

## MYTHICISED HISTORY

### THE DECONSTRUCTED – RECONSTRUCTED LEGEND OF SAINT STEPHEN

**Abstract:** Paradigmatic cultural and political changes always influence perception of the past. The changing world-view brings a continuous reinterpretation of history. In this process the judgement of historical figures may change, they may undergo a continuous process of heroisation or deheroisation. In extreme cases heroes may become antiheroes, and antiheroes become heroes. An excellent example of this process is the legend of the Hungarian ruler Saint Stephen (997-1038) now being shaped, which throws light on the driving forces behind the changing vernacular view of history. In it we can see not only the characteristics of the emerging new myths but also the political and religious motivations behind the reinterpretation of history.

**Keywords:** modern mythology, contemporary paganism, neonationalism, hero cult, Saint Stephen, “István, a király” rock opera.

It is regarded as natural that sudden cultural and social changes make people uncertain. Some people feel frustration at the unknown phenomena that appear, the way the rhythm of life seems to have been jolted out of its accustomed pace, or the apparent disruption of ingrained cultural patterns. Society may give many different responses to overcoming the fears and uncertainties caused by crisis: there may be an increase in the number of people turning to religion as a refuge, support for certain political movements may increase, grassroots initiatives may strengthen, or greater value may be attached to the role of traditions. Theories are often put forward in an attempt to explain the cause of the changes, how they are happening and their possible consequences. Often in seeking to break away from everyday reality they paint a vision of an idyllic historical age, one in which the conflicts, hostilities and misery of the present were still unknown. This kind of romantic, idealising approach based on inadequate knowledge often places history in a mythical dimension, creating a more or less false image of the past in which a fragmentary knowledge of history is shaped into a complete whole. Such reinterpretation of the past always reflects the processes of the present and tries to give

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an answer to the questions of the here and now. The remythologisation of history also opens up the possibility for a deeper knowledge of the present.

For a number of reasons the figure of Saint Stephen (István) (997-1038), the ruler who converted the Hungarians to Christianity and founded the state, was predestined to continuous remythologisation, despite the fact that his presence in popular culture, folklore and vernacular religion in recent centuries has been insignificant compared to that of other Hungarian saints (e.g. Saint Ladislas), rulers (Matthias Hunyadi), or other historical figures (e.g. Ferenc Rákóczi, Lajos Kossuth). However, in our case the question is not whether the figure of Saint Stephen was alive in the folklore of the recent past, whether his cult had survived, but how and why it had begun to flourish again as a kind of revival phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> One obvious cause is that his life and deeds are linked to a turning point in history, so it is inevitable that official politics and religion have always preserved his memory. In this way he remained an active figure in historical memory despite the fact that by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century his popular cult and myths about him had practically disappeared from folklore. On the other hand however, this incomplete knowledge – combined with the fact that the attitude to Saint Stephen of the powers that be changed several times over the past century – opened the way for the emergence of differing opinions and in the final step for his remythologisation.<sup>2</sup> A homogenous, positive attitude towards him existed as long as the state functioned on basically Christian foundations and Stephen's foundation of the state and his adoption of the Christian faith were the bedrock of national identity. However, with the shrinking of the Christian ideological basis, on the one hand all this became heterogeneous and on the other its rootedness in society as a whole became shallower. But it did not disappear entirely, even in times when the regime in power – specifically the Communist Rákosi dictatorship<sup>3</sup> – strove to ignore the Christian content. But even though the designation "Saint" was removed from all history books, it was impossible to deny the fact that he was the founder of the state, or his role in bringing about a complete change of direction marking the beginning of a new era. Even stripped of some of his attributes he remained a figure in national historical memory, with a background of symbolic meaning that could be reactivated at any time. The question

1 Basically two ideas have been put forward on this topic. In his writings Zoltán MAGYAR noted that although the corpus of tradition that arose around the figure of Saint Stephen was smaller than in the case of other outstanding historical figures, elements of folk poetry, beliefs and customs can all be found in the folklore tradition right up to the present. According to Magyar, beside the official church cult of Saint Stephen, there also existed a "vernacular" cult of Saint Stephen even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as evidenced among others by the hundreds of churches named after him, and the popularity of the name István (Stephen) (MAGYAR 2000. 7-9), while religious ethnological aspects of his cult are still alive today (MAGYAR 2000. 224). In contrast Vilmos VOIGT is far more sceptical on the question, and on the basis of historical-folkloristic considerations he makes a distinction between the so-called official state and church cult or memory, and the existent or non-existent cult of Stephen among the common people independently of or beside the former. On the basis of material collected by Ferenc MÓRA, Margit LUBY, Gyula ORTUTAY or Ildikó LANDGRAF, VOIGT also emphasises that the figure of Saint Stephen in folklore died out well before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. VOIGT 2004. 290-308.

