

INTRODUCTION



Conqueror and Founder of the Homeland—these were the most common epitaphs dedicated to Árpád, the late ninth-century Magyar prince, in fin-de-siècle Hungary. Prince Árpád, who led the Magyar tribes from their genuine homeland somewhere in present-day Ukraine to the Carpathian Basin in the 890s, became one of the most important national heroes in late nineteenth-century Hungary. The figure of Árpád and the story of the conquest (*honfoglalás*) provided convenient material with the potential to be developed into a powerful national myth. The *Gesta Hungarorum*, a chronicle written at the turn of the twelfth century, explained how Árpád's Magyars fought the original population of the Carpathian Basin and conquered their new homeland. A century later, Árpád's successor St. Stephen established the Christian Kingdom of Hungary. The frame of the myth was thus given but the more precise content varied greatly. These variations derived from the fact that little was known for certain about either Árpád or the conquest. The very details of the conquest remained in the shadow of the past; even such basic data as the exact chronology and the very territory of the Magyars could not be established, giving much space to myth inventors.

Most members of the Magyar elite liked to fill this frame with the so-called Hungarian state doctrine (*magyar állameszme*), the official political-historical dogma of dualist Hungary, which promoted a liberal and united nation under ethnic Magyar leadership. In the sense of the Hungarian state doctrine, the military victory of the Magyars over the indigenous peoples was stressed, and the foundation of the Christian monarchy was ascribed solely to the Magyars. This reading of the past was unacceptable for a number of non-Magyar national activists in Hungary. Slovak leaders in the north of the country, Romanians in the east, and Serbs in the south were particularly concerned about the political consequences of the Magyar historical narrative: if Árpád's Magyars alone founded Hungary, there was no place for other peoples except the Magyar. Therefore, they offered alternative readings of the past, stressing their aboriginality, their high cultural standards compared to pagan Magyars, and various historic forms of self-government, which stood in sharp

contrast to the unifying and ethnically Magyar agenda of the Hungarian state doctrine. Catholic leaders were also concerned about the cult of Árpád, since a pagan figure was hardly compatible with Christian values.

Nonetheless, the cult of Árpád flourished in the nineteenth century. The *Gesta Hungarorum*, a manuscript hidden for centuries in a library in Vienna, was published in Latin in 1746 and in 1790 in Magyar translation. Its discovery “made Árpád, the leader of that campaign, the central figure of ancestry [and] moved the center of the narrative to the ninth-century foundation of the kingdom.”¹ Beginning with the late eighteenth century, historians elaborated the story of the conquest and their authority “guaranteed” its accuracy. During the *Vormärz*, the “Panther-Skinned” Árpád became a central hero in Magyar epic poetry.² Árpád also found his way into textbooks and popular chapbooks; the rising standards of education and literacy brought him to the widest possible audience of the age.³ Still, by the end of the nineteenth century, the myth of Prince Árpád was to be found on paper only: it did not materialize yet.

The Magyar national elite of the country was dissatisfied with both the intangibility of Árpád and the incomplete “national consciousness” of the Hungarians. To solve these matters, in the year 1896, the Hungarian government organized large-scale celebrations to commemorate the 1000th anniversary of the conquest. The scale of these festivities was grandiose; they certainly reached millions of Hungarian citizens. Before this year, symbolic politics in Hungary was designed and consumed mostly by members of the middle class; now the designers remained the same but the audience became far larger. The message of the millennial festivities was developed in concert with the Hungarian state doctrine.

The uniform message symbolized by Prince Árpád was received, digested, and conceptualized by the diverse Hungarians in a number of ways. This book aims to illustrate how this transpired, through the analysis of seven government-sponsored monuments erected in provincial Hungarian cities during the millennial year.

Two of these monuments were built in northwestern Hungary: one at the castle of Theben (today Devín) near Pressburg (Bratislava), and another on Zobor Hill next to Nitra. Both of these locations belong to Slovakia today; at the end of the nineteenth century they had a mixed Magyar-German-Slovak-Jewish population. The third memorial was at the Munkács castle (today Mukachevo in Ukraine), built in a then Magyar-Rusyn-Jewish environment on the northeastern border of the country. The fourth monument was located on Cenk (Tâmpa) Hill in Brassó (Braşov), today a city in Romania, then a stronghold of Transylvanian Saxons, Romanians, and Magyars facing the Romanian border. The fifth millennial monument was erected at the castle of Semlin (Zemun), a town today part of the Serbian capital, Belgrade, but then bordering on Serbia and inhabited by a Serbian-Croatian-German-Jewish

population. Two other memorials were located in the Hungarian “inland,” at Pannonhalma Archabbey in western Hungary, and in Pusztaszer, not far from Szeged. Both of them still belong to Hungary; now, like a century ago, they are located in a predominantly Magyar-speaking environment.

The seven locations reflected the enormous heterogeneity of late nineteenth-century Hungary, whose inhabitants spoke a number of vernaculars (Magyar, German, Romanian, Slovak, Rusyn, Serbian, Croatian, Yiddish, etc.), worshiped God according to various denominations (Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Orthodox, Calvinist, Lutheran, reformed Jew, Orthodox Jew, etc.), and lived in diverse environments ranging from the booming metropolis of Budapest to remote villages in the Carpathians. They had various concepts of the past and their loyalties went to various communities, based on religion, social status, and a sense of ethnicity. All in all, they were quite different from the ideal Hungarians imagined in the framework of the Hungarian state doctrine.

