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BETWEEN REALITY AND FICTION: THE SIEGE OF BELGRADE IN 1071 IN THE 14TH CENTURY CHRONICLE COMPOSITION

Abstract: The text presents the description of the Siege of Belgrade in 1071 described in the Hungarian Chronicle Composition. The analysis of the text passages will be carried out by inserting the text into the literary tradition of the turn of the 11-12th century and by using the outcomes of the research on public communication in the Middle Ages.

Key words: 11th century, Chronicle writing, Hungarian-Byzantine wars, Throne struggles of the Arpads, Gesta Militaria, Topological description of conflict, Hungarian Chronicle Composition.

The 14th century Hungarian chronicle composition is a compilation of the earlier Hungarian chronicles made by the rulers of the Angevine dynasty in the 14th century.¹ The compilation was completed twice: once under the reign of Charles I of Anjou (1310–1342) and later during the reign of his son, Louis I. of Anjou (1342–1382). The text itself represents many chronicle redactions occurred between the 11th and early 14th century², descended in two main text families, called the Chronicon Budense (the Chronicle of Buda) and the Chronicon Pictum Vindobonense (The so called Vienna Illuminated Chronicle). Each of the text families has been preserved in five codices.

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¹ See the recent text editions: *The illuminated Chronicle*, Ed. by. János M. Bak & László Veszprémy, Budapest – New York 2018, 199–207.

² See: Kornél Szovák's study in: *Képes Krónika*, Fordította János Bollók, A fordítást gondozta és a jegyzeteket készítette Kornél Szovák és László Veszprémy, Az utószót írta, a függelékét és az irodalomjegyzékét összeállította Kornél Szovák, Budapest 2004, 239–254.

Thus, the text of the chronicle composition is a kind of text pool, containing many texts from the age of the Arpadian dynasty, which have been several times interpolated, re-stylized between the 12th and 14th century, giving sometimes a controversial description of the same events.

Among the many texts preserved in the chronicle composition there are some passages, which have been devoted to the throne struggles of the 11th century Arpad rulers.³ These parts of the entire text might have been composed earliest at the turn of the 11–12th century, but – similarly to other narratives in the text corpus – they might have been modified during the centuries before the final compilation of them.

The alleged text gives a larger description of the wars between the Byzantine Empire and Hungary in the second half of the 11th century, presenting the siege and conquering of the fortification of Belgrade by King Solomon (1063–1074) and his cousins, the later king Géza I (1074–1077) and Ladislas I (1077–1095). The chronicle gives the following narrative about the events:

“It happened in the third year after the coming of the Cumans that the Pechenegs advanced through Belgrade and swam across the Sava river into the fields of Buziás and carried off no small number of captives and other booty into their own country. The king and the duke charged [those of] Belgrade with treachery because they had violated the peace by having freely permitted the robber bands of the Pechenegs to plunder Hungary. They therefore collected their armies and having met in council at Slankamen they determined that the treacherous Belgrade must be besieged and occupied. Moving camp, they came down along the Sava in the direction of Belgrade. There went out a decree from the king and the duke that the whole Hungarian army should cross the Sava into Bulgaria the sooner the better. But from their boats the Greeks and the Bulgarians blew sulphurous fires by means of machines against the Hungarian ships, so that they burned even in the very water. However, the fire spitting Greeks were vanquished by the Hungarians, who had launched upon the river a great fleet. The Greeks and the Bulgarians took to flight, and the Hungarians crossed over and occupied the Bulgarian borders.

On a Monday the king and the duke crossed the Sava; early in the morning they marshaled their forces, and by having all their troops join their shields, completely invested the city. Fearing that the siege placed them in peril, the Greeks and the Bulgarians secretly sent messengers to the Pechenegs and asked them to come without fear to their help; for neither the king nor the duke was besieging their city, but only the ispán Vid, who had attacked them with warriors from Bács. Misled by these deceitful words, the Pechenegs hastened to their help, and in their greed for the booty which they hoped to gain from the defeat of ispán Vid they threw themselves upon the ranks of the men from Sopron, whose commander was the ispán called Ian.

