

## I. Myth: The Foundation of Historical Consciousness

**Myth has several definitions** — partly because there are several kinds of myth. Generally, it can be defined as an independent story, or a set of interrelated ones, which explains humanity's place in the universe and society. Each myth is the product of a certain culture; therefore, it reflects the values and the frame of reference of a specific society. While classical myths transfer the familiar human world onto a magical and allegorical plane, in their more recent forms myths can narrate seemingly quite authentic events in a realistic manner. This definition is suited to the readings pertinent to our studies.

There are two major mythological themes. One deals with the origins and order of the world, and introduces divine characters. Hungarians did not have such myths, nor an explanation for the creation of mankind. Little is known about the Magyars' ancient religion — it is assumed that, unlike other ancient peoples, they worshipped a single God. Their rich mythological tradition relies on the other major theme: the deeds of human heroes who represent a cultural consciousness and ethos. Perhaps it is their vivid, realistic narrative that has made these mythical stories dear to Hungarians.

At the threshold of general literacy, historians often lacked earlier models to follow, and had to rely on tales or — if available — accounts from foreign sources. Such was the dilemma that Anonymous, already mentioned in the introduction, faced. As an early historian, he claimed credit not only for recording the naive tales of country people but also for being the first one to turn to written sources. Yet, his Latin chronicle actually made lavish use of the oral tradition still flourishing in his time — that is, in the very first years of the thirteenth century.

If the excerpts from Anonymous's *Gesta Hungarorum* are confusing, it is because they contain many elements of the typical, "classical" mythological narrative. Such are the references to his nation's origins, which he traced back to Scythia (described as a fairy tale land), and to the mighty pagan family of Magog, also mentioned in the Old Testament. Supernatural elements are introduced, such as conception by an animal or a vision (both familiar from many other myths around the world). Besides biblical and mythical names or places, names of real historical figures also appear (such as Alexander the Great) to provide the illusion of authenticity. Albeit naively narrated, rather true to historical evidence is the description of tribal democracy and the legislation by consensus that the paragraphs on the pact struck by the warrior chiefs describe. Last but not least, there is pride shining through Anonymous's lines over the revealed descent of a new Christian country of Europe from noble, if distant, ancestors. A justified national pride it was: in the early 13th century Hungary was one of Europe's most prosperous countries, and one whose influence was decisive in the central part of the continent. As the early chronicles suggest Hungary was also a culturally developed country by European standards. As elsewhere during the Middle Ages, the language of almost any kind of writing was Latin, although religious texts were written in the Hungarian vernacular already in the 12th century. Also, similarly to other European literatures, Hungarians produced not only chronicles (that aspired to historical accuracy) but also *gestes* (*gestas*), i.e., colourful, partly fantastical, historical tales. Typically, references to Hungarian prehistory have been left to us in this genre.

## Document 1. ANONYMOUS

[...] It would not be appropriate for the noble Hungarian nation to learn about its origins and heroic deeds from the untrue tales of the peasants or the naive songs of the bards. Therefore, from now on, it can learn the truth in a worthy way, from reliable documents, and from clearly interpreted historical works. Hungary is fortunate because her scholar recorded the origins of her kings and noblemen from the beginning. For those kings praise and respect should be paid to the Eternal King and His mother, the Virgin Mary, by whose mercy Hungary's kings and noblemen govern this country in happiness, now and forever. Amen.

Scythia

Scythia,<sup>1</sup> which is called Hungary upon the [river] Don, is quite a vast land. Its eastern border stretches from the northern region to the Black Sea. Behind it runs the Don river with its enormous marshlands, where there are enough martens not just to lavishly clothe the noblemen and the lower ranking people, but also the herdsmen, swineherdsmen, and shepherds. The land is rich in gold and silver, and its rivers offer pearls and semi-precious stones. Scythia's eastern neighbours were the nations of Gog and Magog, who were cut off from the world by Alexander the Great.<sup>2</sup> The dimensions of the Scythian land are extremely large. The people inhabiting it are still customarily called Don-Hungarians; they have never been under the yoke of any ruler. The Scythians are, namely, an ancient nation which has power over the east. Scythia's first king was Magog, son of Japheth, and the nation obtained its name "Magyar" from him.<sup>3</sup>

Before continuing Anonymous's fantastic narrative of Hungarian prehistory, let us consider the first account of the myth of Hunnish-Hungarian relations. Anonymous was the first chronicler of the Hungarians, but he was not the only one. Before the introduction of the printing press, a series of similar works was compiled by ecclesiastic authors who held high positions in the courts of various kings. While including newer and newer events of history, they also added to earlier chronicles. Among these authors was Simon of Kéza (Kézai Simon) who wrote his geste titled, like Anonymous's, *Gesta Hungarorum* around 1283.

