

Versions of Folk History Representing Group Identities: The Battle for the Masternarrative

Klára Sándor

An effect of the internet on language use, spoken language and group identities symbolized by different spoken varieties is their gaining back their rights and importance in networked societies. It is also a commonplace that new communication technology accelerates the development of and helps to maintain those groups and small networks, whose members, due to their geographical isolation, might otherwise not form a successful working network.

Also important is another core constituent of group identity, namely the own narratives a group uses to create its self-identity. Folk histories, connected to the identifying narratives of subcultural groups, seem to generate more conflict than the apparent diversification of public language use, since the various narratives in folk histories aspire to step in the place of the canonized, academic (“official”) national history.¹ It also means that most variations of folk history demand the status of the only valid, canonized version of national history. Theoretically this could even lead to the development of a dialogue between the varieties of folk histories, and, eventually, a nationwide consensus. However, this speculation could not work in reality, since the compromise would detract from the importance that the group narratives have in identity formation. Unlike micro-historical elements and memory databases, folk history versions cannot be cumulated, since due to their nature, each version aspires to the role of master narrative, and so exclude and delegitimize other versions of folk history. As an example to support this hypothesis, I will show some subcultural interpretations of the modernized Székely script.

The Székely script

Those who travel around Hungary by car, can see place name boards written with strange, angular, runiform signs in many—actually hundreds of—villages and towns. These texts are in Hungarian, but written not with the Latin alphabet but with the letters of the Székely script.

This script happens to be a hot potato in present political debates in Hungary, as its use may be interpreted as an expression of political identity. A portion of Hungarians glorifies it, and keeps it as a precious ancient heritage, a real “Hungaricum,” that is, a Hungarian speciality. Another portion of Hungarians calls it a “scrawl,” a “backward and ridiculous stupidity” which is first of all a Nazi symbol. Most Hungarians, however, including those who belong to those two groups, do not know much about the Székely

script itself. Members of the positive group believe in myths, tales, and legends, while members of the negative group know practically nothing about the script, or consider it a fake writing system. That little or no knowledge about the Székely script is lucrative for those opposing sides in the Hungarian political arena that identify themselves as Right vs. Left. Often these terms overlap with the terms “national” vs. “cosmopolitan” in the rightish discourse, and “nationalistic/conservative” vs. “European/progressive” in the leftish discourse.

Before analyzing the modern use of the Székely script, however, a brief summary about it might be useful. The Székely script belongs to the Western group of the old Turkic scripts, which were used in Eastern Europe between the sixth and tenth centuries. The Székelys are, according to most historians, an ethnic group of Turkic origin, which conjoined to the Hungarian tribal federation before the end of the ninth century, during the period when the Hungarian tribes were living east of the Carpathian Mountains and north of the Black Sea.²

There are some carved, scratched, and painted inscriptions preserved mostly in the churches of Székelyland, at the Eastern part of Transylvania, which today is in Romania, but was part of the Hungarian Kingdom from the tenth-eleventh century until 1920. The first known inscriptions date back to the late thirteenth century and the latest ones are from the mid-seventeenth century.

The usage of the Székely script outside Székelyland can be traced back to the late fifteenth century. It seems that it had quite a following in the royal court of King Matthias Corvinus (ruled 1458–1490), who was a successful military leader and a renaissance king with a powerful army and offensive political style together with a true respect for ancient times, so he chose Attila the Hun as his prefiguration, and also used the attribute *Attila Secundus*. For him, the Székely alphabet was proof of the Hunnic (and Scythian) origin of Hungarians.

At the end of the sixteenth century, Johannes Telegdi compiled a textbook to teach the alphabet to as wide a circle as possible, but his work has never been printed or widely used. The Székely script has remained a symbol of Hungarian identity for a part of literate society, and has been used to demonstrate sophistication and being well-educated, while by some it was used as a cryptography. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Székely script became a subject of scholarly interest.