³ To the throne struggles see recently: Dániel Bagi, *Divisio Regni: The Territorial Divisions, Power Struggles and Dynastic Historiography of the Árpáds of 11th–12th century Hungary with Comparative studies of the Piasts of Poland and the Premyslids of Bohemia*, Budapest 2021 (Arpadiana 2).

He with those from Sopron gallantly and courageously withstood the assault of the Pechenegs, many of whom fell there beneath the edge of the sword, while the rest were taken captive. The leader of the Pechenegs, whose name was Kazar, barely escaped by flight with very few others from the hands of the Hungarians. The king and the duke generously bestowed royal gifts and worthy rewards upon the warrior Ian, who had brought destruction to many thousands of the Pechenegs as a finely polished flint shatters vessels of clay, even before the king and the duke with their army had arisen from their early meal. On the Wednesday the king and the dukes Géza and Ladislav took their seats on a rock near that city, and at dawn the Hungarians began to display before them the captured Pechenegs and the heads of the slain and the horses and the equipment, and still they had not finished when the sun began to decline. They did this in order that the besieged Greeks and Bulgarians should see how the Pechenegs in whom they had placed their hopes had been cruelly slaughtered by the Hungarians, and should be afraid and surrender themselves and their city to the king and the dukes.

Then the king and the dukes, seeking for more advantageous positions to storm the town, instructed their carpenters that they should construct there eight wooden towers twice the height of the walls, from which the warriors could strike with stones and arrows at the men in the center of the city. Between the towers they erected the same number of catapults, for breaking walls and they also set up long movable screens to defend the entrances to the towers and other engines of war. In some places they destroyed the walls down to the foundations, but they could not take the city because it was defended from within by very brave warriors. They besieged the city for two months, in which time they clashed often with the Saracens who made sallies from the city, killing some and putting others to flight. Thereafter three very brave and daring Saracens made a sortie from the city and with spears, lances and arrows caused sore trouble to the Hungarians; but Solomon, one of the king's ballista-handlers, struck down one of them with a shot of his engine. The Hungarians strove to carry off his body, but his comrades fought fiercely to defend it. As they watched their struggle, the king and the duke said to the warriors standing by: "Were it hat the blood and heart of the Macchabaeans fired these warriors defending the Hungarians against the Saracens boldly fighting in defense of their citadel, the Hungarians might/would seize the Saracen's corpse." Hearing these words, the valiant warriors Opos, George and Bors rushed forth and leapt upon the Saracens like a thunderbolt. Most valiantly Opos pursued them to the very gates of the city. The defenders hurled stones and arrows from the city battlements, but Opos returned unhurt. Meanwhile George and Bors urged on the Hungarians, who bore off the body of the Saracen and disgraced it.

In the third month of the siege, on a Wednesday, a Hungarian girl who had long before been brought there into captivity set fire to the city. A wind blew most fiercely from the east, and the flames took hold of all the buildings. Where the walls had been shattered by their engines, the host of the Hungarians broke into the city and cruelly slaughtered the Greeks, Saracens, and Bulgarians. The survivors fled into the citadel with their leader Niketas. On the following day, when the fire had died down, the

Hungarians took the city and; seeing the cellars of the Greeks gaping open, carried away from them much gold and silver, precious stones and shining gems, and treasure of almost in-estimable value. It was in the sharing of these spoils that a quarrel arose between the king and the duke. There was none among the Hungarians who was not made rich. Those shut up in the citadel asked the king and the duke to grant them life and liberty, but retain the citadel and all it contained. After the king and the duke had given their hands in sign of good faith that they would do them no further harm, all those who were within came down from the citadel. But the Duke Niketas, bearing a silver icon of the most Holy Mother of God, the Virgin Mary, and accompanied by a great multitude of people, gave himself up into the power of Duke Géza. For he knew that Duke Géza was devoted to God and that in him the bowels of compassion were moved towards those in captivity or affliction. But there came only few to give themselves into the hands of King Solomon, for they knew that he was a tough man and that in all things he listened to the vile counsels of ispán Vid, who was detestable in the eyes both of God and men. When the king saw that many sought refuge with the duke, but few with him, he resented that very much. Returning with their invaluable treasure, they came to Vid's estate in the village of Buziás, and [the king] wished to divide the treasure and the captives and even those who had come down from the citadel, trusting in their good faith. But since the duke disagreed with the king about this, they could not make the division. This was the cause of evils and the seed of strife between them. But when they divided the treasure, the king, on the counsel of Vid and Bishop Frank and Radvány, the son of Bogát, and Ilia, a kinsman of Vid; divided the treasure into four parts and gave one quarter to the duke who was to have received a third, and of the three remaining parts he gave one to be shared among all the soldiers, the second to Vid, and the third to Ilia. At this the duke was greatly annoyed."⁴

