THE

Hungarian Historical Review

NEW SERIES OF ACTA HISTORICA ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARICÆ

Ethnonyms in Europe and Asia: Studies in History and Anthropology

VOLUME 7 NUMBER 1

2018

Institute of History, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences

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NEW SERIES OF ACTA HISTORICA ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARICÆ

Supported by the HUNGARIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES (HAS) and the NATIONAL CULTURAL FUND OF HUNGARY

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INDEXED/ABSTRACTED IN: CEEOL, EBSCO, EPA, JSTOR, MATARKA, Recensio.net.

Institute of History,
Research Centre for the Humanities,
Hungarian Academy of Sciences
H-1097 Budapest, Tóth Kálmán utca 4.
www.hunghist.org
HU ISSN 2063-8647

The Hungarian Historical Review
New Series of Acta Historica
Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae

Volume 7 No. 1 2018

Ethnonyms in Europe and Asia: Studies in History and Anthropology

Zsuzsanna Zsidai
Special Editor of the Thematic Issue

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Ethnonyms and Early Medieval Ethnicity: Methodological Reflections

Walter Pohl
Director, Institute for Medieval Studies, The Austrian Academy of Sciences

The paper deals with the significance of ethnonyms for the study of early medieval ethnicity. The historiographic sources are full of names of peoples, and endow them with collective agency. That may not prove that all of these peoples had strong ethnic identities. But it attests to the general use of ethnicity as a cognitive device to differentiate between large social groupings who were relevant actors on the political scene. In this scheme, ethnonyms are fundamental. 'Ethnicity' as a system of distinctions between collective social actors and 'ethnic identity' as the result of a series of identifications are of course closely linked, but they represent different aspects of 'the ethnic'. Therefore, ethnonyms do not necessarily reflect ethnic self-identification of the group concerned, although they often do. What they attest to is some shared belief that humans can be distinguished by ethnonyms, that is, on the basis of 'natural' affiliations that people are born with.

Keywords: ethnonyms, early medieval ethnicity, Longobards, Goths, gentes

What did ethnonyms mean in the early medieval period?[1] We can begin with an example of what people thought about this question themselves. In the middle of the seventh century, the origin story of the Longobards was written down in the Longobard kingdom in Italy in a text called *Origo gentis Langobardorum*. Toward the end of the eighth century, Paul the Deacon faithfully repeated the story in his Historia Langobardorum, although he (a Christian monk) distanced himself from it by calling it a *ridicula fabula*.[2] According to these two texts, a long time ago a small people called the Winnili migrated from Scandinavia, led by the wise woman Gambara and her sons. They were challenged by the Vandals, who solicited the support of Wodan (a Germanic god of war). Gambara therefore asked Wodan's wife Frea for support, and she gave the advice that the Longobard women should tie their hair in front of their faces so that it looked like a beard and go with the men to the battlefield. When Wodan awoke the next

1 In general: Pohl, "Aux origines d'une Europe ethnique." The research leading to these results has received funding from the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), Project F 42-G 18 – SFB 'Visions of Community' (VISCOM).

2 *Origo gentis Langobardorum* 1; Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 1:7–8.

day, he looked out on the battlefield and asked "Who are these longbeards?" Frea replied, "As you have given them the name, give them victory!" From then on, the Winnili were called Longobards.[3]

In all likelihood, this is a pre-Christian story based on the supposed agency of pagan gods.[4] If Wodan gives a name to the people, he adopts it in a sense, and is obliged to give it victory. Scholars have long assumed that Wodan had (unwittingly, as the legend implies) conferred one of his own epithets on the Winnili. Yet the fourteenth-century text in which *langbardr* is listed among Odin's/Wodan's names may also have relied on a knowledge of Paul the Deacon's *Historia*.[5] The name conferred on the Longobards is strikingly paradoxical. As Paul the Deacon states, "it is certain that the Longobards were afterwards so called on account of the length of their beards untouched by the knife."[6] This is a rather straightforward explanation, immediately comprehensible both in Germanic languages and in Latin (*longibarbi*, as Wodan says in Paul's account). It was also taken up by Isidore of Seville in his seventh-century *Etymologies*: *Langobardos vulgo fertur nominatos prolixa barba et numquam tonsa*, "the Longobards, according to popular opinion, are named after their long beards that are never cut."[7] However, the origin story subverts this clear-cut etymology based on a secondary male sexual characteristic by attributing the long beards to women, and the narrative privileges female agency: Gambara, as leader of the Longobards, is more successful by relying on Frea, than the Vandals, who have directly appealed to Wodan.[8] Whatever the implications of this and other stories about "women in the beginning,"[9] this narrative must have allowed the women to regard themselves as Longobards in the full sense, too. This, then, is a story of self-identification with and through an ethnonym.

