

The World Tree of the Conquering Hungarians in the Light of Scholarly Illusions

Reconstruction, Construction and Deconstruction

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Abstract. In my paper I analyze the case of the supposed shamanistic ‘world tree’ of the conquering Hungarians: I show how this erroneous scientific construction came into being through the coming together of the mutually reinforcing mistakes of Hungarian folkloristics, linguistics, and archaeology; how manifestations of the spurious ideas of lay pseudo-science got mixed in with scientific discourse, and how they influenced the course of ‘professional’ scientific inquiry.

My analysis sheds light on the most flagrant methodological mistakes that lead to the mistaken construct: a) the gaining ground of ideological influences from outside ‘pure’ scientific considerations (in our case features symbolizing Hungarian identity that set it apart from Europeans: the quest for ancient Hungarian shamanism); b) an inverse research attitude of selectively looking for evidence to prove the researcher’s preconceptions; c) the effects of a deferential research attitude which considers one or another ‘great’ researcher infallible and their results irrefutable, which short circuits further research on a topic.

My paper has three parts: the first one deals with the emergence of the construct, the second with the errors of the construct created by highly respected scholars (Gyula Sebestyén, Géza Róheim, Sándor Solymossy, Vilmos Diószegi) and its Hungarian and international reception, while in the third part, I describe the processes of the construct’s deconstruction and its parallelly occurring revival.

I come to the conclusion that the world tree and the related rites connected to the initiation of shamans most likely did not exist in the worldview and ritual practices of the conquering Hungarians and that in light of the most recent research results they seem to be part of an illusionary research construct which came about through the interplay of the strivings of ethnographers, archaeologists, linguists and amateurs who started out from a certain set of preconceptions.

Keywords: methodological mistakes, preconceptions, conquering Hungarians, ancient religion, shamanism, world tree, shaman tree, initiation, *táltos*

Introduction

This paper is about the flaws and follies of ethnographic research which flowed, and continue to flow to this day, partly from the internal errors following from the goals

and methods integral to scientific inquiry and partly from external factors independent of these. I would like to demonstrate through my analysis that even the internal errors and flaws are related to a large extent to factors external to scholarship. I will highlight all of this through a single example – the detailed analysis of the evolution of the notion of the ‘world tree.’¹

Misconceptions in research

One extremely wide-spread genre of ‘external’ influences causing errors is the impact of ideologies that lie outside the bounds of ‘pure’ scholarship. The example of the world tree is related to the attempts to reconstruct the ancient, “pagan” religion of the pre-Christian Hungarians. The beginnings of these were simultaneous with the early days of ethnography in Hungary. A description given by Zoltán Nagy in his book of essays about the Khanty and Russians living along the Vasyugan River in Siberia concerning the activity of a ‘native’ researcher Nad’ezhda Bronislavovna also aptly characterizes the researchers working in this era: “for »native anthropologists« ethnography is not merely an academic discipline, but a type of political and civic activity, a means in the struggle for the survival of their nation.”²

Or, to reiterate briefly something I had written in a previous paper,³ shamanism played an important role in the lives of peoples speaking Ural–Altaic languages and thus a detailed exploration of the linguistic and historical past of Hungarians has naturally led scholars to look for its traces also in the ‘pagan’ religion of Hungarians. These aspirations were tied in with the conceptual framework of European romanticism, and the spirit of the search for national identity and so this research also gained a certain symbolic ideological charge in the service of nation-building. The hope that the religion of the Hungarians possessed some kind of distinctive Oriental trait distinguishing it from the religion of Europeans was implicitly present in the background of this research. A partly nostalgic and illusory construct of the supposed ancient religion and the related notion of shamanism emerged some elements of which were imaginary—and this process of construction inevitably involved even the best of researchers.

1 This study was prepared under the aegis of a NKFI (NRDIO = National Research, Development and Innovation Office) project (No. 132535) entitled “Folk beliefs, folk religion, mentality, 16th–21st century. Digital databases, encyclopaedic overviews.” I wish to thank the members of the “East–West” Research Group as well as Lajos Gyórfi, Director of the Karacs Ferenc Museum of Püspökladány, Julianna Örsi and Gábor Vargyas for providing advice and help as well as further materials for proving my case, correcting my mistakes and the final shaping of the paper.

2 Nagy, *Egy folyó több élete*, 384.

3 Pócs, “The Hungarian Táltos,” 149–96.

This factor, however, is closely tied in with an ‘internal’ flaw of the research process—the ideological application of scholarly presuppositions, which can very easily lead to the creation of misconstrued reconstructions, since researchers will be prone to find items of proof to support their desired assumptions. (In this case, instead of surveying the totality of their research material and judging accordingly what kind of conclusions to draw from it, assuming the existence of shamanism prior to the adoption of Christianity and the presence of the notion of the world tree at the time of the Conquest.) In other words, in such cases the researcher assumes an inverse research attitude. British historian Ronald Hutton summarized the related problems as follows, and precisely in the context of analyzing the study of an assumed Hungarian shamanism,

“That tradition serves, however, to reinforce a situation in which scholars are able to construct hypotheses more or less according to their personal or ideological predispositions, whether these be to think in terms of ethnic, national or supranational identity, pan-human experience or local particularism, archaic survival or historical evolution. In this situation the terms »shaman«, »shamanism«, and »shamanic« correspond neither to agreed conceptual categories nor to precise intellectual tools so much as to materials upon an artist’s palette, with which academics create compositions of emotif and polemical power.”⁴

Mistaken theories of the lay public can easily infiltrate academic discourse due precisely to the above-mentioned ideological overtones and may even come to influence the course of ‘professional’ research. The topic of the ‘ancient religion’⁵ is particularly apt to provoke such pseudo-scientific notions. Ethnology and anthropology are in a delicate position, since some of their topics, including the ancient Hungarian religion, are particularly ‘interesting’ even for the general public. The rich source material of contemporary popular religion is likewise tempting, and those interested can take their pick as they please, without any particular scholarly method. This time, however, I shall explore all of this merely as erroneous views incorporated into genuine scholarship, i.e., as the unwitting collaboration of the two parties—I do not otherwise touch upon this subject area, one which has assumed gigantic dimensions by now, or its representatives.

At this point I need to clarify that the juxtaposition of lay, pseudo-scientific and erroneous categories with those of professional researchers, with the methods and genuine research achievements of ‘genuine’ academic scholarship is a mere hypothetical construct created in order to highlight the central claim of this paper.

4 Hutton, *Shamans. Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination*, 147.

5 The term used by scholars for the assumed pagan religion of Hungarians.

In fact, these boundaries are not sharp, even the ranks of the so-called ‘genuine’ scholars include laymen, pseudo-scholars and fabricators of false notions; while even laymen with scant background knowledge often attained results that made significant contributions to research (there is no room to discuss these because of space limitations). Thus, when I illustrate the ways in which errors arise through the examples of misguided research findings, I am not attacking individuals, but raising objections to particular methods. Likewise, I do not limit my criticism to the follies of ‘lay’ scholars. The very essence of my message is that, more often than not, genuine scholarship and pseudo-scholarship are intertwined and produce ideologically inspired misconstrued theories—usually unawares, following automatisms, and very rarely with the intention of conscious manipulation.

A deferential research attitude which considers one or another ‘great’ and acknowledged researcher infallible and their results irrefutable can be almost as harmful as ideological considerations. It may seem paradoxical, but, whilst criticizing false notions, I would like to promulgate the right of scholars to make mistakes and, in the same context, the obligation of critique and self-critique. There is simply no such thing as an infallible researcher. While recognizing and refuting research errors and the correction of any such mistakes as were recognized promote the cause of scholarship, scholars who stubbornly hang on to their notions as the only possible true way, will themselves fall into the trap of the illusion of infallibility. They are likely to drag their audience into the same fallacy, indeed, often the scholarly public as well, since even this latter is more likely to credit ‘great individuals’. Such deference to authority is even more likely to affect other (non-specialist) local or foreign scholars—i.e., when familiarity with the facts, necessary for the evaluation of research results, is lacking.

Reconstruction from Arnold Ipolyi to Vilmos Diószegi

It is in the spirit of the ideas expounded above that I am going to present the evolution of the notion of the world tree, roughly in the chronological order in which it took place. The framework for this exploration is provided by reconstructions of the ‘ancient religion’ of Hungarians as well as of pre-Conquest and Conquest-era shamanism and of the figure of the *táltos*—a process which began in the latter part of the eighteenth century and is still ongoing today.⁶ In my judgement, the world tree, which did not appear as part of this reconstruction until the mid-twentieth century, is the weakest link in the chain and offers examples to illustrate all of the above

6 I have given accounts of this in several of my papers, including refutations of certain arguments; most recently in Pócs, “The Hungarian *Táltos*.”

outlined scholarly misconceptions. Of the various attempts at reconstruction,⁷ Antal Csengery's work⁸ displays in its most fully fledged form the notion of a Hungarian ancient religion of a Ural–Altaic nature. By the end of the nineteenth century the idea of ancient Hungarian shamanism had become widely known in various professional circles. The figure of the *táltos* became selected for the role of the pagan Hungarian shaman who at first functioned as a sacrificing priest. The figure of the assumed sacrificier of the ancient religion came to be associated with *táltos* beliefs current at the time by Arnold Ipolyi, such as being born with teeth, the *táltos* child dying at the age of seven, the notions of *táltos* battles, of treasure-digging and the fairy-tale motif of the *táltos* horse.⁹

Even back in the mid-nineteenth century, with the exception of the idea of digging for treasure, these beliefs were already little more than legend motifs, rather than the traits of an active magical/religious specialist. Of Turkic (or possibly Finno-Ugric) origin, the word *táltos*¹⁰ existed already in the Hungarian spoken at the time of the Conquest—and we have a handful of data of the personal names of *Táltos* from the Middle Ages.¹¹ However, we know nothing from these terms about the type of specialist the Conquest-era *táltos* actually was. They do not appear in the sources as active, living magical practitioners in their community until the witchcraft trial documents of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Judging by the data found in these, they may equally well have acted as healers, diviners, seers, weather magicians or treasure diggers. Some of them, born with a 'mark' (e.g., with a tooth or with a caul), were believed to have been chosen and were even able to keep in touch with the spirit world through their dreams and visions. They could be initiated into knowledge in the Christian or non-Christian other world.¹² This practice had practically stopped by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Folklore collectors reported but a handful of *táltos* involved in divination and treasure hunting. However, a rich array of *táltos* legends (mostly about their battles in the shape of two opposing *táltos* bulls or horses), as well as *táltos* beliefs (about the *táltos* being born with teeth or wandering off at the age of seven), were found by researchers in many varieties, particularly in the central and southern parts of the country.

7 For an overview of related eighteenth–nineteenth century works complete with numerous quotes and illustrations from the works of Dániel Cornides, János Horváth, Ferenc Kállay, Arnold Ipolyi, Antal Csengery, Kandra Kabos and Lajos Kálmány, see: Diószegi, ed., *Az ősi magyar hitvilág*.

8 Csengery, *Az urál–altáji népek ősvallásáról*. For a description of details, see: Diószegi, *Az ősi magyar hitvilág*, 265–91.

9 Ipolyi, *Magyar mythologia*, 234–37, 447–52.

10 See: Róna-Tas and Berta, *West Old Turkic*, 845.

11 See: Pais, "A táltos meg az orvos," 73–87.

12 For more detail on this, see: Pócs, "The Hungarian shamanism;" Pócs, "Shamanism or Witchcraft," 221–89.

Rites for keeping in contact with the spirit world are characteristic of magical/religious specialists active in any part of the world, including the Christian seers known all over Europe. Nevertheless, it was on this basis that researchers in the nineteenth century began to equate the *táltos* with the Siberian shamans. In other words, the visions they experienced in a trance or dream state, their ‘other worldly’ journeys were accorded a determining role as unique *táltos* attributes in the study of the ancient Hungarian religion. As regards the motifs later associated with the *táltos*, the shaman drum came to be an important element of the reconstruction of the ancient religion in the wake of Gyula Sebestyén’s a 1900 paper on the ‘magic drum’.¹³ By the twentieth century, Hungarian ethnographers had come to see the *táltos* as the shaman of the ancient Hungarian religion supposedly active in the age of the Conquest. In their publications the above-mentioned motifs, particularly the battles of the *táltos*, had by then become parts of the reconstruction of the ancient religion.¹⁴

Géza Róheim’s book on Hungarian folk beliefs and folk customs published in 1925 presented the contemporary state of affairs regarding the reconstruction in its chapter “Táltos.”¹⁵ By comparing Hungarian data with those of the linguistic relatives of Hungarians, based on the characteristic traits of the shamanism of various peoples speaking Ural–Altaic languages he constructed the ideal-type of the Eurasian shaman,¹⁶ and it was in the light of this idealized model of shamanism that he drew the figure of the *táltos* of the ancient religion, comprising traits of the belief figure of the contemporary *táltos*, related legend motifs and the data of two eighteenth-century *táltos* trials. He proclaimed that the Hungarian *táltos* preserved Finno-Ugric based Turkic shamanism and was its westernmost representative and considered the narrative motifs of the *táltos* surviving into the twentieth century to be remnants of a shamanism that still existed at the time of the Conquest and at the time Hungarians adopted Christianity (in the tenth and eleventh centuries). This reconstruction did not yet include the world tree which later came to play a central role in the initiation rite of the *táltos* as a shaman.

