

## BALÁZS SUDÁR – ZSOLT PETKES (eds)

## The Attire of the Conquering Hungarians – Ancient Hungarian History 1

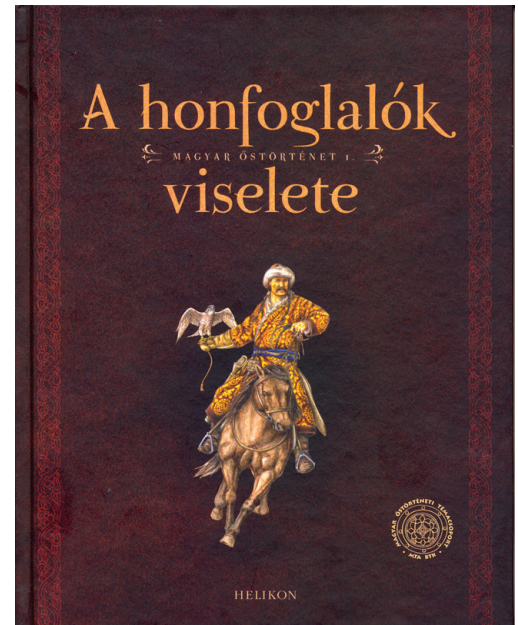
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*Prior to its official launch on 10 February 2015, even before Christmas of 2014 at a few bookshops it was possible to purchase the book entitled **The Attire of the Conquering Hungarians** edited by the members of the Ancient Hungarian History Research Group (Zsolt Petkes and Balázs Sudár). According to the plans this publication has been created as the first volume of a six volume educational series that will encompass the issues of the period of the Hungarian Conquest of the Carpathian Basin.*

The goal of the Ancient Hungarian History Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Research Center for the Humanities that was organized in January of 2012 is primarily to clear up the ethnogenesis of the Hungarians along with certain problems with the system of relationships between the archaeological materials, as well as to organize an inventory of Carpathian Basin finds from the time of the conquest. In addition to this the research group considers it their mission to make the study of this period – which has traditionally been pushed to the background in the field of archaeology – more popular. The book has been created as a first attempt in this spirit; it is directed towards interested people from outside the profession, while at the same time it presents the most recent results of research into the conquest period.

In terms of its structure, the book is comprised of four major logical units organized into six chapters. In the first chapter we get to know the history of research into the conquering Hungarians from the pen of Péter Langó. Following the “required curriculum” of the first published grave of a conquest period Hungarian (“Bene”) from 1835, the combined find materials of the conquest period Hungarians and the series of questions related to their society that can be deduced from these are presented to us through the research of József Hampel, Gyula László and Béla Szőke. Here, the author fortunately does not waste his time analyzing the details of research history that have been excessively rehashed within the profession and are of no interest to outsiders, instead presenting the most recent trends in the field. He mentions, if only briefly, the growth of settlement research, the increasingly swift spread of examinations based on the natural sciences and points out how through “scientific globalization” the topic has entered into the international sphere, both in the West and in the East.

One of the most important phenomena of the last few years has been the reevaluation of the system of connections to the East of the archaeological materials from the conquest period Hungarians, primarily due to the work of Attila Türk studying the early medieval finds from Ukraine and Russia. Following the two chapters on research history, the editors dedicate the next chapter to this topic. In the first section, which is brief but nonetheless touches upon major issues, Attila Türk immediately lays down the main lessons from current research. It seems that what was previously a fundamental tenet, the migration of the ancestors of



*Balázs Sudár - Zsolt Petkes (eds)  
The Attire of the Conquering Hungarians  
Ancient Hungarian History 1  
Budapest, Helikon Kiadó, 2014*

Language: Hungarian  
Hardback 188 pages with color illustrations

the conquering Hungarians along the route of Magna Hungaria–Levedia–Etelköz has been toppled. In the light of finds that have recently been discovered (or at least come to the attention of archeology), in the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century they moved directly from Magna Hungaria to the Etelköz region, going around Levedia and avoiding the Saltovo-Mayaki culture. This new approach cannot be ignored, although the cutting out of Levedia had been proposed long before Türk's research as well. In fact, one of the book's main – although somewhat veiled – points is found in this chapter.

The rather high interest in this topic in recent times shows that the hypothesis has really stirred the pot in research on the Hungarian conquest. The theory has also received an unusually great deal of publicity in the media outside the scholarly forums. In the present case this causes a bit of concern, since its detailed elaboration and discussion is still going on within the profession. We trust that the – perhaps slightly premature – public knowledge of this speculation will be an incentive to the other experts dealing with this period, since it seems that research into the conquest period is ready for a debate to create a new synthesis.

In the next chapter, Attila Türk attempts to verify the Magna Hungaria–Etelköz–Carpathian Basin connection expounded in the preceding section through finds from the eastern and western sides of the Ural Mountains and from the Middle and Lower Dnieper regions. While the majority of the archeological sites listed by him have been known and cited in research previously as well (with no attempt at being comprehensive: Bolshiye Tigani, Manvelovka, Subbotsi and Korobchino), the rich descriptions accompanied by high-quality illustrations contain new and interesting information even for those in the profession.