At the same time, ethnonyms also allowed external identification of peoples. This is illustrated by a second example from a somewhat earlier period. The *Historia Augusta*, written around 400 AD, offers a detailed and fictive description of the Emperor Aurelian's triumph, thought to have taken place in the 270s. According to this account, Aurelian rode up to the Capitol in a chariot which had belonged to a king of the Goths and was drawn by four stags, followed by

3 Waitz, *Origo gentis Langobardorum*, 1.

4 Pohl, "Narratives of Origin."; Wolfram, "Origo et Religio.."

5 Nedoma, "Der altisländische Odinsname *Langbardr* ."

6 Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, 1:7–8; translation based on Foulke.

7 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, IX.2:95.

8 Pohl, "Gender and ethnicity in the early middle ages."

9 Geary, *Women at the Beginning. Origin Myths from the Amazons to the Virgin Mary*, 22–24.

exotic animals, gladiators, and captives from the barbarian tribes, among them Arabs, Indians, Persians, Goths, Franks, and Vandals. "Ten women were also led along, who, fighting in male attire, had been captured among the Goths after many others had been killed; a placard declared these women to be of the kin [*genus*] of the Amazons—for placards are borne before all, displaying the names of their people [*gens*].[10] This set-up (representatives of a people marching past the spectators, one after the other, carrying signs with their names) reminds one of the grandiose opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games of our time. At Roman triumphs and in panegyrics devoted to Roman emperors, long lists of defeated peoples were a standard feature. Again, the functional logic of ethnonyms is somehow subverted by women: the Amazons, a fictive female people. The Gothic women found fighting on the battlefield certainly did not constitute a people of their own; but their spectacular presence in Aurelian's triumph was endorsed by ancient mythology.[11]

In both examples, ethnonyms are a central feature of ethnic identification. Contemporaries tended to believe that they represented the nature of a people, an assumption that Isidore of Seville systematically employed in his *Etymologies* to explain the characteristics of the numerous peoples that he lists.[12] Indeed, some names carried a clear meaning in the language of their own people, such as Longobards or Alamanni ("all" or "full" men). Others, mostly by coincidence, could easily be (mis)understood in Latin: Saxons (rocks), Angli (angels), Bulgars (vulgar), or Avars (greedy). The names already seemed to tell a story, as in the Longobard origin myth.

Ethnonyms, furthermore, were the usual way to structure the political world, and the history of its changes. Some texts (judging from the manuscripts) bore the names of peoples in their titles, if in rather different phrasings: *De origine actibusque Getarum*, *Origo gentis Langobardorum*, *Liber Historiae Francorum*, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*. Still, the ethnonyms were not without ambiguities. In the construction of the Getica (which by the way is a modern title), the Goths were identified with the ancient Scythians and Dacians, and in particular, with the similarly-named Getae, who were referenced in the title. The intention was to enhance the ancient glory of the Goths, but this created rather confusing equations. Isidore, in his Gothic history, proposed the rather far-fetched argument that the names were so similar that "with one letter removed and one

10 Chastagnol, *Historia Augusta*, 33 f., 1004.

11 Liccardo, "Different gentes, Same Amazons."

12 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, IX.2.

letter changed, 'Getae' becomes 'Scythae'."[13] Isidore also added an identification with the apocalyptic peoples of Gog and Magog, featured in the prophecies of Ezekiel and in John's Apocalypse: *Gothi a Magog filio Iaphet nominati putantur, de similitudine ultimae syllabae* "the Goths are supposed to be named after Magog, son of Japhet, because of the similitude of the last syllable."[14]

