BOOK REVIEWS


In his recent book, Dániel Bácsatyai examines the Latin sources on the period of the Hungarian incursions into Western Europe. By offering a critical historico-philological analysis of the sources, he provides an overview of the events, stages, directions, and methods of the incursions that took place in the ninth and tenth centuries.

The book is organized into three chapters. In the first, Bácsatyai presents assessments in the French historiography of the Hungarian incursions which were launched against Burgundy, and he examines sources from the Burgundian monasteries on the Hungarians. This chapter is a case study which demonstrates that the interpretations by Western historians of the narrative sources from the period can be misleading. Modern Belgian and French scholars often presume that the references to the arrival of Hungarians in settlements in the West are untrue, and they consider these references stereotypical remarks or hagiographical and rhetoric clichés. According to them, by mentioning the Hungarians and the raids they conducted, the chroniclers only intended to create a ‘necessary’ enemy, which a Christian religious community could overcome. Bácsatyai contradicts this approach by pointing out that even if there are descriptions in the sources which rest on or rehearse stereotypes, this does not mean that their authors should be dismissed entirely as unreliable. A fine example of this is the *Vita Sanctae Wiboradae*, which describes how Wiborada suffered martyrdom at the hands of the Hungarians in Sankt Gallen in 926. As Bácsatyai states, the Hungarians depicted in the *vita* are indeed clearly portrayed as the necessary executives of Wiborada’s martyrdom, but their presence in Sankt Gallen can be confirmed by other, more reliable sources. This questioning of the rather critical concept about the Hungarian incursions is a valuable methodological innovation with which Bácsatyai manages to argue persuasively that many Hungarian incursions which have come to be seen in much of the secondary literature in the West as never having taken place (i.e. as mere rhetorical fictions) did indeed happen.

In the second chapter, Bácsatyai discusses a theory suggested by the historian Szabolcs Vajay, according to whom some of the Hungarian military expeditions, – e. g. the campaign in 917 to Alsace and Lorraine or the attack
against Burgundy in 937, – were part of an alliance between the Hungarians and the Carolingian rulers. Bácsatayai gives an overview of the related events in support of his argument that there was never any such alliance.

In the third chapter, Bácsatayai analyzes Western sources containing notes about the incursions. The subchapters are organized according to source-types: annals from the ninth and tenth centuries, tenth-century necrologies, chronicles by abbots, hagiographic works, chronicles (most importantly those of Liutprand and Widukind), and charters and letters.

It is particularly useful that Bácsatayai evaluates these sources alongside a discussion of the relevant historical-philological problems, and he demonstrates the manuscript-traditions of the sources, too. A fine example of the usefulness of this approach is his exploration of a manuscript of the Annales Bertiniani by Hincmar, Archbishop of Reims. By emphasizing the significance and the authenticity of this manuscript, – which until now has been largely overlooked in the Hungarian secondary literature –, Bácsatayai argues persuasively that the manuscript’s note about the Hungarian incursion of 862 can be accepted as credible.

Another valuable finding in the book concerns the settling of a number of chronological disputes. Drawing on the sources, Bácsatayai outlines the chronological order of the Hungarian military campaigns from the middle of the ninth century to the end of the tenth, which were launched against East and West Francia, Moravia, Italy, Bavaria, Carinthia, Saxony, Swabia, Thuringia, Burgundy, Lotharingia, and Aquitaine.

The clarification of the events of the great campaign against Italy (899–900) is extremely valuable. With the help of a charter from Altino, Bácsatayai demonstrates that the expedition began in the spring or summer of 899, and after the Hungarians were defeated in Venice, they probably devastated the monastery of Altino on June 29. Using the Gesta/Catalogus abbatum Nonantulani, Bácsatayai clarifies the date of the Hungarian victory over Berengar I in Brenta (September 24). As Bácsatayai points out, the Annales Fuldenses reported that Berengar lost 20,000 of his soldiers in this battle. Using a necrology, Bácsatayai specifies the possible date of the Hungarian attack against Vercelli and the murder of bishop Liutward. The chronology of the events of the Hungarian campaign against Italy, – which ended in the spring of 900, – offers a good example of how Bácsatayai uses different types of sources concerning each episode of the Hungarian incursions in order to obtain a picture that is as complete as possible.
In addition to these strengths of this important monograph, I would be remiss not to mention another new finding in the book. Bácsatyai draws attention to a story from a work entitled *Translatio et miracula Sancti Marci*. The tale, which has been ignored by Hungarian historians so far, tells the story of a crippled churchman. Seeking (for) healing, the man visits a site of pilgrimage which, according to the *Translatio*, fell under the control of the Hungarians. Bácsatyai points out that there is only one settlement in the Carpathian Basin where a relic was kept in the ninth century, and this was Mosaburg/Zalavár.

In conclusion, Dániel Bácsatyai’s monograph presents significant findings. His opposition to the minimalist attitude of the Western European scholars and the theory presented by Szabolcs Vajay about the Hungarian-Carolingian alliance can be regarded as important progress and therefore an important addition to earlier historiographic viewpoints. Bácsatyai was able to add several insights concerning the chronology of events, and he has also made a number of corrections. His examination of the manuscript-traditions also yields important findings, and he has made unique discoveries, such as the identification of Mosaburg/Zalavár as an early site of pilgrimage in the Carpathian Basin.

In addition to the insights and contributions mentioned above, the most important point of the book is the argument it presents according to which the Hungarian tribal federation pursued an organic, unified foreign policy in the first half of the tenth century. This contention is significant in part because it runs contrary to the interpretations of some of the most well-known scholars of the period (such as József Deér and Gyula Kristó). Kristó’s main argument was that there were certain occasions, namely in 917, 934, and 943, when the tribes appeared in Western-Europe, and Byzantium. This implies that the tribes must have acted independently, without central guidance. However, as Bácsatyai points out, the sources reveal that the Hungarian defeat in Bavaria took place in 945, not 943, there are no reliable sources verifying the existence of an incursion in 934, and the authenticity of the expedition in 917 is also questionable. Therefore, it seems that the Hungarian incursions in the first half of the tenth century fit a pattern of a conscious strategy, and they were far from random campaigns.

Iván Kis
Eötvös Loránd University