

BENKŐ, ELEK

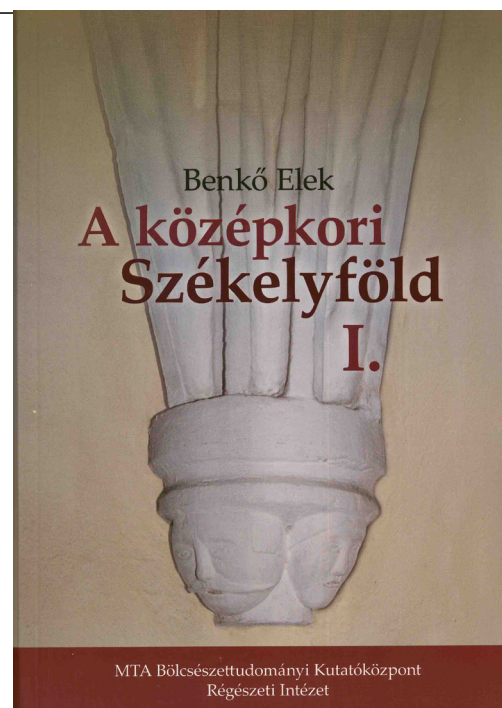
The Szekler Land in the Middle Ages I–II.

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One of the most debated questions in the medieval history of Transylvania is the origin of the Székely people, the special legal status of this ethnic group that was different in so many aspects and the unusual development of the area they settled. Precisely due to this a monograph summarizing Szekler Land (in Hungarian Székelyföld, in Romanian Ținutul Secuiesc, presently a part of Romania, in English Szekler or Székely Land) as a historic region does not just mean a historical review of one area of medieval Hungary, but an interdisciplinary examination of a full series of archaeological, linguistic and anthropological issues. In the course of this it is unavoidable that the researcher must deal with nearly all the questions that spark great debate even in the broader realm of society. The explanation for this can be found in the special history of the Székely people and also in the particular historical judgments about them. We are talking about a Hungarian speaking ethnic group whose origins or ethnogenesis and the opinions in connection with this significantly influence the assessment of the origins of the Hungarian nation and the history of the Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian Basin. These issues also have particular significance in relation to the extent that the Szeklers can be considered to be preserving and perpetuating an ancient social structure and a consciousness of their origins.

Simply the history of scholarship on this subject would make it necessary for someone studying the topic to state their opinions on the disputed issues of the history of Szekler Land only on the basis of a wide-ranging examination, since the ideas and theories formulated are in many cases built upon principles of linguistics, legal history, anthropology and even archaeology. At the same time research has had to face the fact that written sources related to the medieval history of the region and the ethnic group living there are very fragmentary, having only survived in small numbers, and they reveal essentially nothing about the period of their origins or formation. As a result of all of this, the archaeological approach comes to the forefront, even though this discipline cannot by itself provide answers to the most fundamental questions. This is also why art history has been given such a prominent place in the analysis of the material culture, playing an essential role particularly in the processing of ecclesiastical relics. Alongside all of this, one of the most significant new resources analyzed in this two volume work are the remains of human and animal bones that provide the basis for both scientific and historic examinations.

There is no surprise that this multifaceted approach and the synthesizing of the results from various fields of study is connected to the name of Elek Benkő, who has performed examinations in many areas of outstanding importance in the analysis of the material culture of Transylvania and published monographs of fundamental importance that have for a long time determined the direction of further study. The range of historical/archaeological phenomena that he has studied is extraordinarily broad, and as with his work up to this point, in this book he deals with every detail of the medieval network of settlements, churches



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and ecclesiastical relics, residences of the nobility and market towns, as well as the material culture linked to all of these. In the present case this is also supplemented by the issue of border defense that is so significant to the history of the Székely people, as well as an analysis of the system of roads and tolls that is necessary when studying the medieval history of a region and a review of the appearance in the area of different ethnic groups. All of these types of relics or historical issues were given an individual chapter in the book, and are supplemented by other special units shedding light on various aspects of the region's medieval history. The Aranyos Seat (Aranyosszék, Scaunul Arieşului) region, an area of key importance for understanding the settlement of the Székely people, was examined in the book as a case study. Also of outstanding significance is the presentation of the role of castles and other defensive preparations related to the network of towns. Similarly, the analysis of the medieval monasteries does not just complete the picture of the region's network of ecclesiastical institutions, but also fits in with the examination of the various means for nobles to display their status.