What historians habitually refer as "Anglo-Saxons" or simply the "(early) English" was in fact a conglomerate of peoples, mainly Angles and Saxons; in different passages, Bede variously adds Jutes and/or Frisians, and sometimes other names.[15] Bede did much to promote the name Angli/English for all of them, not least because of the association with angels, expressed in a famous saying attributed to Pope Gregory the Great: "Not Angles, but angels" (whereas "Saxons" could be understood as "stones" or "daggers"). And the Longobards only got their name at the beginning of their written history; in later manuscript catalogues, Paul the Deacon's *History of the Longobards* was occasionally still entered as "History of the Winnili." This does not mean that these peoples had no solid identities, and in a sense the onomastic multiplicity could also enhance their pride. It does however indicate that these stories were about identities in the making, not about clear-cut routines of identification.

The ethnic element of identity is prominent in the early medieval sources because, at the end of Antiquity, the countries mostly came to be named after the people by which they were inhabited , and not vice versa. Gaul became France, a large swathe of the ancient province of Liguria came to be Lombardy, the main part of Britain, England. Later, what had been Pannonia became Hungary; instead of Thrace, there was Bulgaria; and northwestern Illyricum became Croatia. Only the Goths did not reign long enough to leave their name on their former realms. In the long run, some of the ancient territorial designations in Europe were maintained: Italy, Spain, Britain, Greece/Hellas (Belgium was only re-appropriated by the new state in 1830), and some regional names such as Aquitaine, Tuscany, Dalmatia, and Macedonia. A few new territorial designations appeared over the course of history, for instance Castile, Provence, Lotharingia/Lorraine, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Austria. Northern and eastern Europe, beyond the former Roman borders, have an almost exclusively ethnic

13 Idem, *History of the Goths*, 108.

14 Ibid., IX.2.89. See also Pohl and Dörler, "Isidore and the gens Gothorum."

15 Bede, *"Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum."* See Pohl, "Ethnic names and identities in the British Isles."

topography: Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Poland, the Czech Republic, Serbia, and Russia.

This ethnic configuration of the political geography of large parts of Europe was not a straightforward development. Ethnicity was not necessarily the prime mover of medieval and early modern European history. It mattered more or less as a form of identification and social cohesion, depending on the circumstances. If the names of states and peoples on today's map of Europe are surprisingly similar to those on a map from one thousand years ago, this is not because these peoples and states had unbroken histories of linear development. Some disappeared from the map for centuries (for instance Poland, Bulgaria, and Serbia), or their geographical position shifted (for instance Burgundy, Bulgaria, and Lithuania), or they were conquered by foreigners (for instance England by the Normans and much of southeast Europe by the Ottomans) or lived through periods of fragmentation (for instance France and Germany). For a long time, *Francia* was only the core of the Frankish realm, more or less today's Île de France. But even where political independence or continuity of a sense of ethnic community were interrupted, they remained available to later appropriations. Sometimes such appropriations were fictive, and rested on the similarity of the name or of the region. For instance, the "Wends" (a German name for the Slavs) were soon identified with the long-disappeared Vandals, a self-representation which reached its peak in the late medieval and early modern period.[16]

What remained in place throughout all these changes was the principle of a distinction by ethnonyms. In this simple sense, "ethnicity" is a system of distinguishing between named social groupings according to their ethnonyms and ascribing collective agency to them.[17] For the early Middle Ages, we have only patchy information about ethnic self-identification. However, we have ample evidence for the systematic employment of ethnic distinctions, mostly by outside observers, as shown in the example from the *Historia Augusta*. In that sense, the early Middle Ages were a world of *gentes*. In the narrative sources, collective agency was unproblematically attributed to peoples: they migrated, converted to Christianity, waged war, or raised kings. A state or a kingdom could hardly act as a collective; it was only the king as the representative of the people or the people itself who could take political action. Ethnic agency also applied to smaller groups and non-state actors, as long as they could be

16 Steinacher, Roland, "Wenden, Slawen, Vandalen."

17 Although some scholars claim that, I cannot see any heuristic advantage in denying that a distinction of social groups by ethnonyms, *nomina gentium*, can be regarded as 'ethnic'.

identified (otherwise such groups would often be generally labeled "barbarians"). In that sense, ethnicity was generally used as a system of distinctions between *gentes* which made it possible to structure the social world and to circumscribe collective political actors and broad, inclusive social groups. This raises problems of definition: can we distinguish between ethnic and other social groups, or do they represent a continuum in early medieval usage? And what distinguishes an ethnonym from a territorial or political label?