The world tree appears in Hungarian folklore

Róheim’s comparative method and his inverse research approach proved to be an inspiration for folklorists who aspired to flesh out this construct with certain elements of existing shamanisms which otherwise did not constitute parts of Hungarian

13 Sebestyén, “A magyar varázsdob,” 433–46.

14 See e.g.: Kálmány, “Összeférhetetlen tátosainkról,” 260–66.

15 Róheim, *Magyar néphit és népszokások*, 8–20.

16 Such elements include the shaman drum (Buryat), the initiation (Chukch), battles in animal form (Yakut and Sami), shamanic headgear (Teleut) and diviners (Khanti) etc., see: Róheim, *Magyar néphit*, 8–20.

folk beliefs. There was no trace of a world tree in Hungarian folk beliefs, while it played a very significant role in the shamanism of certain Ural-Altaic peoples. These researchers were also aware of related European notions—thus, for instance, they knew of Edda, the Old Nordic world tree, as well as the generally wide-spread distribution of world tree notions. This became mixed and mingled with ideas of a probably even more universal tree of life, or notions of a tree cult in general, which further expanded the circle.¹⁷ All of this acted as an inspiration to look for and find the world tree also in Hungarian ancient religion.

These motifs had come to the focus of attention through the work of scholars of textual folklore and archaeologists even before researchers of folk beliefs and vernacular religion began to pay attention. In its earliest period, Hungarian fairy tale research followed in the footsteps of the Finnish historical-geographical school when it looked, primarily in India and Western Asia, for the origin of one or another type of fairy tale and the directions in which it had spread. Later, in the 1920's and 1930's the excellent folklorist, Sándor Solymossy, clearly inspired by researchers of the ancient religion, began to look for the 'eastern' elements of Hungarian folk tales, some of which were later incorporated into the broader concept of the *táltos* as an ancient Hungarian shaman which had already emerged by then. Solymossy pointed out four motifs or *sujets* which were missing from the European corpus of fairy tales, as far as he was aware at the time, and thus seemed to him to be uniquely Hungarian—the motifs of 'bathing in mare's milk'; 'cushions jumping out'; '*táltos* battle' and 'the tree with no top', in other words 'the tree that reached up to the sky.'¹⁸ As far as this last is concerned, the following account may be offered based on Ágnes Kovács's entry in the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* and Katalin Benedek's summary from 2003. The beginning of the fairy tale provides a common frame for a wide variety of *sujets*—the hero uses his axe to cut notches into the trunk of a tree that reaches up to the sky or climbs higher and higher along it using some other means (e.g., magic shoes); on the branches of the tree he sees new worlds, a forest, a palace and various supernatural creatures; until finally, after a great many adventures he obtains what he had set out for.¹⁹

These adventures and the subsequent sections of the tale have many variants and subtypes registered in the relevant folk-tale catalogues. In our present context the first two types of *sujets* deserve the most attention: a tree that reaches up to the

17 According to Szőke, Voigt, and Tolley the world tree is an ancient Indo-European legacy: Szőke, "Spuren des Heidentums," 126–27; Voigt, "Az élet és az élet fája," I–II; Tolley, *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*, Vol. I–II, 108. It was also known among German, Slavic and Romanian peoples. See e.g.: Pócs "The Hungarian shamanism."

18 Solymossy, "Magyar ősvallási elemek," 133–52; Solymossy, "A magyar ősi hitvilág," 340–82.

19 Kovács, "Baum: Der himmelhohe Baum," 1381–86; Benedek, "Az égig érő fa," 76–100.

sky grows in the king's courtyard and the king promises his daughter's hand to anyone who will fetch from the top of the tree the fruit of eternal youth or of a healing plant; and, in the other, a dragon living on top of the tree abducts the princess and the hero must liberate her (this *sujet* often includes the motif of the hero's 'dismemberment'),²⁰ while in certain variants the hero acquires a horse once on top of the tree. According to other, related fairy tale *sujets*, a poor fisherman goes up to heaven where he tells St Peter, the Virgin Mary or some other heavenly being about his wish. Various 'lie tales'²¹ also begin with the motif of climbing up to heaven on the stalk of some plant (e.g., a beanstalk). Solymossy placed these tales and tale motifs within the framework of the 'ancient religion' (mentioning only the Hungarian variants in his 1922 study), and sought to justify the role played by 'the tree with no top' in Hungarian shamanism by drawing a parallel with the Ural-Altaic world tree or shaman tree.²² In the chapter "The ancient belief world of the Hungarians" in the comprehensive multi-authored volume "Hungarian Ethnography" Solymossy published his reconstruction of the ancient religion, now complete with the motif of the world tree, in 1937.²³ In the same work, the chapter on "Folk tales" was written by János Berze Nagy²⁴ who also discussed, briefly, the tale of the tree that reached up to the sky among the 'remnants of the ancient religion.' His writing, however, is less coherent, his mythological parallels are cited from a range of different sources and his audiences did not seem to find him as thought-provoking and inspiring as Solymossy's more impressive and well-organized texts (Vilmos Diószegi did not refer to him, either).

Solymossy's writings may have been the inspiration for Sándor Szűcs's interest in the world tree, starting in the 1940s. In 1936, as a museologist ethnographer, he began publishing belief texts that he had collected from shepherds in the Sárrét and Nagyunság regions about witches, *táltos*, healers and dragons. In 1945 he published an overview in the journal *Ethnographia* summarising the texts that contained motifs of the world tree, shaman tree and the related act of initiating the *táltos*, under the title "Égbenyúló fa a sárréti néphitben" [The sky-high tree in the folk beliefs of the Sárrét region.]²⁵ The only bibliographical reference in this article is Solymossy's text

20 In the international catalogue of folk tales: Aarne and Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, 468; in the Hungarian catalogue of folk tales: MNK 468 I*–MNK 462II*.

21 The 'lie tale' is a category within the genre of folk tales: a witty tale usually about the opposite of experiential reality, or about non-existent absurdities (Aarne and Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, 1875–1999).

22 Solymossy, "Keleti elemek népmeséinkben," 30–44; Solymossy, "Magyar ősvallási elemek"; Solymossy, "A magyar ősi hitvilág," 340–82.

23 Solymossy, "A magyar ősi hitvilág."

24 Berze Nagy, "Mese," 226–89.

25 Szűcs, "Az égbenyúló fa," 23–6.

of 1937. He adopted Solymossy's views and identified the trees featuring in his belief narratives with the former's fairy-tale tree that reached up to the sky.

Let us take a look at a few of these colorful stories. Szűcs quotes from the village records at Sárretudvari from 1821 that one Balázs Hő can see everything from the top of a tall tree and "said that on the tall tree that he knows for sure, the sun shines even at night, and he will go up there and turn the judge into a he-dog..." (Szűcs calls this *táltoskodás* [acting as a *táltos*].)²⁶ In the next data item we hear the story of a shepherd who "used to roam along with the flock even as a child around the sedge-meadows of Bihar and Békés. And in these immense marshes he would often bump into an old crane-catcher called Bütöm..." And it was from him that he had heard that,

"[...] somewhere in the world there was this wondrous great tree which had nine branches in all directions, and each was as big as a forest. Once they started swinging and swaying, that gave rise to a great wind. This is such a marvellously great big tree that not only the moon, even the sun used to travel through its branches. But no one can find this tree or know where it is unless he was born with teeth and took nothing other than milk in his mouth for a whole nine years. And anyone will tell you that that kind of person is a *táltos*."²⁷

In another text collected by Szűcs it is said of an old willow-tree that that is where witches gather at night to quarrel. People hear the sound of pipes and bells and a '*táltos* stud' also turns up out of nowhere (thus, here the *táltos* are the witches' enemies).²⁸ Szűcs includes in this group data items which feature the *táltos* on a tree or a treetop. One of these is a story about Vicsak, the *táltos* of Sárret, who was sitting on top of a willow-tree on a thin little branch. Some people had hidden under the tree to protect themselves from a cloudburst and heard Vicsak singing above them,

"Let the rain bubble,
let the wind up and down rest,
let the humans' fur coat
and the beasts' fur get soaked."²⁹

Although Szűcs included these texts in the group marked by the world tree, he did not explicitly state that these trees were 'world trees.' He categorized as 'lookout

26 Szűcs, "Ősi mintájú ábrázolások," 23.

27 Szűcs, "Ősi mintájú ábrázolások," 23.

28 Szűcs, "Ősi mintájú ábrázolások," 25.

29 *Eső bugyborékolják, / Széll lenn, fenn nyugodják, / Ember szüre, jószág szőre / Hadd ázzék...*, Szűcs, "Az égbenyúló fa," 25–6.

tree' a tree that was later recategorized as a shaman tree by Diószegi. (A lookout tree was a tree that had notches cut into it, or spikes attached to it on a pole, to fashion a ladder-like contraption that shepherds, marsh-dwellers and other people of the meadows would climb up to orient themselves).³⁰ At the same time, however, Szűcs also suggested that "people passing down the traditions of the Sárrét region may have known some kind of ceremony in relation to the tree that reached up to the sky", and comes to the conclusion, "as a belief notion of some kind related to the figure of the *táltos*, the tree that reached up to the sky was preserved at Sárrét down to our own time, along with the memory of the associated ceremony."³¹

Reading Sándor Szűcs's texts we may grow sceptical whether these are one hundred percent authentic. His pre-World War II manuscripts have perished, along with all other materials of the museum of Karcag,³² thus we cannot compare his notes with the published texts. This is why I only advance my doubts as cautious suppositions. The two most problematic points are the following.

1. The unexpected appearance of texts featuring world-tree data shortly after Solymossy's publications on the 'tree with no top.' Szűcs's writings featuring *táltos* written between 1936–1940 completely lack even the mere mention of a world tree or '*táltos* tree.' All manner of *táltos* beliefs known on the Great Plain of Hungary occur in these narratives,³³ but the trees under which witches gather, for instance, are not attributed a world tree role. The *táltos* Vicsak, who first appears in a 1936 paper, is not yet sitting up in a tree or singing a 'shaman song' of rain magic—he is simply seen roaming and offering fortune-telling.³⁴ By the time the 1945 paper is written, all of this assumes, although in a slightly sceptical tone, a more 'shamanic' character.
2. The style of the texts. Sándor Szűcs himself repeatedly made it clear that his texts were not verbatim transcriptions of the utterances of his informants, but his own writings or at least transcripts (e.g., he earned a great deal of professional respect by his overview, *A régi Sárrét világa* [The World of Old Sárrét].)³⁵ The stories he put in the mouth of old shepherds also frequently appeared re-written and stylized, their narrative manner reminiscent of the colorful, somewhat

30 Szűcs, "Ősi mintájú ábrázolások," 25.

31 Szűcs, "Ősi mintájú ábrázolások," 26.

32 According to a letter written by Sándor Szűcs in 1957 to Gyula Kaposvári, then director of Damjanich János Museum of Szolnok.

33 Fighting, vocation, trial (but not on a '*táltos* tree') etc.; for data on all of this, see: NNVA group *Táltos*.

34 See: Szűcs, "Táltosok és boszorkányok a Nagysárréten," 151–55; Szűcs, "Nagysárréti babonák és mendemondák," 299–304; Szűcs, *A régi Sárrét*, 38–41, 125–34.