Even a brief listing such as this of the varied groups of relics and monuments, sources and historic approaches represented in this book shows how diverse a work Elek Benkő has published and how many different results from a variety of fields are represented in this monograph. Due to this, a number of the conclusions go far beyond dealing with just the history of one region of medieval Transylvania. This includes the elaboration of what is without doubt the most controversial problem, the issue of the origins of the Székely people, which will also certainly spark the most debate in relation to this book. Perhaps it is precisely this issue where the author's methodology and the research concept that he followed can be most clearly seen. The most essential element of this is that he analyzes the historical context of the archaeological phenomena and in general the elements of material culture in such a way that these monuments (cemeteries, churches, manor houses, market towns and their material culture) are not simply used as illustrations of historical processes or can only be interpreted on the basis of conceptions formulated in the wake of historical reasoning. It is much more the case that the individual types of relics and monuments are analyzed on their own, taking their unique qualities as sources into account, and the results of the research drawn from them can be compared with conclusions that can be reached from other types of sources without having to force the results of archaeological, art historical or settlement history examinations into the framework of a previous historical conception. It is only in this manner that it was possible to break away from the confines of the romantic view of history that explained the origins of the Székely people, instead analyzing them as a historical phenomenon.

Elek Benkő does not depart from the numerous views that analyzed certain aspects of Szekler Land (e.g. the problem of the castles and the border defense system) on the basis of previous ideas or of his own preconceptions, but instead through the actual examination of a group of monuments and relics. He takes into account the methodology of the research and formulates partial conclusions, which he then places together to reach a more general conclusion. Through his work, the emergence of the Székely people appears to be as the result of a long historical process, just like the ethnogenesis of other ethnic groups. Therefore, despite the consciousness of their own origins and their legal autonomy, we cannot always find those elements that identify the inhabitants of the region under study as a separate community or perhaps even an ethnic group.

The second half of this two volume work is made up of the "Appendix", whose significance goes far beyond being considered just some kind of supplement. Erzsébet Fóthi, Zsolt Bernert, Tamás Hajdú and Ivett Kővári processed the medieval anthropological finds from Szekler Land. Their work covered everything, disclosing results from surveys in detail, organized into tables and formulating significant general conclusions. These are on the one hand demographic data drawn from burials, which obviously provide an important basis for any kind of socio-historical analysis. At the same time it was clear to Elek Benkő who compiled the material for the volumes that these results are not appendices connected to his work in the traditional sense, but introduce fundamentally new information for the examination of the origins of the Székely people, for example. This is not to say that any kind of "Székely" anthropological characteristics could be defined on the basis of these as is often expected from archaeological/anthropological analyses due to some type of

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romantic preconception. However, the opportunity arose to analyze source materials that provide the most trustworthy information from the aspect of what kind of inhabitants lived in Szekler Land in the Árpád Period, as well as which areas of contemporary Hungary can be linked for the most part with what types of anthropological materials through the measurable characteristics that can be observed from human remains. This in and of itself may bring significant changes to the research, since it is not only the linguistic data that has been questioned many times that points in the direction of the ethnic groups who were settled in the Székely areas to guard the borders being connected to the western region of the Carpathian Basin, but this is now also supported by anthropological data. Similarly to the anthropological investigations, the processing of the animal bone remains performed by Erika Gál also represents an important point of departure for further studies. For example, the horse bones that appear amongst the medieval animal bone remains from castles in Szekler Land provide evidence that the custom of eating horse meat survived even up to the 15th–16th centuries. The analysis of the materials from the region's market towns indicates the spread and significance of various handicraft trades. All of this clearly illustrates the effort to include the various types of remains into the study of medieval Szekler Land, whether they are stove tiles with figural designs or animal bone remains, surface finds from toll stops or decorative elements from medieval churches. Due to this, the work provides a model for how to analyze the types of monuments and relics of other medieval regions in a similarly interdisciplinary manner.

Reading this book we can be sure that a variety of opinions in connection with the origins or the settlement of the Székely people will arise based on the results of this monograph, and these may even contradict one another. At the same time we can be sure that Elek Benkő has published a work that is fundamental, cannot be ignored and in all aspects provides a model for further research into Szekler Land.