2 Incomplete knowledge is a basic condition for the emergence of myths and beliefs. VOIGT 1980.

3 Mátyás RÁKOSI was the head of the Communist dictatorship in 1948-1956.

was merely when and what kind of mythological meaning this demythologised figure would acquire. In addition to these factors, his historical role also predestined him for remythologisation. Besides the incomplete knowledge, the fact that he ruled in a period of transition, he closed one era and launched another with his deeds lend themselves to the creation of mythologies.<sup>4</sup>

## Rock and politics

The first spark in this process came from the rock opera *István, a király* (Stephen the King).<sup>5</sup> An examination of its reception and later development shows that it acted as the catalyst in the remythologisation of Stephen: it launched the process, reactivated the figures and ideologies, and paved the way for demands for further remythologisation. All this occurred not only within the mother country but also had a clearly perceivable effect within the diaspora<sup>6</sup>. It is important for an understanding of the fuller picture to know that the appearance of *Stephen the King* was also part of a political process, the fact that it could appear can be attributed in large part to the waning of the Kádár era and the weakening of its ideological control. As though to demonstrate its own reform spirit, from the 1970s the regime gave a growing number of possibilities for the publication of writings on historical topics,<sup>7</sup> and the premiere of the rock opera in 1983 can be regarded as the culmination of this process. In most cases the appearance of historical heroes in genres of mass culture is not only intended to provide entertainment or disseminate knowledge of history, it usually has deeper motivations. In the Kádár era's<sup>8</sup> period of relaxation (and also in the case of other authoritarian regimes) the mass culture genres could also serve to handle correlations between the authorities and

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4 Certain events, such as transitions between different historical periods, also favour the emergence of mythologies. See: KAPITÁNY – KAPITÁNY 2001. 127-145.

5 The rock opera *István, a király* (Stephen the King) was composed by the iconic musicians of the 1970s-80s, Levente Szörényi and János Bródy on the basis of a drama by Miklós Boldizsár. The world premiere was held in Budapest on 18 August 1983. Since then the mound chosen as the venue for the performance has been officially named Royal Mound. The musical was seen by 120,000 people in 1983. The LP sold millions of copies and the film of the musical was seen by more than 1 million in cinemas. The rock opera told the story of how Stephen came to power and his struggle with Koppány, his rival. It also interprets the struggle for power as a conflict between conversion to the Christian faith and remaining in the old beliefs.

6 Fewer than 10 million of the roughly 14 million Hungarians live in the territory of Hungary. Since the Treaty of Trianon (4 June 1920) many of them constitute the largest minority in the neighbouring countries. During the Second World War and the 1956 Revolution further hundreds of thousands fled to the United States and democratic states of Western Europe.

7 It should not be forgotten that the debate that arose from the first major response to the new Hungarian mythology also took place during this period! See: KOMORÓCZY 1976. In this debate Komoróczy refuted the views of the alternative historian Badinyi Jós who was still living in emigration at the time. Nevertheless, although this debate was opened by the Assyriologist and Hebraist Professor Komoróczy, he unwittingly gave Badinyi Jós a chance to spread his views, that first reached a wider public in Hungary through that book!

8 János KÁDÁR was a socialist politician, Hungary's leader from the crushing of the 1956 revolution and freedom struggle up to May 1988.

the masses, between the official and the lived national consciousness.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the best gauge of this is the rock opera *Stephen the King*: its reception in official and popular culture in the period of socialism wished to keep the changes in national consciousness and their internal tensions under state control. As Jávorszky recalled in this connection the opinion of samizdat circles at the time:

“the political leadership considers it advisable to open the valve of nationalism a little from time to time. *Stephen the King* offered the first occasion to try this. The essence of the method was to use Hungarian history and the sentiments that could be evoked from it as a means of relieving tensions arising within the society.”<sup>10</sup>