35 Szűcs, *A régi Sárrét*.

loquacious, quasi-literary style known from his own publications (his contemporaries referred to him as a ‘great story-teller’), rather than of the authentic texts of any ethnographic collection, even if we think of the most articulate informants. From this point of view, the rain song quoted above is the most revealing. This supposed shamanic song was later repeatedly quoted, based on Sándor Szűcs, by Hungarian researchers of religion and folk poetry as evidence of ancient Hungarian shamanism. (Not to mention that a weather magician is not necessarily a shaman.) Based on my familiarity with several thousand verbal charms and magic songs³⁶ (due to these stylistic features uncharacteristic of folk poetry and the complete lack of analogous cases) I dare say that this is not a preserved shaman song, nor is it the poetic imagination of the ‘folk’ that brought it into existence but rather, at least partially, that of Sándor Szűcs.

There are a few further factors that support this view. Not much has survived of Sándor Szűcs’s original notes and records. The section of his legacy to be found today at Püspökladány includes but a few sheets of paper, none of which offer verbatim records, only brief sentences by the collector or, often, he notes down topics or themes only.³⁷ The notebook recording his collecting work at Kide, which forms part of the inventory of the Ethnological Archives, is similar—he describes in his own words the belief or rite in question (sometimes with an interjected quote), or simply names the topics about which he collected information.³⁸ In a letter written to Sándor Szűcs in 1942, László K. Kovács offers an enthusiastic laudation of Szűcs’s book *A régi Sárrét világa* [The World of Old Sárrét].³⁹ He remarks that this is the way in which Hungarian ethnology should be pursued, much rather than in the dry, ‘academic’ manner used by the Germans—in other words he commends Szűcs’s stylized, story-telling manner.⁴⁰ This is just one of many opinions prevalent at the time, but it clearly reflects a general ambiance in which Szűcs could easily have felt justified in using his not-so-exact manner of writing. In this context I must mention a relevant point from much later—the excellent archaeologist István Fodor, an expert on the Hungarian Conquest wrote about Sándor Szűcs’s texts, in response to one of my articles,⁴¹ that he could not fathom why certain scholars will not accept Szűcs’s data as authentic. “Perhaps his main »sin« was”, he mused, “that alongside

36 See: Pócs, *Ráolvasások*.

37 Notes held in the archives of Karacs Ferenc Museum, Püspökladány under inventory no. 84.4100.1–3.

38 Collected at Kide, Museum of Ethnography, EA 31188.

39 Szűcs, *A régi Sárrét*.

40 Karacs Ferenc Museum, Püspökladány, 84.1448.2.

41 Pócs, “The Hungarian Táltos.”

being an excellent scholar he also had a literary vein and wrote good prose?”⁴² I should have replied at the time that good prose is no sin, indeed it is a virtue, but if the folklorist goes on to write in place of his informants, or if he re-writes their words—yes, that is indeed a capital sin in the world of scholarship.

The emergence of such stylized variants of Szűcs's texts may also partly be due to the influence of Vilmos Diószegi, but in this respect we are speaking about far more than mere style. Diószegi used Szűcs's data to create his own construct and actively supported Szűcs's ambitions in relation to *táltos*, that way extending to him his own inverse research attitude. His visit to Karcag and his correspondence with Szűcs allowed him to get acquainted with the latter's unpublished material and he encouraged Szűcs to collect further *táltos* material, as he considered him to be the man best acquainted with the shepherd traditions of the Great Hungarian Plain and their most committed guardian. He also asked him to try and collect more of certain specific types of data (the *táltos* 'is sleeping like one who had been dismembered' or on the *táltos* drinking nothing but milk until he is nine years old). In 1953, upon Szűcs's request, Diószegi sent him a photograph of a 'tree with no top', that he referred to as shaman tree.⁴³ In 1957 he encouraged him to gather his material "that fits the [topic of the] belief world of the conquering Hungarians" as he would happily support its publication in book form.⁴⁴ All of this had an inspiring effect on Szűcs, who clearly committed himself to the cause of expanding the shamanism construct.

We see the effect of similar processes in connection with the world tree representations the inclusion of which into the ethnographic discourse was also initiated by Sándor Szűcs, but it had a precedent in an archaeological publication. Gyula László (leading archaeologist and expert on the Migration Period in European history during the first millennium AD) was the first to feature a world tree relevant to Hungarians in a 1942 publication—an image carved into an Avar container found in Mokrin⁴⁵ in the Bánát region. Named 'tree of life' by László, the tree stands on top of a hillock surrounded by animals, as well as the sun and perhaps also the moon. László speaks of the connection of the image to world trees appearing in the shaman drum images of Inner Asia, of the Altaic Avars and other peoples and of a shared legacy from the age of the joint Ural–Altaic existence of these peoples, but he

42 Fodor, "Sámánok voltak-e a táltosaink," 510–23.

43 The photograph is likely to have come from a Soviet publication, however, the provenance and the original source of the image could not be ascertained from the Diószegi–Szűcs correspondence available so far.

44 Letters from Vilmos Diószegi to Sándor Szűcs, Karacs Ferenc Museum, Püspökladány, 84.730.1–2; 84.729.1–2.

45 In Homokrév what is today in Voivodina (Serbia).

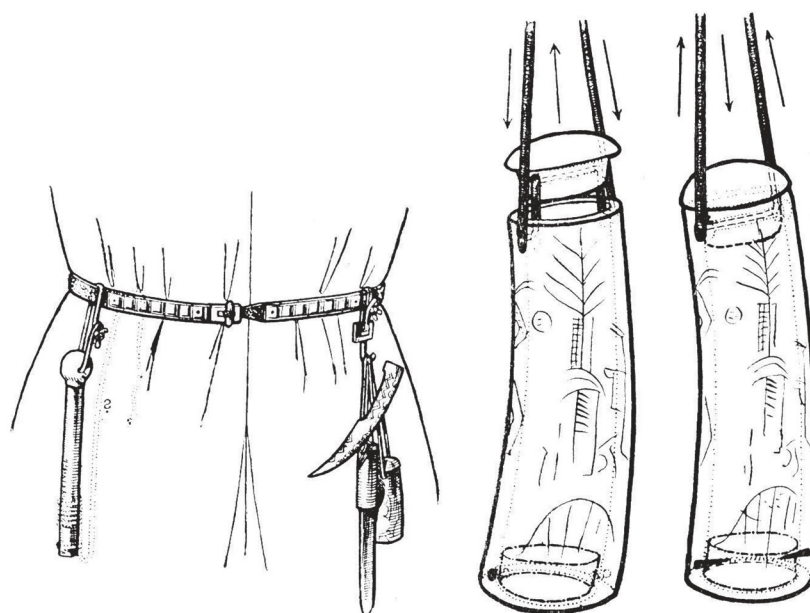


Figure 1 The Mokrin container, based on Gyula László's work (László, "A népvándorlás lovas népeinek ősvallása").

also raises the possibility that, in line with his by now discredited theory of 'double conquest',⁴⁶ the container may have been the personal possession of a Hungarian individual involved in the early conquest.⁴⁷

Gyula László's publication gave Sándor Szűcs the motivation to publish the representation of this container in a spread-out version in an article⁴⁸ entitled "Representations of ancient motifs on shepherd's tools", along with the image of a tree he had collected in the Sárrett region, probably with the idea of the ancient connection in mind.

In this paper Szűcs published further similar incised, carved, or inlaid ornamentation from his own collection—copies made of the everyday objects of old shepherds or their descendants. After some hesitation he decided to regard these images, carved

46 László, "A »kettős honfoglalás«-ról," 161–90. According to this mistaken theory, a group of Hungarians had been present in the Carpathian Basin earlier than the commonly accepted late ninth century, along with late Avars since the seventh century.

47 László, "A népvándorlás lovas népeinek ősvallása," 63–105. A first, essentially identical version of the paper was written by László in 1942, for a planned memorial volume on Antal Hekler which was eventually not published. In 1947 the paper was published in an independent volume by Erdélyi Tudományos Intézet [Transylvanian Scientific Institute]. Szűcs, and later Diószegi and Timaffy are referring to this later edition.

48 Szűcs, "Ősi mintájú ábrázolások," 160–66.

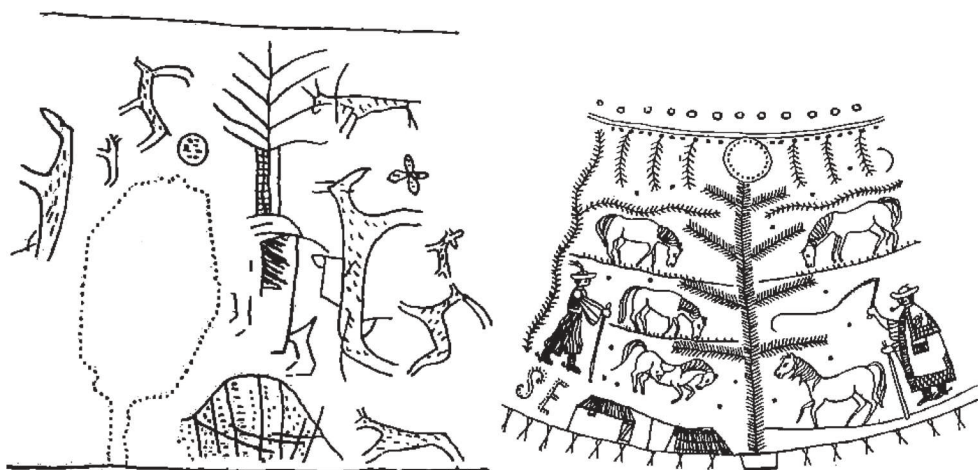


Figure 2 Spread-out rendering of the Mokrin container following Gyula László (László, "A népvándorlás lovas népeinek ősvallása") and the ornamentation of a 'horn salt cellar' from Sárrétudvari, collected by Sándor Szűcs, in Szűcs (Szűcs, "Ősi mintájú ábrázolások pásztori eszközökön," 161).

or etched into containers and mirror boxes as well as the wood or bone inlay of whip handles or staffs as evidence of the identity of Hungarian *táltos* = shaman, and the legacy of Hungarian ancient religion. In 1941 László K. Kovács invited Sándor Szűcs to Kolozsvár (Cluj, then part of Hungary), to take part in the ethnographic collecting work of the Erdélyi Tudományos Intézet (ETI) [Transylvanian Scientific Institute]. Szűcs took the opportunity and launched a tour collecting folk beliefs at Kide, Kolozs County with plans to publish.⁴⁹ In a letter written to Szűcs, K. Kovács expressly urged the exploration and preservation of the ancient legacy of the Hungarians.⁵⁰ Besides Gyula László's similar efforts at Kolozsvár, this may have inspired Szűcs to collect and publish data belonging to this sphere of ideas. Problems of authenticity or stylization may again emerge with respect to these visual representations. When presenting his first overview⁵¹ of these drawings, Szűcs still expressed certain doubts. He mentioned that the shepherds themselves who owned the objects he had copied did not refer to the plants there as 'trees with no top' and that in fact they were flowers much rather than trees. For instance, the maker of one of the objects said, "We put a fine, big flower on the middle of it." "So, he did not call a tree what we had taken for one."⁵² In another instance, "The depiction of the vegetation reflects the way in which the

49 Under the title "Természezeletti erők a borsavölgyi nép hiedelmeiben" [Supernatural forces in the beliefs of the people of Borsavölgy].

50 Karacs Ferenc Museum, Püspökladány, 84.1448.1.

51 Szűcs, "Az égbenyúló fa," 23–6.

52 Szűcs, "Ősi mintájú ábrázolások," 164.

rosemary is represented in the shepherd art of the Tiszántúl region. But this does not necessarily preclude us from considering the plant in the center, in terms of its size and form, a tree, even though it does seem to grow out of a flowerpot or box.”⁵³ In other words, the idea lingering in the background here is that although they do not represent a world tree, they may as well be seen as one. Finally, the author comes to the conclusion (referring to his own texts of uncertain authenticity) that since the tree that reached up to the sky was known in the Sárrét ‘as a belief notion,’ it may be assumed that the similarity with the world tree of the Mokrin container is no accident, but the imprint of a similar notion.⁵⁴ Based on Szűcs’s doubts, however, we, too, need to be skeptical whether the incised images indeed represent a world tree and shaman tree. Seconding the author’s own doubts, we, too, are compelled to question whether the figures incised on these objects do actually represent a world tree and a shaman tree. The uncertainty is further enhanced by the fact that neither of the objects from which the author made the drawing is in evidence any more either in the Karcag museum or anywhere else, nor are there surviving photographs.