The development of the romantic approach towards the Székely script

The turning point in the history of the Székely script was the late nineteenth century, when the division of academic and lay ideas became complete. The folk history of the script connected strongly to romantic historicism, becoming a reminder of the heroic past, a part of the Hunnic heritage of Hungarians, while academic history accepted that Hungarian is related to the Finno-Ugric languages and that no historical, political or ethnic continuation can be proven between the Huns who disappeared from sources soon after Attila's death, and the Hungarians, who appeared in the written sources only centuries later.³

The romantic attitude, however, remained popular, not only in schoolbooks and calendars, but even in the literary works of those writers and poets, who accepted the “Finno-Ugric theory” about the origins of Hungarian language. For example, János Arany and Ferenc Móra, the latter being also a leading archaeologist of his time, who carried out research in the Hunnic cemeteries of the Hungarian Great Plain around the city of Szeged. For them the legend of the Hunnic heritage was a literary source, and a constituent of Hungarian ethnic identity, independent of what they held about the “real” (that is, academic) history of Hungarians.⁴

In the first half of the twentieth century, the romantic historical approach about the Székely script was partly maintained by boy scouts, who used it as a special—“ancient”—form of encryption. After World War II, during the communist regime, any cult of the Székely script ceased, even scholarly research was missing until the mid-1980s. In the 1980s, some enthusiastic laymen revitalized the cult mainly by publishing popularising works, which failed to fulfil academic standards, and followed the romantic approach. However, they were the first ones for a long time to introduce the Székely script to a wider public. The very same small group modernized the Székely alphabet, they added new signs to differentiate short and long vowels as in the historic Székely alphabet the same letters were used for both. They organized study circles in primary schools and summer camps to teach this modernized version of the script, and since the 1990s, there have also been competitions for students, where they had to transliterate between the Latin and Székely script. There were also other opinions about the modernization of the Székely script—how the letters should look and what letters the alphabet should contain. The battle between the supporters of one or the other modernized alphabet peaked in the “UNICODE-battle” in the first half of the 2010s, when two camps were formed and fought against each other publicly in a notably strident voice.⁵

This battle was also marked by differences in political loyalty. Although both groups are connected to political formations with extreme right ideas—one to the World Federation of Hungarians (*Magyarok Világszövetsége*, WFH), the other to the political party Jobbik—they do not share an interest in the political (and business) arena, and the WFH is openly engaged with highly esoteric “historical” views,⁶ which although not unwelcome by Jobbik-voters and by some of the party’s politicians, only a few of these ideas are highlighted by the party. On the other hand, Jobbik has built the cult of the Székely script into its political program in the recent decade. Although the political constituent of the interpretation of the Székely script is fairly new as it has been attached to the script only a few years ago, by now this has become the strongest.

Interpretations of Székely script: the supporters

The group of supporters of the Székely script—those who cultivate it and evaluate it highly—is certainly not homogeneous, although they mostly identify themselves as politically rightist voters.⁷ There are sharp debates among different groups of supporters about several topics. One is the origin of the script: some maintain that it was the very first writing system of humankind, and think that it had already been used forty thousand

years ago within the “Bosnian pyramids” (which are actually natural hills in Bosnia).⁸ Others maintain that the Székely script is the antecedent of all prestigious writing systems in the Middle East, including the Phoenician alphabet and the Egyptian hieroglyphs. Some are happy to acknowledge that the Székely script is somewhat younger and belongs to the Turkic scripts, but call all the Turkic alphabets “Rovash,” that is, Hungarian for “carved.” All of them, however, share the view that the Székely script is a valuable national heritage that all “true Hungarians” should know.