It is hard (and controversial) to define "ethnic."" in an unambiguous way. Many scholars offer definitions with lists of distinctive features (common origin, memories, language, culture, customs, costume, territory, etc.).[18] These kinds of definitions mostly apply to urban or territorial identities as much as they do to ethnic identities. There are also subjective definitions, according to which ethnic identity is determined by a subjective sense of belonging to a group.[19] However, we have relatively little evidence of actual subjective self-definitions in the early Middle Ages. Therefore, I would propose four answers to the question of definition.

First, we all know in everyday usage what an "ethnic" name is, and so did ancient and medieval historians. Our understanding obviously differs little, for instance, from the one laid out by Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologies* in the seventh century, which remained popular throughout the Middle Ages. Most of the *nomina gentium* which he lists (with etymological explanations) are also ethnonyms by our standards.[20] They include the Romans (at the time often considered one *gens* among others), but otherwise only a few groups that we might not consider as ethnic. Isidore also discusses the terminology (*gens, natio*) and the relationship between peoples and languages. The unquestioned assumption is that after the Flood, the world was divided up by *gentes* according to their descendance from the sons of Noah.[21] Consequently, Isidore defines *gens* as a multitude descended from one origin, but he then adds an alternative: "or distinguished by its particular grouping."[22] The twenty books of his *Etymologies*

18 See for instance: Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*.

19 Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*. This was an important step in overcoming objective, 'essentialist' definitions of ethnicity.

20 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies,* IX.2.

21 Ibid. (with enumeration of the gentes descended from each of the sons of Noah). Unlike the wording of the Old Testament, "the peoples were divided on earth," *divisae sunt gentes in terra* (Gn. 10.32), Isidore's phrase assumes that the entire earth was divided up by the gentes: *Gentes autem a quibus divisa est terra*, the peoples by whom the world was divided.

22 Ibid., IX.2.1 (*gens est multitudo ab uno principio orta sive ab alia natione secundum propriam collectionem distincta*).

contain only two other chapters which provide exhaustive lists of named social groups: imaginary peoples (the "monstrous races," that is, fantastic ethnicity) and Christian heresies (often named after their founder, for instance "Arianism").[23] Isidore was surely able to draw the line between *gentes* and other social groups. The same applies to the general historiographical use of ethnonyms, most of which seem to correspond to modern notions of ethnicity.

Second, as noted above, according to ancient and medieval perceptions, countries and polities cannot act, only people and their representatives can. In our political language, Washington or France can take political action. Rome or the *regnum* of the Franks do not have agency, only the *senatus populusque Romanus* or the *rex* and the *gens Francorum* can act. The ancient *populus* essentially implied a political definition of the "people," not an ethnic one. In the ancient period, the notion of civic identity was so strong that the *populus*, the people of a city, dominated the political landscape and the historical narratives. In the early Middle Ages, this changed, and the *gentes* came to the fore. Thus, the Romans came to be regarded as one *gens* among many.[24] Still, there are some cases in which the texts also attribute the same kind of agency to groups that we might not regard as ethnic, for instance the "Romans" of the eastern Roman Empire (who by our standards were mostly Greeks) or the populations of cities (for instance the Venetians), (former) provinces (the Aquitanians), and smaller kingdoms (the Mercians). Our more neutral term "peoples" may thus be more appropriate to cover the entire range of collective agents.

This leads to the third element of definition: on a pragmatic level, an ethnonym is defined by its position in a horizontal system of distinctions within the social world. If the prevalent distinction is between *gentes*, then named collective actors whom we would not regard as ethnic groups (Romans, Normans, or Venetians, for instance) tend to be ethnicized as well, and can be presented in the texts as a *gens Romanorum*, *Normannorum*, and *Veneticorum*.