The questions of stylization which occurred in the context of texts surface once again with regard to the drawings. Lajos Vargyas mentions poorly stylized drawings⁵⁵ associated with Szűcs’s publication in two letters to him, so stylization was definitely something Szűcs was known to practice. The presumably original, first drawings have been lost⁵⁶ with two exceptions which can still be viewed among Sándor Szűcs’s legacy at the Püspökladány Museum. One is the original of the image published in the book “Pusztai krónika” [Chronicle of the Plains]⁵⁷—a drawing transferred from a horn saltcellar to tracing paper and traced with ink. Comparing this and the published version it becomes clear that (at least in this one case) Sándor Szűcs went rather overboard in completing a design that on the original had worn off.

As far as the other image is concerned, I am not aware of the existence of a published version, but the original itself deserves attention. A marginal note on the page reveals that Szűcs was truly eager to find a world tree with a sun and a moon wherever he could.

Visual imagery seems to have enticed Sándor Szűcs even more to become enmeshed in the inverse research attitude and deferentially following certain trends

53 Szűcs, “Az égbenyúló fa,” 161.

54 Szűcs, “Az égbenyúló fa,” 166.

55 Letters from Lajos Vargyas to Sándor Szűcs from 1956 and ’57. (Karacs Ferenc Museum, Püspökladány, 84.2395.1–3).

56 According to the inventory book of the Karacs Ferenc Museum of Püspökladány, the legacy includes a few more examples of a world tree, but in the folder corresponding to their inventory number (845134.1–7.) all I could find in October 2022 was the single drawing I mentioned.

57 Szűcs, *Pusztai krónika*.

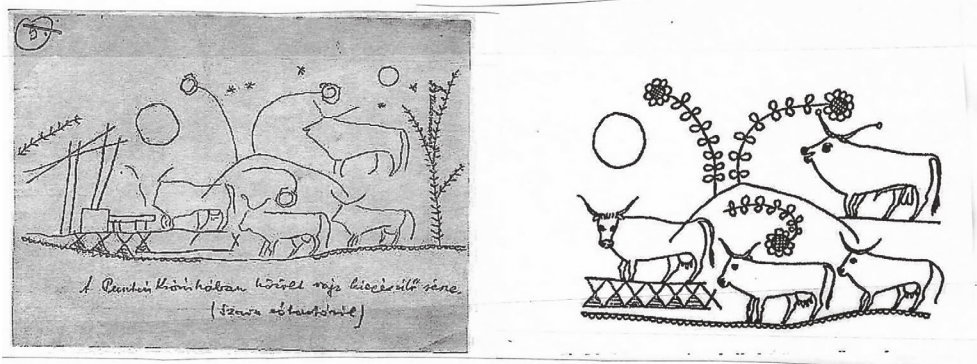


Figure 3 The original and the published image from the horn saltcellar (Füzesgyarmat-Szeghalom); Karacs Ferenc Museum, Püspökladány, Inv. no. 84.5134.1–7 (Szűcs, *Pusztai krónika*).

than did texts. This may be proved with an instance of the image not of a *táltos* tree, but of a battle between two *táltos*. Szűcs published this drawing in a brief review of his data on *táltos* battles in 1952.⁵⁸ In the text commenting on the image Szűcs speaks about the case of a *táltos* called Pista Takács. “The shepherd Demeter was so intrigued by the *táltos* battle that this was the scene that he incised on the side of his saltcellar in his youthful years by way of decoration.”⁵⁹ By contrast the truth is the following. “At the request of Uncle Sándor [Szűcs] Uncle Lőrinc Vákánt carved two fighting bulls on a container for scabies ointment. Whether he originally ever knew of such a legend, I don’t know.”⁶⁰ (If Szűcs’s published statement is also true, then it must refer to another container and the commissioned ‘fake’ drawing of the carving by the ‘shepherd Demeter’ below was made from memory, or the object has been lost in the meanwhile.)

The sum of our doubts relating to Sándor Szűcs’s contributions brings us to conclude that unfortunately, the use of these data in academic reasoning is untenable and it threatens to undermine the very foundations of the construct of the world tree.

Vilmos Diószegi’s *táltos* construct

Using Róheim’s and Solymossy’s model as an ideological foundation Diószegi based his reconstruction of the figure of the *táltos* of the ancient religion and at the time of the Conquest (mostly relying on contemporary belief data and also incorporating

58 Regarding an object held in the museum of Karcag which Szűcs acquired from its owner in the early post-war years.

59 Szűcs, “Ősi mintájú ábrázolások,” 4.

60 By courtesy of Dr. Julianna Örsi, retired director of the museum at Túrkeve, in a letter dated November 2022.

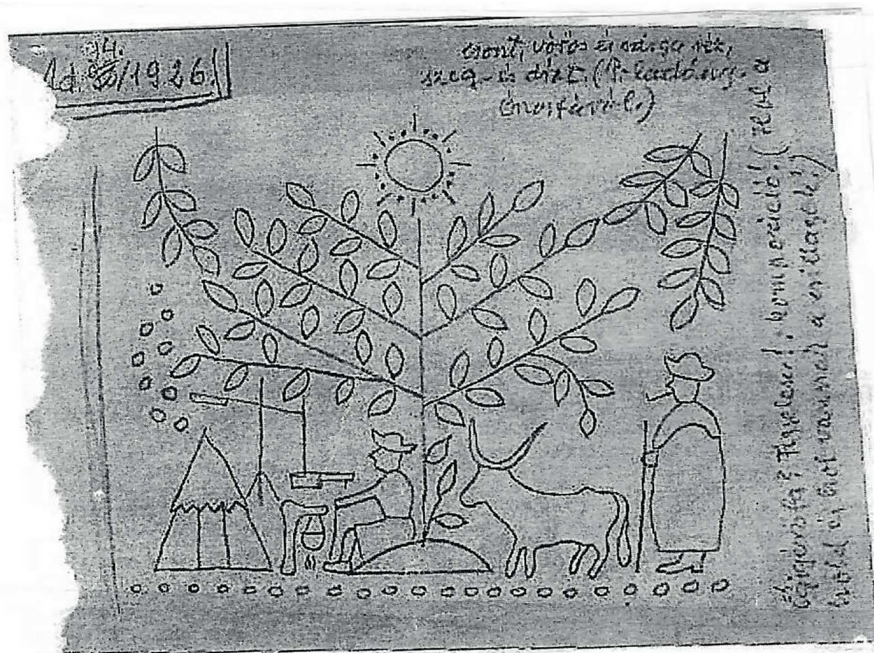


Figure 4 Original drawing from the leaded wood ornamentation (Püspökladány), Karacs Ferenc Museum, Püspökladány, Inv. no. 84.4546.1.

Sándor Szűcs's findings). This is someone who is born with a sign (a tooth or possibly six fingers) or has a 'superfluous bone' such as a double line of teeth; they become initiated on the world tree or the shaman tree and come into contact with the spirit world during a public ritual performance through ecstasy induced by drumming. This picture thus featured the world tree as the center of the cosmogony of an assumed ancient Hungarian shaman and the symbolic representation of his path to the spirit world. The shaman tree also appeared, seen as the model or representation of the world tree, as the physically existing means of initiating the shaman.⁶¹

I shall say more about Diószegi's reception later, but I should indicate at this point that recent research has raised considerable doubt around the reconstructed notion of the shamanism of the age of the Conquest associated with the names or Róheim, Solymossy and Diószegi. One of the most conspicuous shortcomings of this construct, also noticed by non-Hungarian researchers,⁶² is that it was based on a

61 Overviews of his research results are: Diószegi, *A sámánhit emlékei*; Diószegi, *A pogány magyarok*. Short overviews for the international public are Diószegi, "Die Überreste des Schamanismus," 97–135; Diószegi, "Hungarian Contribution to the Study of Shamanism," 553–66.

62 See e.g.: Hutton, *Shamans*, 145; de Blécourt, *Tales of Magic*, Chapter 6.

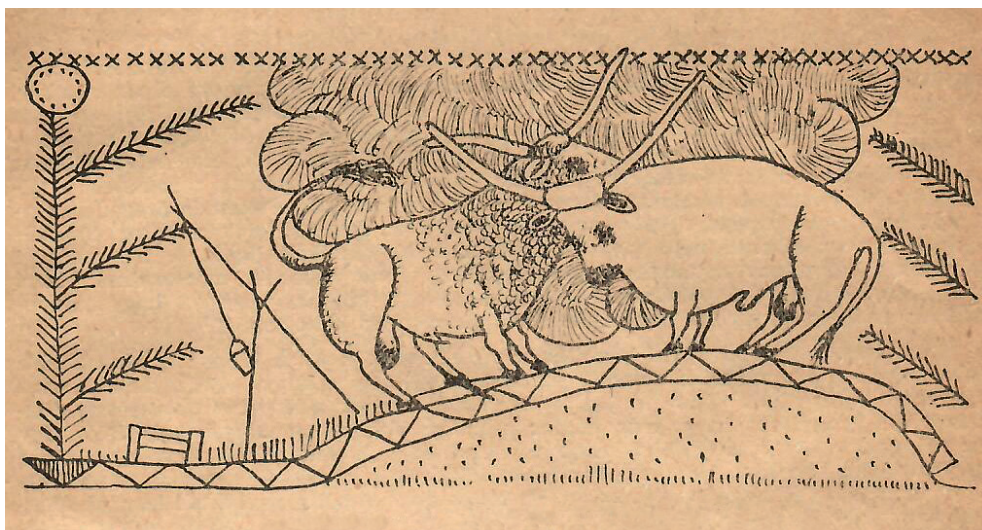


Figure 5 Táltos bulls battling. (Incised decoration on a horn saltcellar.)
Collected by Sándor Szűcs (Szűcs, "Viaskodó táltosok," 4).

model compiled from the attributes of the shamanism of different peoples and from different time periods. The ideal image of 'the Eurasian shaman' does not strictly correspond to the shamanism of any of the linguistic relatives of Hungarians—no such 'perfect' shaman has ever existed. The attribution of qualities to the shaman of the ancient Hungarian religion of which no data, relic or trace of any kind has survived, simply to be able to tick off each element of the model is a characteristic example of the vanities of the inverse research attitude.

Another problematic aspect is that the reconstruction has mostly been compiled from contemporary folklore data (and, as I have already mentioned, these referred not to a magic practitioner active in the period, but a mere belief figure and the legends relating to him). It is a perennial problem of ethnographic research that there are usually not enough data to carry out a historical examination of the past, and thus we are compelled to make do with indirect inferences, e.g., based on analogies and comparisons. This may lead to a number of pitfalls—many scholars are unable to stop at the point where they can make no further valid inferences; the pseudo-scholar—and the general public—usually want more and fall into the trap of their preconceptions. Vilmos Diószegi wrote in a summary of his investigations, "as a result of a range of explorations in a number of different directions we have found out that a whole line of traits in our belief world goes back to the time of the Conquest."⁶³ Accordingly, as Róheim had already pointed out, we are talking about 'pagan' relics of the ancient Hungarian religion of the Conquest period.

63 Diószegi, *A pogány magyarok*, 134–35.

One of the most important elements that play a part in the reconstruction, the battle of the *táltos* was a motif in the folk beliefs of the early modern period. Vilmos Diószegi himself contributed a great amount of data in innumerable variants. In fact, researchers had already borrowed certain other attributes of the *táltos* from widely known belief motifs even before Diószegi (such as the *táltos* being born with teeth, their headgear, certain elements of their ‘initiation,’ as well as trance or ecstasy). It was more difficult to prove the relevance of those contemporary data which were not *táltos* beliefs but had been imported from the attributes of other mythical beings, religious/magical specialists, or even from outside the bounds of religion. Characteristic examples are the following: the shaman drum, where attempts to prove its existence relied, beyond a single data item of a drum, on rather remotely connected data on sieves and some children’s rhymes;⁶⁴ the Christian visions of the dead-seer (*halottlátó*) comprised in the reconstruction in the absence of any beliefs testifying to visions in the state of trance on the part of the *táltos*; the traits of the witch seen at Christmas from St Lucy’s chair (e.g., her horns) were associated with the figure of the *táltos* battling in the shape of a bull or were even interpreted as surviving elements of the shaman’s costume.⁶⁵ (Thus, one non-existent thing, as it were, served as proof of the other non-existent thing.)