What is the Székely script used for nowadays? Continuing the hobbyist tradition of the 1980s, it is taught to children in study circles, there are summer camps organized to learn and practice it, and the traditional annual competitions have been recently organized on a “nation-wide” level, meaning that they reach beyond the political borders of Hungary to include the Hungarian ethnic minorities in the neighboring countries.⁹

For quite a lot of people the Székely script is a definite tool to perform identity. It is very popular in tattoo salons, you can buy jewellery and clothing with Székely inscriptions; a few people even used it when signing their ID or driver’s licence. As a part of identity performance there were a wide range of books published written with the Székely alphabet: novels, folk and fairy tales, esoteric literature, and even the New Testament.¹⁰

There are hundreds of websites where one can read about this script, almost exclusively lay views approaching the topic more or less esoterically; there are pages that transform the Latin letters to Székely ones,¹¹ one can send Christmas cards with it; it can be practiced with the help of memory and board games, and there is Székely “Scrabble” for experts as well. The popularizing websites, the books and the games are for those whose hobby is to deal with the Székely alphabet, to strengthen their commitment towards it and especially towards the ideology it symbolizes, and, of course, to gain more fans for the script and for the ideology. The function of other kinds of consumers’ goods is very similar, with an even clearer business interest, since they are for everyone, and their use do not require even a knowledge of the Székely alphabet, since they can function as simple fashion objects as well: T-shirts, jewellery, letter shaped soup pasta, etc. The Székely script is indeed a part of the “ancient history business” that sells artefacts reminding their users of the heroic nomadic past of the Hungarians, that is, the era before the settling in the Carpathian Basin in the last decades of the ninth century.¹² The background ideology of this business, the respect for the nomadic past of Hungarians, and the interpretation of it as a Hungarian “Golden Age” is a constituent of the nationalistic public discourse. This ideology, supported by the intentionally manipulated folk history generates more and more demand on the market. On the other hand, the same ideology and the strongly romanticized folk history also generate political votes for those who focus on “Hungarianness” in their rhetoric, such as the governing Fidesz and the extreme right Jobbik.

As for the Székely script, it was Jobbik that realized that putting the cultivation of the Székely script on their political agenda would differentiate them from Fidesz. This might have been needed, since according to political analysts, Fidesz implemented many items from Jobbik’s political program, but Fidesz does not always highlight its nationalistic attitudes or does it in a less transparent way than Jobbik does.¹³

Jobbik was the first and is still the only Hungarian party that has put the cultivation of the Székely script on its agenda. They forced the establishment of place name boards, and Jobbik politicians participated at their inauguration ceremonies. Actually, these boards are widely interpreted as symbols of Jobbik being present in the particular town or village that utilizes such name boards. Jobbik also introduced parliamentary motions to legitimize testimonies written with Székely letters, and to include the Székely script in the official list of Hungaricums.¹⁴ Jobbik strongly supported the newly developed cult of nomadism seen in hobby circles and in a biannual nomadic pride festival called “Kurultáj.”¹⁵ For the romanticized and heroic past ideology the Székely script was also an important piece in the set of “real” or “true” “Hungarianness” together with the map of Great Hungary, the Holy Crown, and the “turul,” a specific type of eagle that used to be the symbolic bird of the first Hungarian royal house, the Árpáds.¹⁶

Interpretations of the Székely script: the rejection of its cult

No doubt, Jobbik tried to tie the Székely script to itself as strongly as possible. It was actually not a hard job, since most Hungarians know practically nothing about the script. When they first see it on place name boards, there is a good chance that they attach it to Jobbik, because they know about the connection between the boards and the party from the newspapers and portals where there were quite a lot of reports about the board setting activity of Jobbik. Consequently, most supporters of the left wing parties see the Székely script as a symbol of Jobbik, and, since many of them label Jobbik a neo-Nazi party, they reject the Székely script as a Nazi symbol.¹⁷

The rejection of the Székely script can also be eased into a major cultural discourse, according to which Hungarians, coming from the East and settling down in the West, had always to choose between Asia and Europe, between two distinct and sharply opposing poles, where Asia represented barbarism, ignorance, and backwardness, and Europe represented civilization, enlightenment, and progress.