Generally, the passages presenting the siege of Belgrade can be analyzed from two different approaches: one of them is the literary tradition of the turn of the 11-12th century the text can be inserted in, the other one is the narrative as literary text from point of view of public communication between the protagonists of the events. Approaching the text from point of view of the literary tradition of the literacy, the narration is to be interpreted as one of the examples of the historiographical innovations of the turn of the 11th–12th century, originated from Normandy.⁵ One of the earliest prototypes of narratives of this kind is the *Gesta Tancredi* written by Randulf of Caen,⁶ representing the deeds of Tancred and Boemund in the first crusade. Approaching to the sense of the narrative from this point of view, the text of the Hungarian Chronicle composition gives a large description of the events, presenting all necessary and usual literary elements of warfare of the 12th century, including mortal combat scenes, all necessary war machines, surrender and

⁴ Translation after: *The illuminated Chronicle*, 199–207.

⁵ Letizia Böhm, „‘Gesta Dei per Francos’ oder ‘Gesta Francorum’? – Die Kreuzzüge als historiographisches Problem“, *Saeculum* 8 (1957) 43–81.

⁶ *Gesta Tancredi*.

submission of the defenders, and the division of the siege treasure after the war by the Hungarians.⁷ Indeed, the way of the depicting of the war indicates that this passage of the chronicle must have been written originally somewhere on the turn of the 11–12th century. But even more interesting is the description of the siege of Belgrade from point of view of public or social communication between King Solomon and his cousins. This methodological approach, elaborated mostly by German scholars,⁸ helps to understand texts as a construct of stereotypical patterns, which have been written for an audience comprehending the meaning of them, and serve as explanation for the events.

In this case, it is important to underline again that the narration about the siege of Belgrade is presented in the chronicle as part of the dynastic conflicts, throne struggles of the Arpads in the second half of the 11th century. These struggles began during the reign of king Andrew I (1048–1060), who supposed to preserve the throne for his brother, the later Béla I, but instead of this he let crown his own son, ignoring his brother's rights.⁹ After his death in 1060 duke Béla accroached the throne to himself, expelling Solomon from the country. The two lines of the dynasty tried to make a settlement first after king Béla's death in 1063. King Solomon, came on throne, and he and his cousins, the sons of Béla I tried to reign in the country simultaneously, cooperating for a couple of years.¹⁰

This time of peace between the two lines of the dynasty was interrupted even by the Byzantine war in 1071 and the conflicts began after the siege of Belgrade, and

⁷ To the new genre of this kind of literacy see furthermore: Marian Plezia, *Kronika Galla na tle historiografii XII. Wieku*, Kraków 1947, 45–49; Imre Szabics, *Epika és költőiség. A XII. századi francia költészet stíluseszközei*, Budapest 1983.

⁸ See as general examples: Gerd Althoff, „Königsherrschaft und Konfliktbewältigung im 10–11. Jh.“, *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 23 (1989) 265–290. Idem, *Die Macht der Rituale. Symbolik und Herrschaft im Mittelalter*, Darmstadt 2003; Verena Epp, *Amicitia. Zur Geschichte personaler, sozialer, politischer und geistlicher Beziehungen im frühen Mittelalter*, Stuttgart 1999; eadem, „Rituale frühmittelalterlicher amicitia“, in: *Formen und Funktionen öffentlicher Kommunikation im Mittelalter*, Hg. von Gerd Althoff, Stuttgart 2001, 11–24 (Vorträge und Forschungen 60).