How do the notion of the world tree and the assumed material existence of the shaman tree appear in this context in Diószegi’s works? After a few papers on particular subjects and a work laying out his methodological foundations,⁶⁶ his first great overview published in 1958 puts the emphasis more on the shaman tree and the related initiation rituals, while the cosmogonic notion of the world tree did not come to play an important role until Diószegi’s 1967 publication—a work on a smaller scale and aimed at a more popular audience (as the most important representation in the ancient Hungarian world view). In 1969 he published a review of the Ural–Altaic parallels of the ‘sun and moon’ and ‘birds’ variants of the world tree complete with some new data.⁶⁷ Two long chapters in his 1958 book (“Climbing the tree that reached up to the sky and initiating the shaman candidate”⁶⁸ and “The *táltos*’ tree that reached up to the sky, his ladder and the shaman tree”⁶⁹) disclose a great number of data about the world tree notions of the various Ural–Altaic-speaking

64 There is absolutely no trace or evidence of the existence of the shaman drum or of a *táltos* drumming like a shaman either at the time of the Conquest or later. For more detail on this, see: Pócs, “The Sieve and the Drum,” 197–212.

65 For more on these dubious points of the reconstruction, see: Pócs, “The Hungarian *Táltos*.”

66 Diószegi, “A honfoglaló magyar nép,” 20–65.

67 Diószegi, *A pogány magyarok*, 11–68.

68 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 149–68.

69 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 270–93.

peoples (Ostyaks, Samoyeds, Yakuts, Mongolians, Turks, Evenkis, Nanays, etc.). He couples these with initiation rites collected among various Siberian and Inner Asian peoples which the shaman performs using the symbolic equivalent of the world tree, shaman tree (with steps or a ladder) on (or beside) which he passes tests and performs sacrifices. Diószegi presents these items as comparative material testifying to the Hungarian shamanic connections, publishing the Hungarian items in tandem as evidence (this, again, is a manifestation of the inverse research attitude). Diószegi had no data of his own collection directly relating to the world tree or shaman tree, and the few thoughts he gave to initiation concerned not the *táltos*, but popular magical experts such as the *halottlátó* [dead-seer], *garabonciás* [weather magician] or *tudós* [wise man/woman, cunning folk].⁷⁰ These had European, rather than 'shamanistic' parallels (which former Diószegi did not use, indeed, perhaps was not even aware of). The motif of the cunning-man/woman being initiated into knowledge⁷¹ while standing on top of a sprout that grew to the moon or on weeds growing very tall are legend motifs associated with magical specialists or witches all over Europe and internationally (cp. the already mentioned lie-tale of the bean stalk that grew to the sky/moon, which Diószegi himself did not consider pertinent). Even more doubtful is a motif borrowed from a novel by József Nyírő according to which the future was divined by someone climbing on top of a 'holy poplar tree' at the summer solstice using a ladder made from nine types of pines.⁷² There is no doubt whatsoever that this is a literary construct by a person who is a layman from the point of view of folklore studies, which drew on sources such as Solymossy's Hungarian world tree and Transylvanian folklore items with Romanian connections (divination during the summer solstice).

Diószegi's rather meagre database was usefully supplemented by Sándor Solymossy's fairy tales and their analyses (which the latter himself had already declared shamanistic) with regard to both the notion of the world tree and the initiation motifs associated with the world tree or shaman tree, as well as by Sándor Szűcs's drawings and stories involving a world tree, and finally by a few pieces of MS data sent by mail by teacher-ethnographer László Timaffy.⁷³ All of the above constitute almost the most important pieces of evidence of the book chapters mentioned above. Sándor Szűcs's data, regarding which I have signaled my serious misgivings above, were accepted by Diószegi without reservation. To illustrate the supposed connection, Diószegi included every drawing of world trees offered by Szűcs along

70 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 149–155, 270–275; as well as Diószegi, *A pogány magyarok*, 87–90.

71 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 149.

72 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 273–74.

73 Timaffy published his data on the world tree and the *táltos* initiation after the publication of Diószegi's work.

with various Ural-Altaic world tree representations in both of his comprehensive monographs, as the sole Hungarian data for world tree representations featuring the sun and the moon.

Besides the above, Diószegi has but one data item from Nagyszalonta stating that *táltos* Gyurka Árva from Szalonta “was hopping from one tree to the next.”⁷⁴ (Let me note that if a *táltos* is hopping from one tree to the next, this does not mean that any of those trees is necessarily a ‘shaman tree.’)

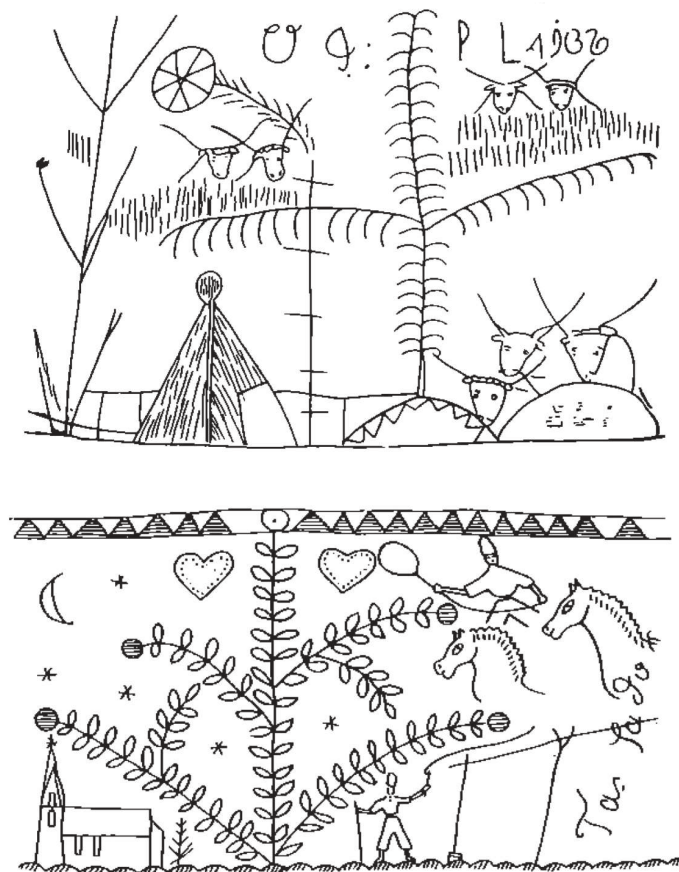


Figure 6 Two world trees complete with sun, moon and animal figures (based on Diószegi, *A sámánhit emlékei*); World tree and shamanic ladder on a saltcellar made of horn (Biharnagybajom, collected by Sándor Szűcs, based on Diószegi, *A sámánhit emlékei*); “Stylized world tree on a container made of horn; the sun on its tip, the moon on its left, stars and horse-heads among its branches” (Berettyóújfalu, collected by Sándor Szűcs, based on Diószegi, *A sámánhit emlékei*).

74 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 271; based on Fazekas, “A »lidérc« és a »táltos« a szalontai nép hiedelmében,” 38.

Timaffy's and Szűcs's texts, as well as Szűcs's drawings are the only Hungarian data testifying to the idea of a world tree with the sun and the moon and to an initiation rite associated with the shaman tree. Diószegi speaks of two methods for initiating a *táltos*, based on his data from Siberia and Hungary—one is the rite related to the shaman tree, the other is when the would-be shaman goes into a trance and experiences being called and 'dismembered'. Hungarian parallels to elements such as climbing on a shaman tree or initiation practically exclusively consist of fairy tale motifs mediated by Solymossy or the rather dubious data of Szűcs and Timaffy. The fairy tale hero climbing up the tree that reaches up to the sky is actually the Hungarian shaman who does this in order to acquire his horse (or drum),⁷⁵ as well as to pass a trial and thus become initiated. Diószegi incorporates Solymossy's assumption without question in his reconstruction, little minding that a fairy tale motif from the modern period cannot directly reflect an element of the world view of the conquering Hungarians (Solymossy's critics only noted this considerably later, too). This is "the fairy tale version of the »trial« in the set of beliefs surrounding the *táltos*"—he writes.⁷⁶

As regards the 'dismemberment' type of initiation of the *táltos*, Diószegi had practically no access to any data testifying to folk belief. The handful of data he published on *garabonciás*, dead-seer or two items on *táltos* do not speak of dismemberment (at best they feature someone talking about dismemberment); the few data items springing from Christian visions have nothing to do with the *táltos*; the single data item he had collected himself in this respect states that the *táltos* kidnap a child born with teeth and twist his arms and legs (which is not the same as 'dismemberment').⁷⁷ Diószegi himself admitted that this was a sporadic phenomenon in Hungarian folk beliefs.⁷⁸ He incorporated into his work pieces information sent to him by mail by Szűcs and Timaffy, but even these were not actually about dismemberment even if they could be explained that way. For instance, in one data item coming from Timaffy a cunning shepherd known to be a cunning man from the Szigetköz region is initiated by three witches and they discuss options of possibly torturing him.⁷⁹ Similarly to Szűcs's data, the authenticity of Timaffy's data is highly questionable. His descriptions are too much 'in line' with the contributions from Siberia and Inner Asia—it seems that when publishing his collected data he placed allusions to Diószegi's theses in the mouths of his informants and used them to support Diószegi's theory.

75 In this view great importance was attached to the identification 'drum = horse' in both Diószegi's and Róheim's thoughts, which later also turned out to have been erroneous concerning Hungarian data on horses.

76 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 151.

77 Szihalom, Heves megye, Diószegi, *A pogány magyarok*, 45.

78 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 73–109.

79 Diószegi, *A pogány magyarok*, 44.

One item from Mongolia, for instance, says that the candidate is sprinkled with blood whilst on top of a tree—by way of a parallel to this Diószegi published a data item from Timaffy: in the Szigetköz region the would-be *táltos* “had to climb, while still a young lad [...], to the tip of a tall poplar tree, there the devil would sprinkle him with blood and this is how he acquired all his knowledge.”⁸⁰

Diószegi also made up for the absence of data on dismemberment by using fairy-tale motifs, relying, besides the previously mentioned dismemberment motif from *The Tree that Reached up to the Sky*, on an episode of the tale about *The Magician and his Pupil*⁸¹ whose hero is first cut into pieces by a witch and is then revived by another hero. Diószegi was aware of this being a tale of Indian origin with an extremely broad distribution, but he identified a characteristic trait which seemed Hungarian to him—the motif of ‘passively acquiring knowledge’. This, however, is of little significance (as opposed to learning magic from books) as a textual motif supposedly proving the existence of shamanism among the ancient Hungarians (in fact both types of knowledge acquisition are widely known in the European legend tradition in the context of several magical or religious specialists).⁸² As regards the few sporadic Hungarian data on dismemberment, the legend tradition of ‘ripping to pieces / dismembering / taking out the bones—reassembling / resurrecting’ were widely known in the nineteenth–twentieth centuries on the Balkans and in the Alps in relation to a varied range of belief figures.⁸³ Certain types of it belonged to the ‘Lord of animals’ tradition still existing in these parts at the time rather than to any assumed shamanistic notions.⁸⁴

Another notion that pertains to dismemberment beliefs in certain parts of Eurasia, as attested by Diószegi’s Nganasan, Teleut, Yakut etc. data, is the notion of the superfluous bone or missing bone (the candidate is dismembered so that they can examine whether he has any superfluous or missing bones). Parallel Hungarian data attest to the (extremely widespread) belief that *táltos* are born with teeth or a double row of teeth.⁸⁵ This is a fairly weak link in the chain of the reconstruction since, as many of Diószegi’s critics have noticed, notions of a superfluous bone or being born with teeth are intermingled in his work,⁸⁶ while data of dismemberment are false or

80 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 165–66.

81 Aarne and Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, 325.

82 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 86–95.

83 Stojanović-Lafazanovska, *Tanatološkiot prazvor na životot*.

84 The entire literature on European notions of the Lord of animals lies outside of the scope of this paper; for more on this, see e.g.: Schmidt, “Der »Herr der Tiere«”, 509–38.

85 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 123–48.

86 László, “A magyar táltos alakjáról,” 44–49; Demény, “Európai-e a sámánizmus,” 147. Diószegi himself was also aware of this problem and did in fact provide some sort of an explanation: Diószegi, *A pogány magyarok*, 55.

dubious and are not related to beliefs concerning the *táltos*'s teeth (except for a few data from Timaffy) and so the motif of the *táltos*'s teeth carries little weight as proof.