And seeing the reactions at the time, the intense, delighted mood<sup>11</sup> it can be said that the rock opera – making use of the “language” of popular culture of the period, its demands, its taste, and in the final analysis, of fashion – had a far more liberating effect on national consciousness than perhaps those in power could have imagined. The unprecedented success of the rock opera, the concert film made of it and the LP was obviously not only due to the music. Kipke also noted in 1983 in the columns of the Catholic periodical *Új Ember* that

“It was national sentiments that brought the rock fans and even more the older generations out to the City Park.”<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps a correspondent defined most precisely the effect the opera had on masses at the time:

“It became a festive ceremony, not only evoking but also realising the direct human togetherness, the experience of community of real feasts, linking the eternal festive with the tradition of the beat festival [...] For the audience the end of the performance created a community not only in the musical experience but also in the sentiment of belonging to the national community.”<sup>13</sup>

9 It is worth thinking here, among others of the delayed release of the Hungarian cult film *The Witness* by BACSÓ that was made in 1969 but was not allowed to be shown until 1979, the limited concert opportunities allowed in the 1980s for performers of rock music that had earlier been classified as underground, or even the relative freedom given to religious revival that did not show signs of nationalism but had earlier been strongly controlled.

10 The article published in *Népszabadság* on 19 August 2002 is available at: <http://www.jbsz.hu/interjuk/regmult-/463-istvan-a-kiraly-koppany-a-szupersztar.html> Accessed on: 1 October 2015.

11 KOLTAY 1984 published a detailed selection from contemporary newspapers and readers' reactions.

12 The article by Tamás KIPKE that appeared on 11 September 1983 is included in KOLTAY 1984. 33.

13 Contribution by Tamás FEITL in the 21 October 1983 issue of *Magyar Ifjúság*. Published in KOLTAY 1984. 83. It should be noted at this point that already from the 1970s the regime gradually allowed scope for interest in the historical past. The number of books and theatre performances with a historical aspect increased, and in the final analysis the launching of the dance house movement can also be regarded as part of this process.

For remythologisation to work, the presentness of history in the everyday present, the search of people in the present for contact with the given historical period are needed. If it is able to actualise the historical figure for everyday reality, that figure can once again enter into the stream of lived culture. This happened with the figure of Saint Stephen too, it was brought to life by the “opening of the ideological valve” in the Kádár era. It is inevitable that under the circumstances of the given period, the connection between past and present was manifested not as a guide to be followed, but as a work having a hidden meaning of current political relevance. In the words of Jávorszky

“Stephen the King is an epochal work. And as such, its interpretation is necessarily plural – everyone approaches it with their own emotions, ideas, sins and desires. In this way over the years it acquired a life of its own in the political sense: everyone thought about it and projected into it what they wanted (or what they were not ashamed to).”<sup>14</sup>

All this happened in spite of the fact that the opera itself did not in reality carry a coded message of current political relevance. Sebők pointed out that in 1983 the crowd gathered on the Royal Mound

“was not only able to see the most memorable performance in Hungarian rock history, but also to experience the biggest mass cultural demonstration of the Kádár era. The storm of applause that followed the national anthem at the end of the performance was a kind of liberation from all the suppressed burdens of conscience of the previous decades.”<sup>15</sup>

As Szörényi who composed the music said, the current political mythologisation of the work began even before the premiere: “word came from Köztársaság tér [where the Socialist party’s headquarters situated] that they thought Stephen was their figure. Koppány represented a failed figure of the Imre Nagy kind, who made the wrong decision in a given historical situation. This expectation on their part almost had the reverse effect, because the public did understand the essence of the conflict”.<sup>16</sup> It can then be regarded as natural that within the Hungarian

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14 <http://www.jbsz.hu/interjuk/regmult-/463-istvan-a-kiraly-koppany-a-szupersztar.html>  
Accessed on 1 October 2015.

15 SEBŐK 2002. 366.

16 SEBŐK 2002. 366.

Socialist Workers' Party too the hidden message was decoded<sup>17</sup> as a conflict between Stephen – Koppány and Kádár – Imre Nagy.<sup>18</sup>

Naturally, *Stephen the King* cannot be held responsible for every reinterpretation of the historical figure of Saint Stephen. Its significance can be seen much more in the role the mass media had on popular culture: it strengthened opinions appearing in everyday culture and common talk, stirring them up and contributing to their spread. It is not possible to produce figures verifying the claim that the rock opera contributed to forming a positive image of Koppány, but the millions of LPs sold and the numbers who saw the film can be regarded as indirect evidence of such a connection. While it cannot be used to support arguments, it is worth mentioning a round-table discussion held at the time that touched on the question. The director's assistant Mihály Sárdi asked:

“who do we like better in this play, Stephen or Koppány? And if a 14-year-old child sees Saint Stephen for the first time in his life in this play will he really like him?”