There is also a sophisticated way of rejection by claiming that the Székely script is not the heritage of the nomadic past but created by humanist scholars in the sixteenth century. This argument is supposed to be strong as this theory was developed by a respected scholar of old Hungarian literature, and was even published in the new concise history of Hungarian literature (Horváth). Some of those who reject, ridicule, and devalue the Székely script, point to this theory as the scholarly background of their attitudes, or simply do not know about the historical background of the writing system. Both subgroups admit that their overwhelming negative attitude toward the Székely script is triggered by its association with Jobbik, and, as they add fairly often, is purely “emotional.”

Conclusions

Why is public ignorance of the Székely script so lucrative for both political sides? For the right wing parties, it helps to construct a refined nationalistic idea in which the nomadic past is glorious, and legitimizes the demand that Hungary should be bigger, if not geographically, then at least in commanding political respect. The notion of the

powerful past reinforces nationalistic pride and xenophobia which is vital for both Fidesz and Jobbik, as both parties build on these sentiments in their rhetoric. Considering the real history of the Székely script, right wing parties would not be able to insert it into their nationalistic narrative which is construed out of historical myths.

For the left wing parties, a clear visual symbol, such as the Székely script functions as a proof of the permanent threat of “Asia” and what it represents, namely moving away from Europe and European values, and also the threat of Nazism. That is why they accept Jobbik’s attempt to monopolize the Székely script, and that is why they describe users of Székely script as a homogeneous group. Had they considered the real history of the Székely script, they would not be able to identify it as a Jobbik symbol.

To summarize: the less society is familiar with a phenomenon, the more it can be used for sharpening political polarization. None of the groups at the right and left political poles are engaged in learning historical facts about the Székely script, since the knowledge about its cultural background would weaken the strong symbolic association between the script and extreme right groups. It is neglected by both the extremists and those who want to reject them, as they both need easily identifiable symbols to create stereotypes to identify the “us” and “them” groups.

Notes

The writing of and research for this paper was supported by the OTKA Grant K 115748.

¹ The term “folk history” here does not mean people’s history or microhistory but, similarly to the way terms, such as “folk linguistics” or “folk psychology” is used, refers to lay views and ideologies about history.

² On the grouping of Turkic scripts see, for example, Vasil’ev. The huge literature about the origins of the Székelys is summarized by Kordé. On the connections between the theories about the origins of the Székelys and the Székely script see Sándor, *A székely 172–74*.

³ For a comprehensive monograph on the history, monuments, and history of the use of the Székely script, see Sándor, *A székely*.

⁴ On the interrelations between the theories about the origins and relatedness of Hungarian, the Hunnic tradition, and how the latter remained the basis of the Hungarian ethnic identity embedded in literature, art, and public school curricula, even after academic history writing rejected the theory of Hunnic origins, see Sándor, *Nyelvrokonság*.

⁵ On the UNICODE-battle see Sándor, *A Bulldog* and Sándor, *Harc*.

⁶ For example, that the Hungarians are the most ancient people of Europe, of the whole World or even the Universe; that the letterforms of the Székely script contain an ancient sacral message to us; that the Hungarian language has special virtues, and perfectly expresses the “Hungarian soul”; etc.

⁷ Based on the pre-analyses of printed and online discourses within the frame of the research supported by the OTKA Grant K 115748.

⁸ See Bohannon; Harding; Woodard.

⁹ See the page of the competitions, <<http://www.rovasirasforrai.hu/Versenyek.htm>>. (Accessed: 24 Feb. 2018)

¹⁰Many of them can be read online as well, see the search list of the Hungarian Digital Library for the keyword “rovás” (“carved script”).

¹¹Some examples are: <<http://rovasfordito.hu>>, <<http://www.magyarhon.eu/szekely-rovasiras/latinrol/latin.htm>>, <http://www.kromek.hu/rovass/rovassiras_m_r.htm>, etc>, (Accessed: 24 Feb. 2018).