Diószegi attempted to mobilize data in order to bridge the gap between the assumed shamanism of the age of the Conquest and folk belief data in the modern period. These include quotes from historical sources which he interpreted as possible evidence of the shaman tree. One such source is the account of the pagan uprising in 1061 as reported in the *Illuminated Chronicle* which states, "the common people chose for themselves leaders and erected for them a wooden stand [... and ...] the leaders of the people, seated on high, sang abominable songs against the faith."⁸⁷ Diószegi believed, based on the similarity with Nyírő's data that this 'wooden stand' may have corresponded to the *táltos* tree of eleventh century Hungarians,⁸⁸ but his argumentation is not very convincing. The minutes of a witchcraft trial held at Szentandrás (Békés County) from 1721 indicting one András Suppony for witchcraft included a passage according to which András Suppony and his accomplices used to 'sing in a pagan fashion' in the dark night in the middle of the dense forest.⁸⁹ Diószegi believed that a group of singers may have gathered in the thick forest around a *táltos* tree or shaman tree (not mentioned in the text). Unfortunately, this quote from the supposed minutes of a trial is probably a fake, intentionally modified to seem 'shamanistic'—coming from a transcript that was manipulated post factum.⁹⁰ Naturally, Diószegi himself used the text in good faith, but even so it does not enhance the number of his historical data convincingly.⁹¹

Diószegi saw the various subgroups of data on initiation as a complete whole and as evidence for his ideas. The set of beliefs concerning the way in which the Hungarian would-be shaman received his knowledge emerged in front of our eyes—groups of archaic notions such as 'sleeping at great length', 'dismemberment' and 'superfluous bone'. This led to conclusions like the following, "Thus the ritual of initiating the Hungarian *táltos* has proved, in comparison, to correspond to the initiation ritual of peoples with shamanic beliefs related to Hungarians." "Thus, in the Hungarian *táltos* tree we may see scientific evidence of the remnants of the shaman tree of the related peoples."⁹²

87 *Chronica de gestis Hungarorum*, 184–85.

88 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 276; based on the edition of the *Chronicle* in *Scriptores Rerum Hungaricarum* I, 360.

89 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 275, based on Oláh, "A boszorkányperek Békésvármegyében," 158; for the entire trial, see: 149–61.

90 For more on this, see: Pócs, "Shamanism or Witchcraft," 280–82; Tóth, *Táltosok és rokonaik*, 161–63.

91 Pócs, "Shamanism or Witchcraft," 280–82.

92 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 147, 293. I have no space in the present paper to discuss phenomena of extended sleep and shamanic trance.

The use of a large number of data of dubious standing has in itself weakened the results of Diószegi's comparative work regarding the world tree, shaman tree or shaman initiation. Added to this is a tendency for over-generalization, to readily declare certain data to be about the figure of the *táltos* or *sámán* and thereby make it into a general rule. In its mildest form this is manifested when Sándor Szűcs's captions such as 'ornamentation on saltcellar' or 'ornamentation on container made of horn' would appear in Diószegi's work as 'world tree standing on top of a hill' or 'stylized world tree', or the drawing of the 'lookout tree' in Sándor Szűcs's Figure 6 is described as a shaman ladder.⁹³

More extreme examples of such 'shamanification' may be observed in the summaries of individual sections of his analysis. E.g., in the summary of data on dismemberment Diószegi writes, "chosen by supernatural beings, the candidate will sleep for an extended period of time (usually three days). During this time, he is dismembered by the *táltos*. Traces of this are detected even in the lifeless body—lying unconscious, the person is covered in blood. The dismembered body is thereupon re-assembled by the *táltos*, the candidate is re-awakened, now replenished with knowledge."⁹⁴ (The blood-covered body is represented by data on a single dead-seer lying in a trance who was not dismembered and not reassembled by the *táltos*). Also, Timaffy's only data item on the sprinkling of blood gives way to this summary statement: "similarly to the Hungarian notion, the sprinkling or smearing of blood on the would-be shaman is also practiced among peoples with shamanic beliefs."⁹⁵ Once again, we see that the errors of an inverse research attitude based on assumptions can be the source of much confusion, error and erroneous generalization in the work of even the most serious scholars. Furthermore, the acceptance of the erroneous results and additions of Solymossy, Szűcs and Timaffy without reservations seemingly rounded out the whole reconstruction, but in fact made it more uncertain and doubtful. And: it set in motion new harmful processes, on which I will shed light in the next section.

After Vilmos Diószegi

Diószegi, primarily through his painstaking, selfless and fruitful research in Siberia, his charismatic personality, but perhaps also through his commitment to his preconceived notions of historical continuity, has become a canon maker. Most of his contemporaries, as well as the vast majority of scholars working after him, accepted his results without doubt or criticism, treating his construction of the ancient

93 Diószegi, *A pogány magyarok*, illustrations in the Appendix.

94 Diószegi, *A pogány magyarok*, 120.

95 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 15.

religion as axiomatic. This served as a basis for the writings of Tekla Dömötör, later of Mihály Hoppál, and other researchers still active today on *táltos* and the ancient religion,⁹⁶ as well as, to an increasing extent, the arguments of ‘pseudo-scientific works’. For some seventy-eighty years, ‘lay’ misunderstandings about the world tree have continued more or less unabated.

Let us first look at the mistakes of those researchers who had already contributed to the instability of Diószegi’s building with a couple of faulty bricks. Even after the publication of Diószegi’s summary works, Sándor Szűcs continued his *táltos* publications—now in support of and supplementing Diószegi’s views that have become well-known—in some of his texts, allusions to Diószegi’s theses can be discovered. Another important element of the Diószegi construct, the shaman drum (whose serious credibility problems I have already alluded to⁹⁷), is not our subject matter here. Yet I have to mention it here, because Sándor Szűcs in his last article on Hungarian shamanism⁹⁸ provided some evidence for this, when he published data on divination and healing with the sieve, which he presented as the *táltos*’s shaman drum or ‘horse’ (cp. the shaman’s trance-inducing drumming and the above-mentioned drum = horse identification). The article contains motifs relating to the use of the sieve as a shaman drum of which there are no other examples among the hundreds of collected data of the *táltos* of Hungarian folk belief. The problems of text forgery mentioned in connection with the world tree are also very much in evidence in this work (for example, there are also some highly suspicious words of invocation to spirits and fragmentary texts of shaman songs). This article—and its afterlife—clearly illustrates the harmful effects of the transmission and the conjunction of researchers’ mistakes, which foster new misconceptions: further research based on Diószegi’s construction of course already took the existence of these Hungarian ‘shaman drums’ for granted. The correction of a single error could, in a chain reaction, bring down the whole edifice.

The situation is similar with the activities of László Timaffy, who, after some of his manuscript data had been used by Diószegi, published a collection on the Szigetköz in 1964 from data collected in the latter’s spirit. In the introduction to the book, he described the results of Diószegi’s research on the ancient religion, saying that “I wish to insert the results of my research into his system [...] I accept the results of Diószegi’s methodological investigations and compare my existing data with them.”⁹⁹ He presented his data in line with the points of Diószegi’s overview. As for the dismemberment of the would-be shaman upon initiation, as I mentioned, there was a notable lack

96 Dömötör, “The Hungarian female *táltos*,” 423–30; Hoppál, “Traces of Shamanism,” 156–75, 430–49; Hoppál, “Hungarian Mythology,” 251–76.

97 See: note 65.

98 Szűcs, “A samanizmus emléke,” 45–54.

99 Timaffy, “A honfoglaló magyarság,” 309–33.

of Hungarian counterparts to the examples of the various Ural-Altaic peoples. Let us examine a Teleut data item collected by Diószegi with regard to dismemberment:

“According to the Teleut, the individual selected to become a shaman would be boiled by the spirits in a cauldron, his flesh would be cut into chunks and examined at length and with great care; his bones would be counted. If the would-be shaman had a bone missing, he had to die, if he had an extra bone, no matter how hard he resisted, he would become a shaman.”¹⁰⁰

Let us now look at two data items that Timaffy published in 1964, well after Diószegi’s publication, from his own collection on the Szigetköz region. I get the impression that this enthusiastic collector kind of ‘helped out’ Diószegi by providing Hungarian data according to which the *táltos*, similarly to the Teleut, dismember the unconscious *táltos* candidate, count his bones, then reassemble and revive him.

“When this kind of *táltos* child disappears from home, first he would be taken ill. He will lie lifeless somewhere out in the fields, just as if he had died. Then the *táltos* come and take his body into little pieces and count his bones to see if he has any superfluous. He’ll have one or he’ll have several—the teeth that he was born with. Then they put him back together again and glue his body together with their own blood. By the time he wakes up he will have become a real *táltos*, all he has left to do is climb up a tall ladder, that’s where he rests up from all of this. Then he can already turn into a bull and can go and battle his enemies.”¹⁰¹

Timaffy introduced the topic of the shaman tree as follows. “[The *táltos*, i.e., the ancient Hungarian shaman] relied very much on his shaman tree. In the beginning it was a tall pole with crossbars. This was later replaced in our traditions by the ladder. It is climbed for the purpose of performing tasks beyond the strength of man.” Here he refers to the appropriate place in Diószegi,¹⁰² followed by the data he had collected himself: a young shepherd ‘sees’ the *táltos* coming at night and climbs to the top of the ladder to escape him; ‘from then on he was a *táltos*’.¹⁰³

The following text develops the theme of the ‘shaman tree’ further: now the ladder used for smoking meat also becomes part of the picture which lends it a local color:

“[a shepherd aged twenty from Kunsziget] ... once pretended that he had died and lay unconscious for three days. During this time the *táltos* took

100 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 139.

101 Timaffy, “A honfoglaló magyarság,” 313.

102 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 270–73.

103 Diószegi, *A sámánhit*, 312.

him to pieces and counted his bones. Once they had found his superfluous bone, they put him back together again and glued him together with *táltos* blood. When he woke up, he had become a *táltos*. He had one more trial to accomplish [...], he ran into the shepherds' hut, and through the chimney climbed out onto the roof. He climbed up into the chimney on the little ladder used to hand the meats into the smoke. This is how he got his knowledge."¹⁰⁴

Timaffy published a range of other data regarding the climbing of all sorts of ladders and treetops which are not known from anywhere else, from any Hungarian folklore collection, except for the contributions of Sándor Szűcs.¹⁰⁵

Even if the telltale signs of style are ignored (e.g., the way the peasants of Szigetköz talk about the 'superfluous' bones of the *táltos*), one can still suspect forgery for a purpose that was obviously important to the collector. The problem is especially grave when such dubious data appear not in popular literature, but in academic journals (like the ones cited), and therefore, as presumably credible data, which then find their way into scholarly arguments more easily. In our case, this communication also retroactively discredits the data that Diószegi received in manuscript form from the same author before the publication of his book and incorporated into his construction.

Almost without exception, the inner circles of ethnography and folklore scholars accepted Diószegi's reconstruction and made it the basis of their own research. The world tree is almost always in the picture, usually in an important, central position. Let's see how the scholar who researched Eurasian shamanism and Hungarian folk beliefs in 1998 saw the world-tree image of the 'ancient Hungarian belief system', in this case based solely on the evidence of fairy tales:

"In the mythological worldview that can be reconstructed with the help of Hungarian folk tales, the image of the *tree that reaches up to the sky* or the *tree with no top* (the world tree of other Finno-Ugric peoples) plays a central role. This huge tree symbolically connects heaven and earth, i.e., the upper world of the gods and the world of human life, while its roots reach into the underground world, and a hole at its base provides access to the dark underground world. Only the hero with shamanic powers (the young pigherd) can climb this huge pillar to reach the house of the Moon and the Sun, the silver and the golden castle."¹⁰⁶

104 Timaffy, "A honfoglaló magyarság," 316.

105 Timaffy, "A honfoglaló magyarság," 316–18.

106 Hoppál, "Az ősi magyar hitvilág," 25.

For Diószegi's followers, it was natural to examine the phenomena covered in his works from the perspective of 'Hungarian shamanism'; they usually added a few further traits to the reconstruction, which would make the original basic formula even more doubtful and increased its incoherence. The generalizations from a paucity of data mentioned in connection with Diószegi's summaries are also more prevalent in the work of his successors. Mihály Hoppál, in a volume of studies published together with Anna-Leena Siikala in Helsinki, gives a brief summary of *táltos* beliefs. In it he lists all the doubtful points for which Diószegi has only one or two dubious data (the *táltos* initiate is tormented by spirits, suffers from convulsions, is dismembered, struggles in a trance, asks for milk on his 'return' from hiding, etc.) as leitmotifs; and he presents the figure described by these as the depository of the shamanic traditions of the Conquest period.¹⁰⁷ Foreign researchers interested in the subject could this way consider the questions of Conquest-era shamanism of the Hungarians to be solved. For example, Owen Davies, an eminent British scholar of historical folklore, in the chapter *European Comparisons* of his book on cunning folk, gives an account of the Hungarian *táltos*, and, referring to this Hoppál article, among others, gives the description of a non-existent mythical figure who "had profound psychological experiences in childhood, such as being tormented by ghosts or having visions of his own dismemberment."¹⁰⁸

Hungarian folklorists Linda Dégh and Ágnes Kovács, who were researching Hungarian folktales, initially fully embraced the Solymossy-Diószegi theory of "ancient Hungarian shamanism preserved in fairy-tale motifs." They wrote the first professional overviews of the 'shamanistic' fairy-tale material of the 'tree that reached up to the sky'—progressing along the Solymossy-Diószegi line, following the idea of the Hungarian shaman's world tree.¹⁰⁹ In her 1963 study, published in 1978, Linda Dégh, very well-versed in European fairy-tale research, rejected several motifs considered shamanistic by Solymossy (e.g., the lie tale about the person who goes to the moon on the beanstalk) from the sphere of the ancient Hungarian shaman, but considered all the variants of the tree that reached up to the sky existing outside the Hungarian language area to be of Hungarian origin and an imprint of ancient Hungarian shamanism.¹¹⁰ Dégh's and Kovács's encounters with European researchers of fairy tales and myths, their conference talks and publications in English and German made these views known and—through the authority of these researchers—accepted in the West as well.¹¹¹ In the meantime, János Berze Nagy,

107 Hoppál, "Traces of Shamanism," 160.

108 [Who] "...during childhood [...] underwent some profound psychic experience such as being tormented by spirits or having visions of dismemberment": Davies, *Cunning Folk*, 180.