The director Gábor Koltay, and even Béla Balás a Catholic priest quite clearly named Koppány:

“We watched the performance with a whole lot of small Christian groups, and their first response was that Koppány was better than Stephen.”<sup>19</sup>

However, the emergence of an image of Stephen radically different from the view(s) of academic historians must be sought not in the rock opera, or even in national political factors during the period of communism and then of socialism. The pseudo-scientific trend that appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whose representatives

17 SEBŐK 2002. 367: “One group spoke of an unwanted nationalist breakthrough, especially in connection with the giant national flag unfurled in the finale, the national anthem and the fireworks. According to the other group the work was an unequivocal stand in support of János Kádár. King Stephen the reformer was prepared to condone cruelty and executions, he called in foreigners, that is, he used violence to realise the national aspirations. The work could therefore also be seen as confirming Kádár's interpretation of 1956. According to a third view, Koppány (played by the rock singer Gyula Vikiidál) was the best figure, his role was the strongest musically. While it is true that the course of history demands the victory of King Stephen, artistically and aesthetically it is Koppány who is victorious, in this way the piece can be seen as confirming Imre Nagy. Stephen's victory is false, and they added, he even implemented certain things from Koppány's aspirations. In addition, as Péter Agárdi pointed out, a fourth interpretation could also be felt, especially in 1984-85, when parallel with the steadily strengthening opposition movement, a growing struggle began within the party over Kádár's succession. It could be felt that Imre Pozsgay was trying to radicalise the party with reforms, while others on the contrary demanded a stronger, stricter leadership (perhaps with a younger face), and beside these two main trends there was also another distinctive trend, »popular-national leftism«, whose members actually would have liked a milder form of national communism. And for whom Stephen the King also provided an occasion for self-celebration.” Béla Szilárd Jávorszky <http://www.jbsz.hu/interjuk/regmult/463-istvan-a-kiraly-koppany-a-szupersztar.html>

18 Imre NAGY (1896-1958) the martyred prime minister of the 1956 revolution and freedom struggle, who was condemned to death during the time of János Kádár.

19 KOLTAY 1984. 125-126.

were famously called “prehistoric oddballs” by Miklós Zsirai, did not focus its attention exclusively on the topic of origin, but taking it as a point of departure reinterpreted practically every (real or imagined) major event and figure in Hungarian history.<sup>20</sup> As a consequence, it became inevitable that vital turning points in history about which our knowledge is incomplete – making them more susceptible to mythologisation – such as the Magyar Conquest<sup>21</sup> or the figures at the time of the foundation of the state became the subjects of (re)constructed historical myths. After 1945 these myths flourished mainly among the Hungarians in emigration, but from the 1960s they gradually began to trickle into the mother country,<sup>22</sup> then following the liberalisation of book publishing and the spread of the internet, they reached the unprecedented richness and popularity that we see today.<sup>23</sup>

In connection with Saint Stephen remythologisation is present with special intensity, in a way that is full of internal tensions and can be linked to current political processes. Half humorously, Voigt wrote of pseudo-scholars who gave free flight to their imagination, one of whose sources was the work of Adorján Magyar (1887-1978) whose writings – says Voigt

“are not even the worst in this direction. There is nothing historical about them, at the most the fact that the authors hate not only the Finno-Ugrian peoples and Saint Stephen who converted to the Christian faith, but sooner or later everyone who, say, is not Sumerian [...] There is no refuge here for fact-based historiography. Saint Stephen appears mainly as the persecutor of the authentic Hungarian *regösök*, shamans, compared to whom the heathen Koppány would have been a better »alternative«.”<sup>24</sup>

Viewed superficially such a conclusion could even seem true, but on closer examination we find a more complex picture of how the ideologies described as illusory, dilettante, pseudo-scientific have seeped into the public conscience.

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20 On this topic, among others, see BALI 2014; POVEDÁK 2015.

21 SZABADOS 2015.

22 KOMORÓCZY 1976.

23 MIKOS 2013. 204. Various disciplines responded to the phenomenon in studies of varying intensity. It is not possible here to discuss them. For further information see, among others: KOMORÓCZY 1976; SÁNDOR 2011; HONTI 2010; HUBBES – POVEDÁK 2015; KEMÉNYFI 2006; MIKOS 2013; POVEDÁK – SZILÁRDI 2014; SZILÁGYI – SZILÁRDI 2007.