The fourth element of a terminological clarification tends to be narrower. The term *gens*, which is overwhelmingly used for early medieval peoples, comes from *gignere*, to procreate; *genus* and *natio* have a similar etymological background. This suggests that *gentes* were understood as "having a common origin," regardless of whether or not the people in question actually did. In this context, "ethnic," in my view, can most usefully be understood as a perceived intrinsic

23 Ibid., XI.3 and VIII.5.

24 *Transformations of Romanness*.

quality that is in the people themselves: common blood, common origin, or a similar quality. Thus, it needs no defining point of reference outside the person, such as a city, a land, a polity, or a religious cult.[25] One can be a Goth or a Hun wherever one is, under Hunnic, Gothic, or Roman rule, as a pagan or a Christian. Of course, in most cases ethnic identities attach themselves to territorial, political, religious, or other identities and form amalgamates of identification. Yet it is methodologically more advantageous to be able to distinguish between these different elements of identification in order to analyze how their relative significance changes. For instance, is the affiliation with the people crucial, or is the affiliation with the land more important? It makes a difference whether a royal title is *rex Hungarorum* or *rex Hungariae*. However, it is not a fundamental difference (the land is named after the people), but a gradual one.

The approach defined by these four methodological principles is necessarily flexible. It cannot rely on one clear definition which can be used for all periods, but compels us to historicize our concepts. The goal is not to decide whether or not an early medieval people "was" an ethnic group. That would be a static and not very productive approach. Three questions may be more interesting. One is the question of the extent to which a people or peoples in general were regarded by contemporaries in ways that fit our criteria for ethnicity. The second is the question of our heuristic purposes to use the concepts of ethnicity and ethnic identity. Thirdly, this gradual approach allows us to assess how the salience and meaning of ethnicity changed over time or differed in different contexts at the same time.

This flexible approach also allows us to deal with a good number of problematic cases of ethnonyms. First, some ethnonyms found in biblical, ancient, or medieval sources are clearly fictive. But as argued above, educated observers could basically distinguish between actual people and "monstrous races." As we have seen, Isidore draws clear distinctions between them.[26] Second, frequently ancient and outdated names were used, which were sometimes conjured up to make the victories of a Roman emperor seem more impressive or, in other cases, to refer to ethnographic stereotypes or relatively stable identifications of earlier with later peoples. Thus, the Huns could be called Scythians, the Avars Scythians and Huns, and the Hungarians by all of these names.[27]

25 Pohl, "Introduction: Strategies of identification."

26 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, lists the *gentes,* i.e. actual peoples, in Book IX. ('De gentium vocabulis', IX.2), and the '*monstra*' among the *gentes* in XI.3, 'De portentibus'.

27 Pohl, *Die Awaren.*; reworked English translation forthcoming: *The Avars.*

Third, names employed by outsiders could consistently differ from the name used for self-identification. This can be an enormously stable practice: the Hellenes have been called "Greeks" by many of their neighbors for more than 2000 years, and they still are. If such a case of cultural translation is well-established and generally known, it may create surprisingly few problems. The modern *Deutschen* are called Germans by the English, Allemands by the French, Tedeschi by the Italians, Němci (or something similar) by many Slavic peoples, and Saksa by the Finns, but everybody seems to be well aware who is who.

Names for collectives only mentioned in isolated texts may not help much to establish any "real" identities. More frequent mentions at least allow one to trace consistent naming practices within a wider system of distinction. It may still be difficult to grasp to what extent this mental map corresponded to social practice, or in this case, to an ethnic identity. A decisive criterion is whether there is evidence to suggest interaction and communication between the author of the source, his environment, and the people in question. In general, the representatives of the Roman, Byzantine, or Carolingian empires could hardly afford to deal with their many neighbors on the basis of totally fictitious mental maps. Some inconsistencies are always noticeable, especially in the barbarian lands and the steppe zone; in many cases, they may point to shifting identifications. At almost the same time, around 550, both Jordanes and Procopius provided a generally consonant, but to some extent contradictory map of peoples living around the Black Sea.[28] East Roman diplomats and travelers provided the material for these kinds of ethnographic descriptions. The contact with Romans may even have convinced some smaller peoples in the area that they were in fact Scythians or Huns.