The fourth chapter of the book sets before us a representative selection of finds from rich conquest period cemeteries excavated in recent decades in Hungary that have remained unpublished or only partially published. We can read the brief descriptions of the seven archaeological sites found in the book through the interpretation of the excavating archaeologists (Ágnes Füredi, Attila Jakab, Rozália Kustár, Péter Langó, Gábor Lőrinczy, László Madaras, Zsuzsanna Siklósi and Attila Türk). Here it is worth mentioning that this is the first publication where we can read about some of these cemeteries (e.g. the one at Tarpa) in print with high-quality illustrations.

From perusing the chapters presented so far – or even from looking at the book's table of contents – it is clear that in terms of its logical arrangement *The Attire of the Conquering Hungarians* landed up being a bit incoherent. The title of the volume only covers a portion of its content; it is only in the final two chapters where we can read about conquest period attire, and this makes up only a bit less than half of the length of the book. However, this editorial unevenness is made up to the reader by the content of the sections in question.

During the reconstruction of the apparel of the conquering Hungarians the research was always forced to use “outside” support, since as a result of the climatic conditions in the Carpathian Basin the organic materials have decomposed almost completely. The final two chapters evaluate these kinds of sources. The section introducing the individual raw materials for garments – various types of textiles, leather and felt – is the work of Katalin E. Nagy, Márta Kissné Bendefy, Mari Nagy and István Vidák. Following this, Zoltán Boldog introduces all of the elements of apparel, piece by piece and from head to toe, that can be hypothesized from the various types of sources. The foundations for these reconstructions have been known for a long time; the Alan cemetery at Moshchevaya Balka represents the major resource, in addition to which we can turn to written sources, a few pictorial depictions and ethnographic analogies for support. The authors and editors of these sections exploit the possibilities afforded by these sources to the maximum extent in accordance with the demands of the reading audience. The discussion of the attire according to individual pieces of apparel is in itself a good idea, and within this the presentation of certain types of kaftans and shirts – which may provide something new even for those in the field – deserves particular attention. The outstanding quality illustrations go a long way to help in understanding the written descriptions. We can state without any exaggeration that in these terms this book is one of the highest quality works of recent years.

All in all it can be stated that an unbelievably plentiful amount of information and pictorial material has been concentrated into this outstandingly aesthetic volume, despite it being a rather thin volume in

terms of length. All of this was also done without making it boring, tiresome or unable to be digested by the reader. It is obvious that every page of this book has been the result of serious effort. The main text is accompanied by sidebars throughout, which contain a wide range of supplemental information. These are in part explanatory and in part quotes from original sources, as well as being where cleverly worded columns containing linguistic data entitled “What could have been the name?” are located.

So the book is primarily for those curious about the subject, but having read it there is material to make experts “in the trade” like us ponder. For example, how is it possible that the characteristic finds of the Saltovo culture that we know so well and have cited ad nauseam now do not show so much similarity to the material culture of the conquering Hungarians? Perhaps the appearance of the objects suddenly changed? Also, how can it be that the most successful reconstruction of the attire of conquest period Hungarians has been worked out in this volume, which – I repeat again – is directed at a broad audience?

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Although I am not included in the target audience addressed by this freshly published book, a borrowed copy quickly made its way to me, an archaeologist who deals meticulously with the conquest period. And although during my brief career I have shown benign indifference towards the popularization of science, the book quickly inspired my curiosity. I was grabbed by the demanding workmanship – knowing Helikon this should not come as a surprise – as well as the number and quality of the illustrations. Even more important than this is that the book did not just arouse my interest, but was able to hold it as well from the first page all the way to the last. This is how before Christmas – while searching for gifts for the family – this also landed up in my basket.

As I later found out my decision proved to be a smart one many times over. Not only did my father, who is curious about history anyways, peruse it with great interest (and continues to read it), but even my mother who is entirely unconcerned with the topic. My father – a teacher at an elementary school in a small provincial village – already after his first look through the book stated (without even asking!) that he would show it to his students. This he did in one of his lessons and although the conquest period was not the current subject matter for the class – the students were “able to be motivated” in the topic as my father put it. This is serious praise knowing the audience.

Serious commendation is also shown by the fact that *The Attire of the Conquering Hungarians* is consistently in second place on the continuously updated top books list on the Helikon Press’s web site, ahead of the always popular Sándor Márai, Csaba Böjte, Ervin Lázár and the Dalai Lama. This, I believe convincingly proves the demand in Hungary today for quality popular science books, as well as the great lack (and even debt) we have in this area.

The editors have thus achieved their goal. A great number of copies of this book have gotten into the hands of readers outside the profession, and as they have bought it, hopefully they will open it up and read through it. We can be sure that it will spark their interest as well, just as in the case of the kids at an elementary school in a remote backwoods village.