24 VOIGT 2004. 295.

## The remythologisation of Saint Stephen

Just as at the time it was not the rendering of historical justice that was regarded as the most significant among the effects of the rock opera *Stephen the King*, in the same way it is not principally academic historiography that is affected by the contemporary reinterpretations, but the lived national self-awareness. The opinion of Vitányi in 1984 – “I would not regard it as fitting to expect an opera to resolve the debated questions in our view of history.”<sup>25</sup> – is also valid for these theories, and we can state that among the political, cultural and religious trends of the present time there is a group of growing size, a subculture that is spreading in all respects and has increasing social/cultural influence that defines its national identity not on the basis of the “official”, “academic” canons, but in many cases in opposition to them and reinterpreting them.<sup>26</sup> The question arises in this connection: what happens when this mass ideology being shaped at the grassroots level reaches the official level and appears in politics and then, in turn, in public education? What contribution can this basically excluding attitude, in many cases tinged with chauvinism, make to shaping national identity? The answer to this rhetorical question points beyond the competence of the folklorist and cultural anthropologist.

The reinterpretation of Saint Stephen has been present in pseudo-science for a long while – and obviously also among those who read such writings – but it was only in connection with the debates surrounding the revival for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the rock opera that it reached wider public opinion. The play under the title of *I.K. 3.0.* was directed by Róbert Alföldi<sup>27</sup>, and after the premieres in Szeged then Budapest and its broadcast on television, the debates on the topic shaped cultural public discourse for a considerable time. Although the reviews appearing in periodicals, on various websites and blogs basically criticised the director’s conception, or less often praised it, quite separately from them a mass reaction arose, based mainly not on aesthetics but on ideology. The process reached its peak in a demonstration mobilising a few hundred people held at the time of the Budapest premiere.<sup>28</sup> Although the demonstrators officially gathered because of the director’s conception that presented a negative view of the Catholic church, to a great extent the real motivations were different and far more complex. Although

<sup>25</sup> KOLTAY 1984. 100.

<sup>26</sup> For the most comprehensive syntheses to date of this phenomenon being constructed from below, see: FEISCHMIDT et al. (eds.) 2014, POVEDÁK – SZILÁRDI (eds.) 2014; and SÁNDOR 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Róbert Alföldi (1967-) actor, talk show host, director. He was director of the National Theatre from 2008 to 2013. He openly acknowledges his sexual otherness and his liberal political views.

<sup>28</sup> During the concert given in the Budapest Aréna a demonstration was organised by mainly radical right-wing groups hostile to the director’s conception, such as the Guardians of the Carpathian Homeland Movement, the Hungarian National Guard, the Hungarian Self-defence for a Better Future and the National-spirited Bikers. On the course of the demonstration, see: <http://mno.hu/grund/istvan-a-kiraly-tunteteseseke-unalom-1181472>

a number of commenters attacked the director for his ideas that were contrary to the original meaning of the play, it can be said that it was certainly not the artistic principles or aesthetic objections that brought people out onto the street or launched a wave of mass indignation online. Indeed, the comments that appeared show that it was not even the slur on Christianity that evoked the reactions.

An examination the forums dealing with Saint Stephen on websites associated with the alternative view of history reveals that the commenters with an interest in history but in many cases having very superficial knowledge, basically criticise the historical figure of Saint Stephen and reinterpret it from four angles.

1. The anti-Christian opinions complain about the forced spread of a religion foreign to ancient Hungarian traditions that they regard as ideological colonisation.

“[...] it was not only unjustified morally and ideologically to ‘import’ the Catholic religion that was in moral crisis, but also entirely unnecessary.”

“The steadfast Scythian Magyars opposed the foreign occupation called Christianity: the leaders and tribal chieftains because of their loss of power, the *táltosok* because of their loss of influence.”

“The conversion, that is, the christening generally happened under orders and on a mass scale. Those who refused were slaughtered cruelly by the method that had already been tested in the west. If “necessary” they executed whole villages. The *táltosok*, the priests of the Scythian religion (the practitioners of culture and its doctors) were sent to the stake as witches, or were buried alive with their wives, as happened with the chief shaman Thonuzoba.”