109 Kovács, "Das Märchen vom himmelhohen Baum," 74–84, 176–80.

110 Dégh, "The Tree That Reached Up to the Sky," 263–316.

111 For example, Bäcker's encyclopaedia entry *Schamanismus* dedicates special attention to

following in Solymossy's footsteps, and with considerable knowledge of mythology in his background, attempted to draw a general picture of the world tree that could be expressed in fairy tales and myths, pieced together from mosaic pieces from almost all the peoples of the world. Regrettably, his data cannot be used for a serious comparative study and his results are illusory. With some of his views, he also gave further weight to the erroneous ideas of the Hungarian world tree: thus, by bringing together a group of motifs composed of Eurasian occurrences of the motif 'the top of the world tree = the dwelling place of a god/goddess',¹¹² he supplied those who reconstructed ancient Hungarian religion with further data. (For example, he contributed to the creation of the cult of 'Babba Mária,' which is not discussed here.)

Towards the end of the last century, semiotic research gained momentum in Hungary and this, partly due to the influence of Mihály Hoppál, who mediated and popularized such studies, led to the appearance of views related to various 'cultural languages,' which held that such elements (for example folklore texts, woodcarvings or embroideries) could preserve the memory of the 'mythological thinking' of the past.¹¹³ These views reaffirmed the tendency to include fairy-tale motifs in mythological reconstructions that were otherwise already weakening.

Diószegi's reconstruction was also generally accepted by researchers of related disciplines. Most interested in the matter were the archaeologists involved in researching the Conquest period who, as scholars less versed in ethnography and folklore, treated Solymossy's and especially Diószegi's doctrines as evidence formulated by the great authorities of another profession. In this way, many of them easily became prisoners, to a greater or lesser extent, of the 'inverse attitude': that is, they (often unwittingly) evaluated their archaeological finds, which were difficult to decipher in many ways, as evidence of the shamanism of the Conquest era. It was primarily Gyula László, István Dienes, and later István Fodor, aspiring to produce a general overview, searched for—and believed to have found—archaeological evidence based on fairy-tale motifs and shepherd carvings from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for presumed tenth-century 'shamanistic' images and rituals.¹¹⁴

Hungarians among European peoples, since they have the closest linguistic and ethnic ties to Eurasian peoples who practice shamanism. He lists 'world tree' types of fairy-tales that had been emphasized by Hungarian research and which, he claims, indicate shamanism in a number of ways, and declares that the *táltos*, cunning man and diviner of Hungarian belief legends were all derived from the shaman: Bäcker, "Schamanismus," 1215.

112 Berze Nagy, *Égigérő fa*, 147.

113 Cp. Hoppál, "Hungarian Mythology."

114 László, "A népvándorlás lovas népei"; László, "A magyar táltos alakjáról"; László, "A kettős honfoglalásról"; Dienes, "A honfoglaló magyarok," 77–108; Dienes, "Der Weltbaum," 202–7; Fodor, "Honfoglaláskori művészetünk" 32–40; Fodor, "Über die vorchristliche Religion,"

Gyula László's statement from 1970 is highly characteristic: "The fact that the story of the tree reaching up to the sky is known throughout the Hungarian-speaking world proves that the belief in the world tree, the shaman tree, was much more widely known in earlier times, at the time of the Conquest and before."¹¹⁵

Source material for the notion of the world tree—and the 'tree of life' which archaeologists often fail to distinguish from the former—was mostly provided by Iranian–Sasanian style ornamentation on handicraft articles from the age of the Hungarian Conquest (silver pots, belt buckles, sabretache plates, containers, etc.). (Gyula László, who elaborated the theory of the 'double conquest' included Avar relics from the same period in his investigations.¹¹⁶) The examination of the Sasanian silverware was particularly important for archaeologists exploring the Conquest period, because, as István Fodor explained, this was by far the most influential artistic trend all over the Steppe region at the time when the Hungarians resided there, and the greater part of the known wealth of Eastern European relics was created by artisans of this Hungarian population. The Sasanian style of Iranian relics from the third to the seventh centuries was prevalent in the region of Central Asia and the Caucasus and survived into the age of the Hungarian Conquest.¹¹⁷ The question emerged to what extent the 'palmette' motifs of these ornamented objects may be seen as world tree representations and tied in with the shamanism of pagan Hungarians. Discussing the pre-Christian religion of the Hungarians, István Fodor wrote in 2003 that the image of the tree of life or world tree, which appeared in many different forms in the works of tenth century Hungarian silversmiths, survived in folk tales¹¹⁸ and folk tradition and folk art¹¹⁹ in general until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and thus it is certain to have played a central role in the belief world of tenth-century Hungarians.¹²⁰ István Dienes came to similar conclusions¹²¹ and both he and Fodor identified unique Hungarian traits on the objects found at Hungarian archaeological sites. One such is the 'world tree with bird.' István Fodor

327–51; Fodor, *A magyarok ősi vallásáról*; Fodor, "Az ősi magyar," 11–34. Although Béla Szőke talks about the broad European distribution of the respect for trees, of the life tree or tree of notions, etc. and about the ancient veneration of trees in general, he mentions the role of the Hungarian–Finno-Ugric world tree with the sun and the moon within the same framework, accepting Diószegi's results (Szőke, "Spuren des Heidentums," 121–30).

115 László, "A »kettős honfoglalás«-ról," 172.

116 László, "A »kettős honfoglalás«-ról."

117 Fodor, "Honfoglaláskori művészetünk," 32.

118 Fodor, "Über die vorchristliche Religion."

119 Szűcs, "Az égbenyúló fa;" Szűcs, "Ősi mintájú ábrázolások."

120 Fodor, "Über die vorchristliche Religion," 329.

121 Dienes, "Der Weltbaum."

stated in 2005,¹²² based on Sarmata images from the Southern Ural mountains, that the world tree with a bird at its peak may well have been a part of the Hungarian belief world well before the Conquest. (Both were aware of Diószegi's theory built on a text and a representation published by Sándor Szűcs.)¹²³



Figure 7 Representations of world tree with bird on Sasanian silverware (based on Fodor, "Honfoglaláskori művészetünk").

Prompted by the clearly recognizable eagle figure in certain representations, Fodor, similarly to some other researchers, brought it in connection with the bird Turul, the totemic ancestor of the lineage of Árpád in connection with notions of the world tree; he also proposed the idea of the shaman's bird as a *psychopompos* ('soul transporting') bird.¹²⁴ (With this he also alludes partly to Róheim's view¹²⁵ on the *halálmadár*—'the bird of death.')

All of these notions may well have existed, but their direct representation on practical objects seems fairly improbable. The reverse is always true—their presence there can hardly be seen as evidence of the existence of such ideas.

122 Fodor, "Az ősi magyar vallásról."

123 Diószegi, *A pogány magyarok*.

124 Fodor "Über die vorchristliche Religion," 329–32.

125 Róheim, "A halálmadár," 23–36.

The other supposed distinctive Hungarian or Ural–Altaic trait is the world tree with the sun and the moon, the presence of which on objects was acknowledged—also following Diószegi¹²⁶—by all the archaeologists dealing with the Conquest period mentioned here. Evidence for this is provided by the drawings of Sándor Szűcs and the text quoted above about a ‘shaman tree’ placed in the mouth of a shepherd in Sárrét, whose branches “not only the moon..., but the sun also passes through,”¹²⁷ as well as by palmette decorations on objects from the period of the Conquest, which may also depict celestial bodies among the branches of the tree of life. Fodor pointed out as early as 1973¹²⁸ that Turkic, Mongolian and Manchu world trees differed from that of peoples speaking Indo-European languages that they envisaged the sun and the moon on the tip of or among the branches of the tree; this way he marked out the place of the assumed Hungarian world tree among these peoples. He dedicated a large-scale study to the ‘world tree/half moon’ ornamentation of a tenth to eleven centuries pair of discs discovered in the cemetery of Sósartyán. He contended that while the moon images of Iranian–Sasanian ornamentations were related in Khorezm, in the areas of Georgia and Armenia, and elsewhere to the cult of a moon deity, similar representations found on the discs at Sósartyán were ‘re-interpreted according to their own belief world’ by Hungarians, in other words for them this meant the Hungarian tree of life or world tree, in which the celestial bodies also had a place.¹²⁹

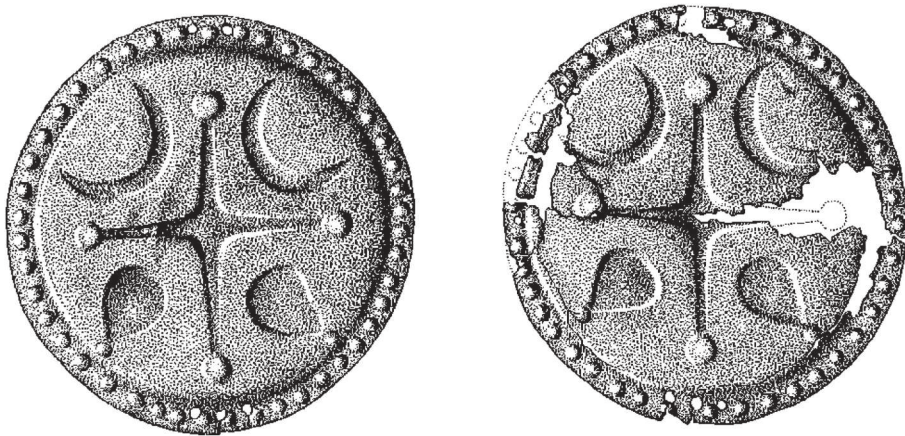


Figure 8 The Sósartyán discs, based on Fodor, “Über die vorchristliche Religion.”

126 Diószegi, “A honfoglaló magyarok.”

127 Szűcs, “Az égbenyúló fa,” 23.

128 Fodor, “Honfoglaláskori művészetünk,” 33–4.

129 Fodor, “Über die vorchristliche Religion,” 37–8.

The question I would like to cautiously ask at this point is—how can we know what the ornamentation of a practical object worn on the body meant for a tenth- or eleventh-century individual?¹³⁰ A further problematic point in this line of argumentation is that the concepts of the tree of life and the world tree become mingled or merged in them: in fact the tree of life seems a far more universal phenomenon than world tree notions which have a distinct geographic area of distribution. However, regardless of whether we consider the tree of life a manifestation of the world tree, its appearance as an ornamental motif can in no way be identified with a ritual requisite of the shaman, the shaman tree.¹³¹

A more serious problem in relation to the ornamentation of objects, as well as the use of oral tradition texts is the disregard for the methodological constraints of folklore research (equally true for the arguments of Sándor Szűcs and Vilmos Diószegi). Unfortunately, we do not have the space to go into this subject in detail here, but it should be noted that we cannot treat either contemporary or modern-era folklore text motifs or decorative art representations, nor modern beliefs, as direct imprints of Conquest era notions or rites, or as the ‘memory’ of religious ideas from 1000 years earlier.¹³²

Deconstruction

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the voice of the experts, especially of folk tale researchers became more and more reserved regarding the accepted views whereby ‘the world tree of fairy tales = the ancient Hungarian shamanic tree.’ Ágnes Kovács, in her above-mentioned encyclopaedia entry, described the so-called shamanistic motifs as traces of an old, widespread mythical idea. She referred to Solymossy’s and Diószegi’s opinions of these, but she herself did not take a position, nor did she mention these motifs as a Hungarian speciality.¹³³ In her studies, the question of the literary origins of several fairy-tale motifs was raised, for example, in 1984 she spoke of ‘folk tales’ composed by Elek Benedek.¹³⁴ Although Linda Dégh classified the fairy-tale episode of dismemberment as a “shamanistic survival” (i.e. a shamanistic tradition that has survived to this day), she also warned that the elements explained as shamanistic did not prove the survival of ‘pagan Hungarian religion,’ and that *táltos*

130 A question on an even more cautious note: can we be sure that the relevant dead in the cemetery of Sósartyán were all Hungarians?

