribes and tribal consciousness must have been among Stephen's first acts during the introduction of Christianity.

New statutes ensured the observation of the Christian doctrines replacing the pagan rites. Stephen made the first laws in the beginning of his rule, prescribing the observation of Sunday, the quarter-tenses, the Friday fasting and the confession before death. Everybody was obliged to visit the church "except for those who guard the fire", and granting special punishment in prospect for those "whispering and disturbing others by telling fallacious stories during the service". The old ones were only punished by expulsion, while the young ones and churls "were beaten and their hair were cut down as well". In his second, latter statute-book, Stephen prescribed that "ten villages should build a church and provide it with two households and two servants, a horse and a mare, six oxen, two cows and thirty fowls. The king provides them with clothes and altar cloth, the bishop with priests and books." In regard to the polygamy and patriarchal customs of the pagans, the laws paid special attention to the Christian marriage, and in general, to the protection of women. For example, Stephen forbade the forcing of the widows into another marriage against their wills; he

condemned the tradition of the abduction of women and took measures against those "who escaped abroad from their wives".

In general it was Stephen who created the new political system that later served as the basis of the rule of the Árpáds until the beginning of the 13th century. It was Géza's role to do the preparations, but the formal founding and organization of the Christian kingdom was solely the work of Stephen and that is why it is justified that the Church canonized his person in 1083 and that he lives in the memory of the posterity as the founder of the Hungarian kingdom. By and large, the significance of the era cannot be overestimated. Centuries later Stephen's personality was still remembered as the ultimate source of rights and not only noblemen tried to deduce their privileges to his donations, but other social layers as well. Characteristically in 1437 the leaders of the Transylvanian peasants' rebellion sent delegates to Buda, because they believed they could see the diploma of St. Stephen, in which their liberties are written down. Several creations of the first king such as the counties and dioceses still endure. However, it was undoubtedly the decision to join the Roman Catholic Church that has proven to be the most far-reaching of his acts. As a result, Hungary became and has remained ever since a country using the Roman alphabet and taking the Latin culture with all the accompanying cultural and political advantages.

[Vissza](#)