“The popes in Rome have always been aware that the ancient Hungarian religion is the basis of all other faiths and they began to fear “in the name of God” for the well organised and functioning world empire that spread and taught distorted, misinterpreted, simplified, satanic ideals. They knew that the Hungarians were the guardians of the true faith and at any time could have unveil the church that proclaimed satanic teachings and aimed for domination. This is why the priests needed someone they could direct as they wished, but who at the same time appeared to represent the interests of the Hungarian people. That person was Stephen (Vajk), son of Prince Géza, who rose to the throne through betrayal and murder, with German bayonets and Roman gold, then consolidated his ill-gotten power with bloody reprisals (genocide).”

“The whole of Christianity is a dirty Jewish sect... Dirty Stephen was one of the servants of that Satanist nightmare. Peter the first pope was also crucified upside down.”

2. Some of the comments reinterpret Christianity itself, making a distinction between the “original”, “true”, “Hungarian/Scythian” Christianity and the “falsified” “Judeo-Christianity” operating under the direction of the Roman pope. However, this kind of anti-Christian attitude strongly reflects the ideology of anti-Semitism as in the majority of cases we can find in it threads of a conspiracy theory in which the teachings of the “Christianity of Jesus” were “falsified by the rabbi Saul”, and as a consequence the entire Christianity as it exists today is the result of “Jewish scheming”. In addition, the notion of an anti-Hungarian Jewish conspiracy runs through this version of history.

“[...] the forced imposition of Jewish Christianity against the will of the Hungarian people is a historical fact.”

“What kind of ruler is that who saddles the people with priests who don’t even speak Hungarian, who preach the Jewish God in Latin! Who praise the people of David and tell stories of saints who have nothing to do with the Hungarian people! Our saints are Emese and Álmos, not the Virgin Mary and Jesus! Our heroes are not Moses, David and Solomon, but Árpád, Lehel and Botond! Until we embrace that, we will be nothing but servants of the Jews!”

“[...] he prevented his people from continuing to follow the Divine Guidance, the teaching on natural human life, that is Christianity, rejecting its Judaisation.”

“Two religious ideas: that of Saul and that of Peter, two mentalities: the neo-barbarian West and the ancient, authentic, Jesus-based Scythian-Hungarian clashed then in the Carpathian Basin.”

“Now the Jews regard themselves as God’s people. We could call Budapest Judapest, etc. The work of Stephen I must be evaluated in the light of this fact, they should not spit on the *táltosok*; in the past it was in many people’s interest to give them a bad reputation.”

3. In the majority of cases the notion of “Scythian/Hungarian Christianity” indicates a religious phenomenon of bricolage that simultaneously syncretises Christian teachings and traditions with pre-Christian elements of the *táltos* belief, shamanism.<sup>29</sup> Opinions reflecting the resulting Neopagan or ethno-pagan religious construct are thus not merely anti-Christian, they also indicate the existence of a new, constructed religious orientation.

“[...] we became a new “European” kingdom, that was no longer headed by the grand duke Vajk who followed the Scythian religion and had dedicated himself to the God of the Hungarians.”

“[...] the Hun-Magyar people were robbed of the Scythian religion of their ancestors that had always been victorious. The new order

<sup>29</sup> Povedák 2014.

killed/ordered the killing of the learned *táltosok*, and at the same time banned the ancient culture, that is, the Hun-Székely runes.”

“Today we would say that the child Stephen had been successfully brainwashed. And Stephen tore the Hungarian people away from their eastern roots, he destroyed the original archaic religion and the ancient knowledge.”

“Gábor Pap wrote somewhere that Stephen wrote a letter to the pope, seeking his advice. The pope wrote back to him saying that he should do whatever he thinks best, as Stephen carried on the bloodline of Jesus, while he, the pope, was only a vicar. He found the original letter and published it.” (12.10.2015)

“Anyone who underestimates the Hungarians and regards them as Christian knows nothing of our ancient *táltos* and *mágus* traditions and nature:) That is what the Hungarians are proud of, not of the betrayal committed by King Stephen, but of the ancient Turul origin! Of the tradition of the Sun God. Of Sumerian sciences!”

4. However, what lies behind all the opinions is neo-nationalist indignation arising from a violation of national identity, that is at the same time the main source of motivation of the following three categories.

“[...] Saint Stephen I, who no longer ruled the country with the trust of the Hungarians. He had become the loyal Christian king of the west with the support of the German emperor, consecrated by the pope’s emissary and rewarded with the “crown of Sylvester” ...”