131 On the question of life tree = world tree, see: Voigt, “Az élet és az élet fája.”

132 My analysis of the question of the shamanic drum in the spirit of these thoughts, and of the shamanic construct in general, has led to rather negative result: Pócs, “The Hungarian Táltos.”

133 Kovács, “Baum.”

134 Kovács, “Das Märchen.”

beliefs (birthmarks, initiation, battles, etc.) did not occur in fairy tales; the fairy tale as an artistic composition has had no connection with modern folk beliefs.¹³⁵ It has also become clear that stories of the tree that reached up to the sky did not become widespread in Hungary until the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century—data from outside Hungary have also come to light, in other words theories of an exclusively Hungarian origin have become untenable.

Almost immediately after its publication, critical voices regarding Diószegi's reconstruction also appeared outside the field of folktale research, both in the fields of ethnography and archaeology. Gyula László, Gábor Lükő, Lajos Vargyas, Vilmos Voigt had doubts regarding the overall reconstruction, or at least they disagreed with different aspects of Diószegi's results. As regards the motifs related to the world tree/initiation, László began to have doubts about the etymology of the word *táltos*, more narrowly about the 'dismemberment' motif within the initiation of the *táltos*, and he did not think that the *táltos* had a connection with the tree that reached up to the sky.¹³⁶ Lükő, writing in 1960, commended Diószegi's book mostly for its use of data on Hungarian folk beliefs collected by himself, but reprimanded Diószegi, whilst accepting his basic concept, for his dubious historical data and errors in the use of the comparative methodology.¹³⁷ Later, István Pál Demény expressed some doubts about the motifs of the world tree: in his opinion, the fairy-tale motifs did not reflect the idea that the *táltos*, as a healing shaman, climbed up the rungs of the world tree in search of the departed soul of the sick (although he also considered the motifs of the fairy-tale tree to be 'shamanistic').¹³⁸ Vilmos Voigt also saw no connection between the motifs of fairy-tale heroes traveling to heaven and to the underworld and the world tree images.¹³⁹ By 2012 he considered the majority of Diószegi's points to be unproven (including the existence, ever, of 'the tree that reached up to the sky' or the shaman drum).¹⁴⁰ Others may have accepted the basic concept proposed by Róheim and Diószegi, but associated the 'shamanistic' motifs found in Hungarian fairy tales not with the supposed practicing *táltos* of the pagan Hungarians, or at least not directly, but considered them to be part of the epic poetry of the age of the Conquest (they also found or believed to have found 'oriental' parallels to such epic motifs). Demény explored the possible survival of the heroic epic of the age of the Conquest in other genres. In the process, whilst accepting without reservation Diószegi's conception of Hungarian shamanism,

135 Dégh, "The Tree."

136 László, "A magyar táltos."

137 Lükő, "A sámánhit emlékei," 199–208.

138 Demény, "Európai-e a sámánizmus."

139 Voigt, "A magyar samanizmusról," 85–98.

140 Voigt, "A magyar samanizmusról."

he expressed his doubts as to the legitimacy of using fairy tale motifs (pointing out that these were wide-spread all over Eastern Europe, including Russian and Romanian territories).¹⁴¹ Vargyas considered the motifs of the tree that reached up to the sky (as well as the *táltos* horse, *táltos* battle or the battle of dragons in the underworld) as ‘shamanistic’ textual motifs of the various epic genres of the age of the Conquest (fairy tale, heroic song).¹⁴² Voigt also considered the motifs of the tree that reached up to the sky (and the battles of dragons and *táltos* battles) to be elements of the epic literature of the age of the Conquest with Turkic connections.¹⁴³ The most important element here was that these scholars did not approach the question of pre-Conquest or Conquest-era religious phenomena solely from a shamanism-centered point of view and thereby they contributed to dismantling the shaman-centric construct.

The full-scale deconstruction of the construct was accomplished by Dutch folklorist, Willem de Blécourt. Relying on the investigations of Central and Eastern European scholars, he established for each and every relevant fairy-tale type, one by one, that it either had literary origins or came from the renderings of nineteenth-century tale collectors or was not of Oriental origin or was equally wide-spread in the West as it was in the East. Besides, he repeatedly emphasized that the motifs of migratory legends or of fairy-tales cannot legitimately be used for mythological reconstructions and that motifs from literary tales cannot be interpreted as the surviving legacy of archaic rites or beliefs.¹⁴⁴ Not being myself a fairy-tale researcher, I cannot judge where are the points at which de Blécourt’s deconstruction might, if at all, be exaggerated, but I do not find it surprising that the process of deconstruction itself should be carried out by a foreign scholar, entirely free of the conscious or unconscious ‘priming’ in shamanistic thinking that ‘home-grown’ Hungarian scholars had received during their training, and who was thus probably better suited to debunk the research myth of ‘the world tree of the Hungarian shaman’ than his Hungarian colleagues.

Survival and revival of the construct

Alongside the generally more skeptical tones, erroneous reflexes also remained in evidence. Certain scholarly opinions today remain fully committed to Diószegi’s

141 Demény, “A magyar hősi epikának,” 210.

142 Vargyas, “Honfoglalás előtti, keleti,” 107–21; Vargyas, “Magyarság a folklórban,” 108–59; Vargyas, “A hősének maradványa,” 398–413.

143 Voigt, “A magyar ősvallás kérdése I,” 365–418; Voigt, “A magyar ősvallás kérdése II,” 71–96.

144 De Blécourt, *Tales of Magic*, Chapter 6. “Journeys to the other world.”

reconstruction, making certain additions which usually render the situation only more confused and result in further misunderstandings. In one example, Turkologist Attila Mátéffy includes motifs of the tree that reaches up to the sky from a range of different fairy-tales in a paper written in English and intended for publication abroad, focusing partly on fairy-tale connections of the legend of the miraculous stag. Together with the figure of *Tündérszép Ilona*, *Babba Mária*, supposed goddess of the ancient Hungarians also appears, alongside her supposed sun symbolism, on the tree (invoking the idea of ‘goddess on the world tree’ imported by Berze Nagy), in a fairly confused array.¹⁴⁵

I would like to present a personal experience of the survival of these misguided reflexes. In a paper mentioned above,¹⁴⁶ I tried to offer an overarching critique of Diószegi’s construct of Hungarian shamanism and invited critical contributions from relevant professionals. István Fodor sent me a detailed answer—but no critique.¹⁴⁷ In his paper, without having given consideration to the problems I had raised, he reiterated Diószegi’s theses, each of which he considered justified. To my critical remarks he responded with Diószegi’s own arguments or his very words, e.g., at one point he stated that I could not be right, because, as Diószegi had explained, “It is not one isolated phenomenon or another that turns out to have been a part of the belief world of the conquering Hungarians but an organically interconnected set of notions! [...] The groups of ideas associated with the belief world of the pagan Hungarians and the shamanism of the related peoples fit together like two cogwheels, interlinked, with no missing or superfluous cogs.” And (Fodor himself went on), “it is admirable that ancient beliefs have survived in our folk beliefs in such abundance and such a recognizable form—not only in patches limited to one or two locations, but practically in the entire Hungarian-speaking area.”¹⁴⁸ Or, “the image of the tree of life is not overcast by the fog of generalization, since it is connected in concrete, characteristic and unique forms to shamanism.”¹⁴⁹ These were in fact the very points I had refuted! The inverse research attitude manifests doubly in this case, almost like a double twist. It is given further support by an excessively deferential attitude to authority. Quoting my statements pointing out Diószegi’s incoherence, István Fodor expressed his doubts, whether “a renowned scholar of the stature of Diószegi, acknowledged by international research [...] could possibly make such a fundamental mistake worthy of any true dilettante in such a fundamental question.”¹⁵⁰

145 Mátéffy, “Mother Mary in the,” 80–94.

146 Pócs, “The Hungarian Táltos.”

147 Fodor, “Sámánok voltak-e.”

148 Fodor, “Sámánok voltak-e,” 516; quoting Diószegi, *A pogány magyarok*, 137.

149 Fodor, “Sámánok voltak-e,” 517; referring to Dienes, “Der Weltbaum,” 204.

150 Fodor, “Sámánok voltak-e,” 516.

Let us now take a final look at the misconceptions of the laymen. They have been looking, and indeed finding, ever newer evidence in the twenty-first century for the *táltos*-shaman and the related world tree. One teacher who had served the cause of ethnography with excellent folklore collecting activities wrote in 2004 in the introduction to his book on folk belief at Kecel, “the beginning of the twentieth century brought significant and lasting partial results marked by the works of Lajos Kálmány, János Berze Nagy, Gyula Sebestyén, Vilmos Diószegi, Mihály Hoppál, Marcell Jankovics or Lajos Vargyas. I am quite certain that popular belief at Kecel also retains some elements that may complement and strengthen the statements of the above mentioned researchers. Certain elements mentioned in the chapter *World view* of our collection look archaic even at first sight, and we may suspect in them fragments of the ancient world view.” Added to the world tree of the ‘ancient world view’ is a motif of the legend of the ‘wise coachman’, according to which a carpenter working on the church roof exerts his magical powers to ‘bind’ a wagon passing by, in response to which the coachman strikes the beam with his axe and the carpenter dies a terrible death. According to the author, “the church that figures in the story stands in the very middle of the world and is a model of the world tree, while the carpenter [...] working on it, corresponds to the shaman carrying out the ritual according to the testimony of Hungarian folk poetry, as is also stated by János Berze Nagy.”¹⁵¹

I do not wish to multiply further the number of false notions of the world tree that could be quoted from several other authors and can only sincerely hope that in cases like this we do not need to fear scholarly use. I suspect, however, that certain harmful reflexes are likely to persist in academic circles at least for the foreseeable future. The foremost factor keeping them alive is their adherence to their presuppositions dictated by a desire to see continuity with the Hungarians of the Conquest-era. I began this paper with one such example, let me conclude it with a similar, subjective example which I quote from István Pál Demény from a piece of criticism he wrote on one of my earlier papers. “It may well be that some authors are concerned that we point out Oriental features in the Hungarian tradition and that way hinder our European integration. It is possible to consider European integration as our goal, but this does not mean we need to deny our own traditions.”¹⁵² I believe this remark requires no commentary.

151 Fehér, *Mondták a régi öregek*, 14–5.

152 Demény, “Európai-e a sámánizmus,” 144. I shall not discuss here the author’s other critical remarks which are valid and for which I am grateful.

Summary

So how do we stand with the world tree, after all? Perhaps the above was sufficient to make it clear that, once we summarize such a wide range of research and pseudo-research notions, there is only one possible reply to that question: the notion of the world tree may have existed; shamanic rituals related to the world tree may also have existed; the *táltos* may have been a shaman and may have practiced such rites—but we have absolutely no evidence of any of this: the existence of world tree notions or shaman tree rituals among the pagan Hungarians has *not* been proven. Contemporary belief data, even if referring to the *táltos*, do not constitute proof: there are no data from the age of the Conquest or the Middle Ages to bridge the millennium that has passed since the Conquest, nor do we have any other example of a belief or rite surviving intact through 1000 years. Existing contemporary data, as we have seen, are surrounded by a host of doubts, as is the material evidence surviving from the age of the Conquest. If we disregard the handful of suspicious, unauthenticated data, if we do not build on ornamental and folk tale motifs, the number of data items to be regarded as evidence is close to zero. The data on world trees/shaman trees that turned out to be false contributed to demolishing rather than enhancing the theoretical construct of Conquest-era shamanism which came about through the interplay of ethnographers, archaeologists and amateurs who started out from a certain set of preconceptions. Thus, the present paper has been a testimony not to the existence of the world tree among the conquering Hungarians, but, at best, to the harmful effects on scholarship of certain misconceptions.

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