¹²The year when the nomadic Hungarian tribes conquered the Carpathian Basin (known as the Hungarian “land-taking”) is traditionally identified as 895, and according to most historians this is the actual time when the main military forces and the main camp (the ruling centre of the tribal confederation) were settled onto the Great Plain from the previous centre, from the area South East of the Carpathians (today Moldavia in Romania). However, that was a longer process, during which the Hungarian confederation gained control over the Carpathian Basin (first over the Great Plain, then Pannonia, West of the Danube river).

¹³See, for example, the detailed analyses of Policy Solutions at <http://www.policysolutions.hu/userfiles/elemzesek/Policy%20Solutions_Mi%20maradt%20a%20Jobbiknak.pdf>.

¹⁴As defined in Law 2012/XXX, a “Hungaricum” is a valuable natural environment, or product that is acknowledged to be characteristic of the Hungarian culture, is specific and special, and is worth protecting, and is dedicated to be a “Hungaricum” by the “Hungaricum Committee.”

¹⁵Mongolian “Kurultai” (“Kuriltai,” “Khuraltai”) and Turkic “Kurultay” originally meant the “general assembly of the tribes.” The word is still used in Mongolian and Turkic languages as a synonym for “assembly, gathering, convention, congress, parliament.” The Hungarian “Kurultaj” festival is organized “to strengthen the Ural–Altaic self-awareness,” with the participation of Inner Asian delegates of speakers of different Turkic languages, and is announced as the “tribal assembly of the Hun–Turkic nations, celebration of the preservation of the ancient traditions,” see <<http://kurultaj.hu/english>>.

¹⁶“Greater Hungary” refers to the territory of Hungary before the Treaty of Trianon (1920) by which somewhat more than two-thirds of Hungarian territory and more than half of the Hungarian population were allocated to the neighboring countries. The “Holy Crown” was the coronation crown of the Hungarian Kingdom, that, according to the “Holy Crown Theory” was (and, according to its followers, still is) the symbol of the Hungarian state that included the king, the aristocracy, and also the territory of the Kingdom. The “Holy Crown Theory” was developed in the Middle Ages and functioned as the foundation of the traditional (not written) constitution of the Hungarian state. “Turul” is a Turkic loanword in Hungarian, which designated a kind of predatory bird, according to a widely held view a falcon, but most probably a kind of eagle (Fodor).

¹⁷This and the following considerations of the subchapter come from ongoing research supported by the OTKA Grant K 115748. Since the time of the conference (2015) there was a major shift in the political orientation of Jobbik as the party tried to navigate itself towards the middle of the political scene. As a consequence the strong support for the Székely script’s cult disappeared from their political agenda.