“[...] Then the ‘fine foreign’ command became the new law, that is, serve it and the lie that: ‘A people with only one language is weak and feeble’, so you must allow all foreigners in.”

“[...] I think it was not at all by chance that the experienced bishop Astrid took Vajk-Stephen “under his wing” and we are right in assuming that in reality he ruled Hungary. His activity was naturally directed at winning the favour of the two “great friends”, the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor.”

“It is well known that Stephen was far from being a holy man... He brought German soldiers into the Hungarian land and rose to power with their help. Not only did the soldiers massacre Hungarians, they also imposed a foreign religion in place of the ancient Hungarian religion.”

“Vajk was the first Bolshevik in Hungarian history (in the spirit of “totally wiping out the past...”). With his totalitarian brain he wanted to wipe the slate clean. This “holy” king handed over the Vienna basin to his Bavarian brothers-in-law, like a wedding gift for the alliance through Gizella. Wasn’t it rather Vajk who abandoned his religion, who not only rejected the faith of his ancestors and the

Blood Treaty, but also made it his life's aim to eradicate the entire Hungarian culture? When Vajk came to power in 997 it created an entirely new situation. He operated in Hungary like, say, Rákosi after 1945. He spread a foreign ideology by force, with foreign help. He came to power unlawfully."

"Koppány was a patriot, Stephen was a traitor who served foreign interests! He made Germans all the big landowners, raising them above the Hungarian subjects."

"And we must not forget that Saint Stephen wiped out half the Hungarian people in the name and interest of Christianity. There would almost certainly have been an alternative..."

"Stephen, who hardly spoke Hungarian at all, physically deformed – with six fingers [...] Koppány the grand duke, follower and defender of the "Old Faith" (the religion of love) ..."

"He put an end to the Hungary based on general freedom – breaking the continuity of following the Divine Guidance (Constitution), and created a Hungary of Stephen, as a kingdom living according to foreign interests, unacceptable to the Hungarian Soul."

"[...] the truth is that because of the deeds of Saint Stephen we cannot speak of an independent Hungarian nation ...by asserting foreign interests he isolated himself from the people, divided the united Hungarian nation composed of free Hungarians into chosen supporters of Istvan – exercising the right of licence – and the supporters of Koppány who were forced to live in exclusion in their homeland. In betrayal of our ancient traditions, he was raised to the throne by force by those who had made his father their governor, with this he denied his country and forced the people to disintegrate."

"[...] he merged Hungary into the western civilisation that is now becoming unviable after death agonies that lasted 1100 years."<sup>30</sup>

The emotionally charged wave of indignation that appeared clearly shows that the work itself has become canonised over the decades and is closely intertwined with the lived national consciousness. From that point on, versions of the play – of which there have been countless numbers since the first performance – cannot be regarded as simply successful or less successful expressions of artistic freedom,

30 The sources of the quotations are the following websites. There are countless other sites on similar topics with similar comments. <http://magyarmegmaradasert.hu/kozerdeku/figyelemre-melto/item/3857-nemzeti-m%C3%A9rleg-avagy-mi-is-volna-a-tur%C3%A1ni-%C3%A1tok>  
<http://magyarmegmaradasert.hu/kiletunk/tortenelmunk/item/2620/vajkahitehagyott>  
[http://tudatraebresztes.blog.hu/2011/10/20/turani\\_atok\\_1](http://tudatraebresztes.blog.hu/2011/10/20/turani_atok_1)  
<http://www.debreceen-megmaradas.hu/content/view/1740/67/>  
[http://magyarmegmaradasert.hu/kozerdeku/figyelemre-melto/item/3754-az\\_%C3%A1llamalap%C3%ADt%C3%A1sr%C3%B3l](http://magyarmegmaradasert.hu/kozerdeku/figyelemre-melto/item/3754-az_%C3%A1llamalap%C3%ADt%C3%A1sr%C3%B3l)  
<http://monarchista.blogspot.com/2009/09/ujpoganyasag-ellen-keresztenyseg-mellett.html>  
<http://aranylaci.freeweb.hu/sabrag/15-%20koppany.htm>

rather they are reinterpretations of now almost sacralised expression of national consciousness. In this way, conceptions that break down and fundamentally reinterpret the canonised version are manifested among the masses as violations of national consciousness. All this indignation is naturally also strengthened by the nostalgia felt for the 1980s when the piece became a symbol of Hungarian national consciousness that had survived even among the hostile circumstances of socialism. However it must be stressed that all of the categories can be found to varying degrees in the majority of opinions. It happens more than once that a comment is at once anti-Semitic and opposed to globalisation and Christianity, that is, it defines itself and its own nationalism principally by dissociating itself from other ideologies and trends. Other characteristics of this dichotomous attitude are the inability to compromise, and stereotypical thinking.