Simon regarded Hungarians as descendants of a rejected and punished biblical figure: Noah's second son, Ham. This view made them distant offspring of the Old Testament's Jews. Simon was also the first author to write down the tale of the miraculous hind that lured the hunter King Nimrod's two sons, Hunor and Magor, away from their Asian homeland, into a long journey that eventually ended in the establishment of the Hunnish empire first, and Hungary centuries later. This attractive tale shows traces of a totemic culture, especially since the two princes' mother was called Enech, or *ünő* in Hungarian, meaning a young female deer. The belief in the deer being a magical animal is not specifically Hungarian: it has traces in several Eastern cultures, and in the Saint Hubert legend of medieval Catholicism. Yet, as has been mentioned, naive myths are strong cohesive elements of national identity — even if they are composed of not entirely unique motifs.

## Document 2. SIMON OF KÉZA

## The Origin of the Hungarians

The perilous flood destroyed every man except Noah and his three sons. From Shem, Ham and Japheth, however, seventy-two clans descended. [...] These clans, as Josephus mentions, started to build a tower together with their relatives, so that if by chance the flood should recur, by fleeing into the tower they could escape God's avenging judgment. But God's decision, against which human intellect has no power, was a resolved and provident one. He confused their language so much that one relative was not able to understand another, and in the end they scattered all over the world. [...]

Let us return to Menrot<sup>4</sup> and leave matters of minor importance behind, since they only serve to brighten the narrative. After the confusion, the giant moved to Evilath's land, which was called Persia in those days. There, he and his wife, Enech, had two sons, Hunor and Magyar, from whom the Huns and Magyars descended. [...]

And so, it happened one day that they went hunting. In the wilderness, a doe leapt up in front of them. As they began to pursue her, she fled into the Maeotis swamp,<sup>5</sup> where she then disappeared from their sight. They searched for her for a long time, but there was no trace of her anywhere. After they walked through the aforementioned swamp from one end to the other, they found it to be very suitable for cattlegrazing. They then went back to their father, and as soon as they received his approval, they moved into the Maeotis swamp with their possessions, so they could settle down in there. The Maeotis region borders Persia. Apart from a very narrow ford, the sea encircles it from every direction. It does not have rivers at all, but it has plenty of grass, trees, fish, fowl, and game. Entering and leaving this region is difficult. Consequently, after having settled down in the Maeotis swamp, they did not leave it for five years.

During the sixth year, they wandered out and accidentally came upon the wives and children of Belar's sons, who had been left alone in a deserted place. They snatched these people away, along with their wealth, at full gallop, into the Maeotis swamp. It so happened that the two daughters of Dulan, the Alan ruler, were among the captured children. Hunor married one, Magyar married the other. All the Huns are therefore descendants of these women.<sup>6</sup> And it happened that, after having lived in the Maeotis swamp for a longer time, they grew into a gigantic clan. The land could thus neither accommodate nor nourish them. Therefore, they sent explorers to Scythia. After

having explored this land, they moved to their new home along with their children and possessions, and there they settled down.

Let us return to Anonymous. It is interesting to observe how much less explicit he still is about the Hunnish-Hungarian relations. On the other hand, he provides the first description of the migration of the Hungarians to their future country, as well as their social structure and hierarchy.

### Document 3. ANONYMOUS

[...] From [Magog's] descendants originated the renowned and exceedingly powerful king Attila.<sup>7</sup> In 451 A.D., he came from Scythia to Pannonia with an enormous army, driving out the Romans and conquering the land. Later he set up his royal court along the Danube, above the hot springs. He rebuilt all the old buildings that he found there,<sup>8</sup> and built a strong protective wall around them. Nowadays, it is called Fort Buda in Hungarian, and the Germans call it Etsilburg. But enough of this! Let us follow the path of history. After a long time, from the same king Magog's descendants came Ügyek, father of the chieftain Álmos, whose offspring would become Hungary's leaders and kings, as it will be demonstrated in the following.