Byzantine name-giving, according to Florin Curta's hypothesis, gave the impulse for the spread of the name "Slavs."[29] As I have argued, at least in the Latin West, the name "Slavs" came from Constantinople, not from communication with the Slavs themselves.[30] We can trace the way in which the use of the name spread, for instance through a letter of the exarch of Ravenna, who informed Pope Gregory I, who had previously only spoken of "barbarians." John of Biclaro, who had spent many years in Constantinople, introduced it in distant Spain. Frankish authors only employed it in the seventh century. The European Avars, ridiculed as "pseudo-Avars" by the Byzantines, were supposed to have

28 Procopius, *Bella*, vol. 5, 8.5.31–33, 99; Iordanes, *Getica* 6.37, 5.1, 63.; Pohl, *Avars*.

29 Curta, *The Making of the Slavs*.

30 Pohl, *Avars*.

soon adopted a prestigious name given them by other peoples; Turks and Byzantines initially called them "Varchonites."[31] The Byzantines very insistently called the Magyars/Hungarians "Turks," and even sent a golden crown to the Hungarian king with the inscription "*kralēs Tourkias*," King of Turkey; but this never turned into a self-designation.[32]

These and similar examples should not be used in support of the claim that ethnic identities were infinitely malleable and did not really matter. Ethnicity mattered, not least because it was controversial and not easy to handle on a conceptual level. It was always a matter of communication and cultural translation, and a way of placing oneself and one's own community within a wider world of *gentes*. This ethnic landscape was constantly changing, but at the same time, it also provided a familiar long-term perspective for identifications. Most ethnonyms that one finds in early medieval sources were used for considerably longer than an individual lifetime. They made the world more predictable, in part because the names and some of the background information connected with the respective peoples hinted at what one could expect from them.

Given the evidence that we have, then, ethnicity can most easily be studied on the discursive level as a way of structuring the social world and of ascribing agency to broad social groups. In pre-modern societies, there were not many levels on which the naming of macro-groups was so systematically pursued. In many historical contexts, ethnonyms and a very culture-specific terminology of peoplehood shaped perceptions of large groupings and guided political decisions. For instance, it made a big difference in Late Antiquity whether groups immigrating from beyond the Roman border were perceived simply as unspecified "barbarians" or were identified using ethnic distinctions (which made it possible to play them off against one another and to rely on previous experiences with the same or similar groups). Apart from serving as a cognitive tool, ethnic discourse also provided a powerful framework with which to express "visions of community." It could be extended far beyond the range of groupings that we would describe as "ethnic," at least in metaphorical ways. For instance, as Denise Buell has shown, the early Christians could be described in ethnic terms.[33] That makes the concept of ethnicity hard to delineate and define. We would hesitate to class Christians as an ethnic group. On the other hand, such uses indicate the potential of ethnic language to promote social cohesion or,

31 Ibid.

32 Pohl, "Huns, Avars, Hungarians."

33 Buell, *Why this New Race?*

indeed, disruption. It is the very success of ethnicity in many historical contexts that makes the concept fuzzy for scholarly uses. Yet this is the challenge that makes research on ethnicity so interesting.

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(Formerly Acta Historica Academiæ Scientiarum Hungaricæ)
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Postal address: H-1453 Budapest, P.O. Box 33. Hungary
E-mail: hunghist@btk.mta.hu
Homepage: http:\\www.hunghist.org

Published quarterly by the Institute of History,
Research Centre for the Humanities (RCH), Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS).

Responsible Editor: Pál Fodor (Director General).

Prepress preparation by the Institute of History, RCH, HAS Research Assistance Team; Leader: Éva Kovács. Page layout: Imre Horváth; Cover design: Gergely Böhm.

Printed in Hungary, by Prime Rate Kft, Budapest.

Translators/proofreaders: Alan Campbell, Matthew W. Caples, Thomas Cooper, Sean Lambert.

Annual subscriptions: $80/€60 ($100/€75 for institutions), postage excluded.
For Hungarian institutions HUF7900 per year, postage included.
Single copy $25/€20. For Hungarian institutions HUF2000.

Send orders to *The Hungarian Historical Review,* H-1453 Budapest, P.O. Box 33. Hungary; e-mail: hunghist@btk.mta.hu.

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HU ISSN
2063-8647