### Summing up

Saint Stephen is one of the Hungarian historical heroes whose cult has visibly come to new life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A complete mythology, constructed according to the rules of folklore, has arisen around his figure; analysis of this mythology reveals the functioning of vernacular historical memory. It clearly shows that history is continuously written and reinterpreted over the course of time and not only historical events appear in a new light and acquire new meaning content, so do historical heroes, because the vernacular view of history basically focuses on persons.

In the case of individual historical heroes this kind of reinterpretation results in fundamental modifications, often acquiring a sense exactly the opposite of the original meaning.<sup>31</sup> These processes are not unique to post-modernity, they have been present throughout history.<sup>32</sup> But whereas in earlier periods the reinterpretation of historical heroes, the preference for certain figures over others basically began in high culture, academic scholarship or politics, in our time this process of reinterpretation is coming largely from below, as a grassroots movement. As a consequence, changes in social consciousness and national identity can be understood through such processes. The reinterpretation of Saint Stephen also reveals how much the historical judgement, the meaning and significance of his figure in popular culture has changed over the past three decades. We can understand through it that while in the last decade of socialism it was as a symbolic figure of the preservation of (Christian) Hungarian consciousness in face of the regime that the cult of Saint Stephen gained new impetus, by the turn of the century

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31 Anttonen showed that this kind of partial reinterpretation can even result on the emergence of several conflicting discourses making it possible to use the cult of the saints concerned for secular as well as religious purposes. This could be observed for example during the time of Finnish nation-building, when the figure of Bishop Henrik began to appear as a symbol of Finnish nationalism. ANTTONEN 2004; 2012.

32 POVEDÁK 2011a.

under the influence of neo-nationalism it underwent deheroisation resulting in reinterpretation. This reveals how hero construction/deconstruction thinks in absolute categories, the figures are purely good or bad, without any transition, that is, like the world-view of folk tales, it places the individual figures – who helped or harmed the Hungarians – on its palette on the basis of binary opposites. In addition, it is also obvious that the reinterpreted cult of Saint Stephen throws light not only on national identity but also on certain processes of vernacular religion – particularly Christian-Neopagan syncretism<sup>33</sup>. It shows that in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the strict borderline that arose in Hungary between religious culture and profane culture seems to be blurred in the neo-nationalist subculture. Certain elements of religious culture (not only Saint Stephen but also, among others, Saint Eusebius,<sup>34</sup> the Holy Crown, the double cross<sup>35</sup>) are being activated as part of the profane culture, but not in the same way as could be observed before the “secularisation”. It is not a question of blurring of the border between the sacred and the profane: elements containing symbolic meaning originally belonging only to the “sacred” are gaining transcendent features and judgement, and being resacralised within neo-nationalism.

Of course, this kind of reinterpretation brings results not only for folklore and religious studies. Beyond the fact that the operating characteristics of the new myths that are appearing can be analysed mainly with the tools of folkloristics, the broader phenomenon itself has much more complex implications. The new myths constructed on the basis of incomplete knowledge also become the founding myths of neo-nationalism,<sup>36</sup> and as more or less false histories in themselves, they bring about heroes of the same kind. However, it is an inherent danger of an ideology based on false heroes that it will not be able to formulate an adequate response to the demand for clarification and certification coming from the opposite side, that is, it cannot prove the soundness of its own ideology with the objective and authentic methods of scholarship. This leaves two possible defence responses: to counter by ignoring the arguments of the other side or to create conspiracy theories supporting its own views and at the same time implying an attack on the nation behind the arguments of the other side. However, whichever option it takes strengthens its excluding attitude and, finding itself in a Catch 22 situation, it adopts an increasingly aggressive countering mechanism and becomes an ever more self-isolated “counter-science”.

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33 POVEDÁK 2014.

34 POVEDÁK 2015.

35 POVEDÁK 2011b.

36 The presence of neo-nationalism in popular culture is shown by FEISCHMIDT et al. (eds.) 2014.

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