The above-mentioned people of Scythia were hardy in their battles and quick on their horses. They wore helmets and were superior to all the other nations in handling their bows and arrows - that this was really the case can be judged from the skills of their progeny. Since the Scythian land was situated far from the tropics, it was particularly favourable for the growth of the population. Even though the land was excessively immense, it was not able to either nourish or accommodate its ever-increasing population. Therefore, the seven ruling chiefs thought of a solution in order to resolve the problems of overcrowding. After a meeting, they decided to leave their motherland and conquer a country where the living conditions were more favourable.

#### Álmos, the First Chieftain

In the year 819 A.D. Ügyek, the aforementioned commander of Scythia and distant descendant of King Magog, decided to marry Emesh,<sup>9</sup> daughter of Önedbelia, chieftain of the Don-Hungarians. They had a son whose name was Álmos. He received his name due to a miracle: while his mother was expecting him, she saw a supernatural vision in her dream, in the shape of a *turul*, bird, which landed on her

body and made her pregnant.<sup>10</sup> It also seemed to her as if from her womb sprang a stream which was the life-source of future kings who, however, would form a dynasty in another land. Since a dream in Hungarian is called "*álmom*," and since her son's birth was preceded by such dream, the boy was named Álmos. It is also possible that his name, which in Latin means "saint," was indicative of his descendants who were to be holy kings and leaders.<sup>11</sup> But enough of this! [...]

When the seven chiefs could no longer tolerate their confined environment, they held a meeting. Here, they decided to leave their homeland, and conquer with force a new land where they would live comfortably. For this new location they chose the land of Pannonia.<sup>12</sup> From old rumors they gathered that this land had belonged to King Attila, ancestor of Álmos, Árpád's father.<sup>13</sup> Before embarking on their journey, the seven chiefs agreed that they needed a leader for such a long quest. Their unanimous choice was Álmos, son of Ügyek, whom they elected as their hereditary commander, since Álmos and his descendants were considered to be superior in both virtue and military skill. [...] They collectively told Álmos: "From this day on, you are our commander, and where you go, we shall follow." After having said this, according to pagan custom each and every nobleman let some of his blood run into a cup, thereby endorsing his oath. Even though these people were pagans, they kept their oath until their very death.

### The Oath

The first clause of the oath was as follows: Until the end of their lives and the lives of their descendants, they will always choose new leaders from among the descendants of Álmos.

The second clause was this: Everything they obtained together was to be shared by all equally.

The third clause endorsed that those chiefs who voluntarily elected Álmos for their ruler, and even their descendants, should always remain among the counselors of the rulers and leaders of the nation.

The fourth clause said this: Should any of their descendants betray his ruler, or incite feud between the ruler and his relatives, his blood should be let in the manner in which the seven chiefs' blood was let in taking their oath.

The fifth clause stipulated that, if anyone among the descendants of Álmos or the other leaders should break his oath, he shall be cursed forever.

Centuries pass, and we are in the mid-nineteenth century. Romanticism, this dominating artistic and intellectual movement of the early part of the century, renewed the quest for national identity and pride. Hungary needed both: during the previous centuries her power had vanished, her territory had been divided and became governed by various rulers, and her language and identity had eroded under the influx of millions of foreign settlers. In 1791 Johann Gottfried Herder, an early Romantic thinker and no friend of Hungary, predicted that the nation (ruled at the time by the unpopular Austrian Habsburgs) will disappear within about a century.

Herder's often-cited prophecy did not come true, mainly due to an impressive national awakening in the nineteenth century which will be referred to again and again on these pages. Writers of the period, among them the great poet János Arany, recognized the importance of myth for Hungarian survival. Arany regarded the tradition of heroic epics as the transmitter of myths, and an initially oral conveyance as a means of perpetuating these epics.

Thus, early history and narrative tradition were synthesized as message and medium, respectively, and continued to affect one another. It should be noted that Arany was unhappy about Anonymous's condescending view on folk tales — he wished these had been faithfully recorded and cherished.