Decorated with images of Prince Árpád, his Magyar warriors, and their totemic bird, the *turul*, the seven millennial monuments made the already invented but so far only written tradition of Árpád tangible. The monuments were meant to inscribe a Magyar ethnic reading of the past into cityscapes and landscapes and by that to anchor the Hungarian state doctrine in the minds of the population of the Hungarian provinces. The univocal content of the millennial monuments fit into the diverse spaces and minds incidentally. Conflicts between the central government and various local actors, and among the local actors themselves, arose. These conflicts were, of course, not unique to the Hungarian case. Scholars studying commemorative culture agree that “[c]elebrations often exacerbated divisions within societies,”⁴ since “[c]ommemorative activity is by definition social and political, for it involves the coordination of individual and group memories, whose result may appear consensual when they are in fact the product of processes of intense contest, struggle, and, in some instances, annihilation.”⁵

This was the case for the millennial monuments, too, which indeed provoked conflicts. They were built above the discussed localities and their huge size was meant to dominate the cityscape or the surrounding landscape. Their uniform message was understood and negotiated in various local milieus by different groups in a number of ways. Prince Árpád was built above the cities to rule them, but was genuinely accepted in only a few cases.

Later on, local elites also built monuments to express local values and to locate themselves in the symbolic body of the nation. If national and local identities coincided, the message of local monuments was identical to the state-sponsored ones. If this was not the case, then there were profound differences between the governmental and local monuments. In these cases, monuments built by local actors were more successful than the governmental memorials in representing a past meaningful for urban communities. These differences

were dependent on local social factors; thus, the analysis of these is the central issue discussed in this study. Local middle classes were the core targets of the monuments: their voice was the most crucial in the reception of the memorials, they utilized the monuments after their inauguration, and they were in the position to build artifacts to express their identities. They will be also the main subjects of this book.

Being built in a statuomaniac age, the monuments provoked passionate responses and these reactions unfold various identities in given moments. Identities are certainly situational: the millennial memorials were events that forged groups around themselves by forcing people to choose sides. National activists wished to see these groups clear-cut and eternal. In fact, they were neither; what one finds are social structures shaping these groups.

The analysis of the reception of these monuments and the mechanism that led to their success or failure is beneficial in many ways. First, on a macro-level, it allows us to shed light on the contrast between the Magyar national integration project supported by a central governmental will and the competing visions of integration offered by the country's other elites. Second, on a micro-level, the millennial festivities identify national, denominational, and political cleavages in provincial towns of late nineteenth-century Hungary in a comparative way. The third and probably most important contribution of this project is the establishment of the link between the macro- and the micro-levels, the government and "high politics" and the local interests. It may broaden our knowledge and understanding of local milieus in Hungary, whose study has been rather neglected in scholarship.

The first part of the book will briefly introduce fin-de-siècle Hungary and the macro-conditions of symbolic politics. It will discuss the millennial idea and its implementation in Budapest and will explain how it was to be extended to provincial Hungary by historian and politician Kálmán Thaly. This part will show Thaly's reasons for choosing the seven locations that are at the heart of this book. Part II will guide us through these five towns and two non-urban locations. Social structures, local milieus and identities, and national integration processes will be introduced here. Each chapter will reflect on the local self-image and the usage of urban space. It will be shown that religious, class, and regional identities shaped fin-de-siècle Hungary far more than previous scholarship, often focusing on ethnic and national belonging, has supposed. Part III will meticulously examine the local millennial experiences. First, the celebrations in the spring of 1896 will show how local actors acted when they had the chance to organize the millennial festivities for themselves. Second, the inauguration of the millennial monuments will be examined. This will show how locals reacted to the highly centralized attempt by the government to distribute a uniform identity to provincial Hungarians. The third chapter in this part will analyze the usage of the millennial monuments in the period

up to the Great War, the initiatives to represent local values, and the complex relationship between these.

Notes

1. János M. Bak, “From the Anonymous *Gesta* to the *Flight of Zalán* by Vörösmarty,” in *Manufacturing a Past for the Present: Forgery and Authenticity in Medievalist Texts and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. János M. Bak, Patrick J. Geary and Gábor Klaniczay (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 98.
2. *Ibid.*, 103–6.
3. László L. Lajtai, “Magyar nemzet vagyok”: *Az első magyar nyelvű és hazai tárgyú történelemtankönyvek nemzetsdiskurzusa* (Budapest: Argumentum, 2013); Éva Mikos, Árpád pajzsa: A magyar honfoglalás-hagyomány megszerkesztése és népszerűsítése a XVIII–XIX. században (Budapest: MTA Néprajzi Kutatóintézete—PTE Néprajz–Kulturális Antropológia Tanszék—L’Harmattan, 2010).
4. Patrice M. Dabrowski, *Commemorations and the Shaping of Modern Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 6.
5. John R. Gillis, “Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship,” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 5.