Works Cited


- Bohannon, John. "Mad about Pyramids." *Science Magazine*. 22 Sept. 2006: 1718–1720.
- Fodor, István. "A sas szerepe honfoglalóink hitvilágában" [The Role of the Eagle in the Believers of Ninth-Century Hungarians]. *Csodaszarvas*. 4. 2012: 27–46.
- Harding, Anthony. "The Great Bosnian Pyramid Scheme." *British Archaeology*. 91 (2006) <<https://web.archive.org/web/20070712211737/http://www.britarch.ac.uk:80/ba/ba92/feat3.shtml>>. (Accessed 24 Feb 2018).
- Horváth, Iván. "A székely rovásírás és a latin-magyar ábécé." [The Székely Script and the Latin-Hungarian Alphabet.]. *A magyar irodalom története I* [The Histories of Hungarian Literature]. Ed. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák. Budapest: Gondolat, 2007. 27–36.
- Kordé, Zoltán. *A székelykérdés története* [The History of the Székely Problem]. Székelyudvarhely: Haáz Rezső Múzeum, 1991.
- Sándor, Klára. *Nyelvrokonság és hunhagyomány* [Genetic Relationships of Languages and the Hun-Tradition.]. Budapest: Typotex, 2011.
- . *A székely írás nyomában* [Investigating the Székely Script]. Budapest: Typotex, 2014.
- . "A Bulldog szövetsége és annak széthullása." [The Bulldog's Alliance and its Fall.]. *Nyest*. 11 Aug. 2015. <<http://www.nyest.hu/hirek/a-bulldog-szovetsege-es-annak-szethullasa>>. (Accessed 24 February 2018).
- . "Harc a kazárosítás ellen—avagy hogyan nyerte a Bulldog a Unicode-háborút?" [Fight Against being Khazars— Or How the Bulldog Won the Unicode War?]. *Nyest*. 18 Aug. 2015. <<http://www.nyest.hu/hirek/harc-a-kazarositas-ellen-br-avagy-hogyan-nyerte-a-bulldog-br-a-unicode-haborut>>. (Accessed 24 Feb. 2018).
- Vasil'ev, Dmitrij D. "The Eurasian Areal Aspect of Old Turkic Written Culture." *Acta Orientalia Hungarica*. 58 (2005): 323–330.
- Woodard, Colin. "The Mystery of Bosnia's Ancient Pyramids." *Smithsonian* 40.9 (2009). <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-mystery-of-bosnias-ancient-pyramids-148990462/?all>>. (Accessed 24 Feb. 2018).

LOCI MEMORIAE HUNGARICAE

8.

SERIES EDITORS:

Gergely Tamás Fazakas, Orsolya Száraz, Miklós Takács
and Pál S. Varga



The (Web)Sites of Memory: Cultural Heritage in the Digital Age

Edited by

Donald E. Morse – Zsófia O. Réti – Miklós Takács

S H K I



Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó
Debrecen University Press
2018

This volume was completed with the support of
the OTKA/NKFIH grant no. K 112335 awarded to the Research Group
for Hungarian Realms of Memory
(Institute for Hungarian Literary and Cultural Studies, University of Debrecen)

ISSN 2064-549X
ISBN 978-963-318-752-4

© Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó Debrecen University Press,
beleértve az egyetemi hálózaton belüli elektronikus terjesztés jogát is

Kiadta a Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó Debrecen University Press
www.dupress.hu

Felelős kiadó: Karácsony Gyöngyi

Műszaki szerkesztő: M. Szabó Monika

Készült a Debreceni Egyetem sokszorosítóüzemében, 2018-ban

Contents

Miklós Takács: Preface	7
1. Theoretical reflections	
Zsófia O. Réti: Memory of Networks, Networks of Memory.....	10
Gábor Palkó: The Phenomenon of “Linked Data” from a Media Archaeological Perspective.....	23
2. Digital Memory in Everyday Life	
Norbert Krek: Lieux de Mémoire and Video Games: Mnemonic Representations of the Second World War in First Person Shooter Games of the Early Twenty-first Century	32
Antti Vallius: Landscapes of Belonging: Visual Memories in the Digital Age	43
László Z. Karvalics: Defining Two Types of Cultural “Micro-heritage”: Objects, Knowledge Dimensions and a Quest for Novel Memory Institutions	58
3. New Media for Old Ideologies	
Tuija Saresma: Circulating the Origin Myth of Western Civilization – The Racial Imagery of the ‘Men of the North’ as an Imaginary Heritage in White Supremacist Blogs	68
Klára Sándor: Versions of Folk History Representing Group Identities: The Battle for the Masternarrative.....	82
4. Rethinking Hungarian Collective Memory	
Katalin Bódi: Image and Imagination: The Changing Role of Art from the Nineteenth Century to the Present in Hungarian National Memory.....	92
Zsófia Fellegi: Digital Philology on the Semantic Web: Publishing Hungarian Avant-garde Magazines	105
Norbert Baranyai: Cult, Gossip, Memory—Aspects of Mediating Culture in Krisztián Nyáry’s Portraits of Writers in Facebook Posts	117
Notes on Contributors	127
Index	131