Arany's interest in the Middle Ages, myth, paganism, folk literature and national icons coincided with the Romantic obsession of most European countries with the same themes. Already in the 18th century Macpherson "discovered" oral relics of the poems of the Celtic bard, Ossian. In the early nineteenth century the Northern and German-speaking countries raised old Icelandic mythology (their heritage) to a status that equalled that of Greek and Roman mythology. If the literary relics were not coherent or impressive enough, their collectors (patriotic poets) pitched in a bit, here and there. Hungarians had a problem, however: there were no genuine medieval fragments available for them.

Arany's hypothesis was that all great civilizations had produced their heroic epics. The Hungarian civilization was a great one; consequently, it must have had a similar tradition which apparently was later lost or somehow became suppressed. Arany's arguments for the existence of such tradition are numerous and convincing. Unfortunately, they are also flawed. Epic expression is no criterion of civilization, although the existence of myths is an attribute (but no prerequisite) of national and social coherence. Even so, Arany's essay demonstrates the perceived

importance of myth for the modern mind. The nineteenth century epics that the great poet created to fill the gap left by history are gems of Hungarian romantic poetry. Aside from some minor epics and fragments, Arany's poetic recreation of Hungarian mythology is the most memorable in *Death of Buda* (1863). This long poem presents the formidable Hun king Attila at the zenith of his power which he attained at the price of slaying his own brother Buda. The same foreboding of fate that characterizes the great epics of world literature is also obvious here. In another poetic trilogy set in the Middle Ages, Arany created the most popular folk epic of his nation through the figure of Miklós Toldi, a historical character known for his enormous strength, whom the poet guided through many marvellous adventures. Nowadays, modern Hungarians read Arany's epic poems as products of literary fantasy, forgetting about their intended role. But, is this not the fate of all great classics that also had a spiritual function in their own time?

#### Document 4. JÁNOS ARANY:

##### *Our Naïve Folk Epic*

Every time I encounter an old fragment of foreign folk poetry, I sadly ask myself: Did we ever have any genuine ancient epic? Have the people who had the creativity to produce poetry and can even display a few precious romances, whose fairy tales can contend in composition with any other peoples' similar stories, always felt so reluctant toward mythical and historical poetry as they do today? [...]

Travel the country, visit the people at their bonfires or in their shacks, at work or at their feasts, in the hours of rest in workshops and barracks, that is, everywhere where the fatigue of life is soothed by poetry. [...] You shall hear folksongs, sweet and charming ones, sad and cheerful ones, lamenting and merry ones, you shall hear graceful fairy tales, but hardly any song that would recount our nation's past. As if the Calliope of our lowlands had a short memory and would not recall anything older than some outlaw who was oh-so-popular not long ago. As if our people had not been interested in the fate of the nation which regarded them for centuries as nothing more than a labour force.

The situation is the same with the written fragments of our poetic heritage. How many chronicles, from Priscus<sup>14</sup> to Galeotti,<sup>15</sup> mention the bards who immortalized in their songs the deeds of our

heroes and ancestors, from Attila to King Matthias.<sup>16</sup> If we believe these historical references — and we have to believe them — it appears that such bards were not isolated occurrences in one or another ruler's court, nor passing phenomena noticed by chance. In fact, there existed a whole stratum of poets who composed and performed songs as if they were craftsmen. A charter by the last of our numerous king Andrews<sup>17</sup> designated certain estates to support the subsistence of the bards. Also, we cannot doubt the testimony of Galeotti about those performers whom King Matthias heard in his father's and in his own court. Where are these songs, where are these poets? The song has gone silent, the name of the poet has been forgotten. [...]

The great national catastrophe starting with the defeat at Mohács<sup>18</sup> is customarily regarded as the reason why our earlier relics were destroyed. Indeed, it is possible that many written records perished in the long-raging destruction of the nation's largest part<sup>19</sup> with the purest majority of the Hungarian population. Yet, this destruction initially was not so widespread that Tinódi<sup>20</sup> and his contemporaries could not have inherited their fathers' written songs. The devastation spread slowly, and one could still hear a whole camp of epic poets singing all over the land before the better part of the country was ravaged. And what do these heirs of the epic which flourished during King Matthias sing about? Contemporary matters, in a dry reporting manner; also themes from national history, but based on Latin chronicles and not Hungarian epic songs. They sing about biblical themes for the sake of meagre moral lesson, and chivalric themes borrowed from foreign literatures. Where is the trace of the glorious epic of the preceding century? Where the famed richness of the national myth? Was absolutely everything lost during the few years between the end of a century and the beginning of the next one? And, if not everything was lost, if a good part of the tales still existed, how can it be that the poets of the sixteenth century utilized nothing of these, but instead turned to insubstantial chronicles and foreign fables? Apart from the exceptional myth of Toldi,<sup>21</sup> there is no echo of the supposedly lavish tradition of Hungarian sagas. [...]

Let us suppose, however, that very few or perhaps none of those songs which toward the end of the fifteenth century had been still performed so splendidly was recorded in writing. This is all the more probable if we believe in the existence of a class of bards who composed and performed poetry almost as if belonging to a crafts guild. The songs were possibly passed on from father to son, from master to disciple. Oral transmission, more than the treacherous written

word, could guarantee the right of the initiated ones to poetry. Even so, the big question remains: was this whole production doomed to perish when the bards were silenced with the decline of the glorious kings? [...]

But, supposing that all that the poets of that age sung was buried with them, that no *complete*, poem reached the next generation — even then, should the *craftsmanship* itself, the inclination to the genre, vanish from the taste of poets and their audience in such a short time? Is it not reasonable to assume that an audience used to these bards would not tolerate the flimsy stories half a century later? That the Hungarian epic shaped by centuries into perfection would not sink into complete shapelessness so suddenly? [...]

The traditional oral folk narratives always and everywhere show some prowess and polish of an individual creation. Let us leaf through any collection of Hungarian folktales, and we find that the story is always well proportioned and complete in these simple narratives, unless it has been mangled for some reason. The fight of the leading character, the Prince, against his antagonists is described by the typical narrative devices of the epic genre. A fable in which the events are related incoherently, in a loose sequence, could neither win the audience nor be retained verbally. The constantly occurring numbers of three and nine — besides their symbolic meaning — lend proportion to the narrative: the three perils that the hero usually has to overcome make the form well-rounded. This poem in prose that we call folktale is not the romance of the people, but is indeed its epic. We can recognize in this genre the working elements (machinery) of the epic in the form of the mythical powers helping or hindering the hero. [...]

This instinctive good taste, this sense of poetry, is not just a contemporary characteristic of country people: they always possessed such talent. In fact, it was even more evident at the time when the terms *people* and *nation* were identical, when the elite of the nation — although more impressive, more stalwart and exquisite by appearance — lived in just as naive a state intellectually as the people.<sup>22</sup> In such an age the limits of naive narration extended beyond unsophisticated tales and stories of the adventures of robbers. Bards and their audience were identical with the active, battling and conquering nation. They created ample themes and elements for a folk epic. Even if our chronicles would not mention it, we could take it for granted that this folk tradition of poetry and recital had flourished under our late tribal leaders and national kings. [...] We have to give all the more credit to these records. And if, by following these chronicles up to King

Matthias, we may doubtfully ponder whether folk epic was sung at the table of the "scholar" king, or the simple recital of the events that became fashionable in the sixteenth century, the Italian Galeotti clears our doubts: "There are," he writes, "musicians and fiddlers who sing in their domestic language the deeds of knights at the tables and accompany themselves by lute. Always some noble deed is sung of which there is no shortage... Because all Hungarians, noblemen as well as ploughmen, use almost the same words, the same diction, accent, and pronunciation. This is why the song created in Hungarian is understood by peasants and townspeople, by the middle and lower classes all the same." Galeotti says this with reference to language, but why here of all places? Does he not suggest by this that king Matthias was listening to folk songs and understood them although he was a king, and that the songs recited in the royal palace were popular in village shacks as well? Not some dull enumeration of events but the living folk poetry, the naive epic was what Galeotti referred to. It lies in the nature of the matter that this type of epic was shaped over the centuries, from the tribal leaders to Matthias, on a high level, treated, filtered, and perfected by craftsmen, by a class of bards. [...]

Myth is naive belief: one that has always impressed and influenced people. It is the first stage in the pursuit of knowledge, and a long persisting one if knowledge is not forthcoming or is found unsatisfactory. As soon as one day in the future more objective and rational explanations of the world and human existence will become widely accepted, myth will still live on in one form or another, coexisting with what we call rational thinking and knowledge. In the following chapters, our readings will approach Hungarian culture from the point of view of disciplines that are more familiar to the modern mind and modern scholarship, such as history, ethnology, economics and education.