⁹ „Chronici Hungarici compositio saeculi XIV“, Ed. Alexander Domanovszky, in: *Scriptores rerum Hungaricarum*, 352: „Quia vero carnalis amor et consanguineitatis affectio solent impedire veritatem, vicit amor filialis in Andrea rege ustitiam et rupto federe sue promissionis, quod in regibus esse non deberet, filium suum Salomonem adhuc puerulum infantulum adhuc quinque annorum super totam Hungariam anno imperii sui duodecimo confectus senio in regem fecit inungi et coronari.“

¹⁰ „Chronici Hungarici“, 363: „Rex Salomon et Geysa dux coram Hungaria in Geur pacem iuramento firmaverunt. Deide festum Dominice Resurrectionis ambo simul cum plena curia Quinqueeclisiis celebraverunt. Ubi rex Salomon ipso die Pasce assistentibus regni proceribus per manus Geysae ducis honorabiliter est coronatus et regiam Beati Petri principis apostolorum basilicam ad audiendam missam gloriose deductus. Universa ergo congregatio Hungarorum, videntes pacem regis et ducis et mutuam inter eos dilectionem, laudaverunt Deum, pacis auctoret facta est letitia magna in populo.“

the struggles continued up to the first decades of the 12th century, and ended during king Coloman's times, who let blinded his own brother Álmos, and his nephew, the later king Béla II.¹¹ The Chronicle composition describes the events on a very special way, paying attention to the mutual offense by the protagonists of the narrative. On the one hand, King Solomon's royal authority and military efficiency has been questioned according to the narration since the Greeks surrendered not to him but to Duke Géza. This way king Solomon's military virtues were questioned for the audience of the narrative, which must have been a heavy offense, since *gesta militaria* belonged to the most important virtues of the rulers since the time of the crusades. On the other hand, during the division of the treasure after the capture of Belgrade, duke Géza was offended by his cousin since he has received less than the deserved part of the captured goods of the Greeks.

To sum up, it is not clear, whether the description of the siege of Belgrade reflects the reality beyond the fact of the war and gives exact information about the war between the Kingdom of Hungary and the Byzantine Empire. The narrative gives a mixture of topological elements of the *chanson des gestes* and the topological description of dynastic conflicts and their settlements. In this way, it gives rather a link of chain to the dynastic throne struggles of the Arpads after 1063. One can assume, that the whole text was written not earlier than the times of king Koloman, and was dedicated to arguing for the line of Béla I, outpointing the virtues of the line of Béla I and shadowing the deeds of King Solomon.

¹¹ „Chronici Hungarici“, 429–430: „Anno Domini M-o C-o XIII-o imperator propter ducem Almu[m] movit exercitum ingentem et venit in confinium Hungarie, ut colloquium cum rege haberet et inter eos pacem firmaret. Et quod factum est. Rex autem imperatori plurima dona misit et sic honorifice repatriavit. Post hec rex reduxit ducem Almu[m] ad pacem. Confirmata autem pace tandem rex cepit ducem et filium eius Belam infantulum et obcecavit eos. Sed et Belam infantulum preceperat castrare.“

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**VALÓSÁG ÉS FIKCIÓ KÖZÖTT:
BELGRÁD OSTROMA 1071-BEN
A 14. SZÁZADI KRÓNIKÁK SZERINT**

Rezümé

Az Anjou-korból származó magyar krónikák összességét két szöveg együttese alkotja, a Budai krónika (*Chronicon Budense*) és a Bécsi Képes Krónika (*Chronicon Pictum Vindobonense*), melyek keletkezése a 11. és a 14. század közötti időszakra tehető. Ez a gyűjtemény többek között a 11. századi Árpád-házi dinasztikus harcokról szóló beszámolókat is tartalmazza. Ezek a szövegek a 11. és a 12. század közötti századforulón keletkeztek, azzal, hogy az elmúlt évszázadok során történtek bennük változások. Különösen figyelemre méltó a bizánci Belgrád 1071-es ostroma és eleste, amikor Salamon magyar király (1063-1074) és unokatestvérei, I. Géza és I. László elfoglalták a várost. A krónikák ezen részének elemzése két különböző szempontból is megközelíthető. Először is a szöveget a 12. századi történetírás hadviselésábrázolására jellemző irodalmi elemeken keresztül kell szemlélni, amelyek egyértelműen megnyilvánulnak magában az elbeszélésben. Másrészt ez a szövegrész értelmezhető a szereplők közötti nyilvános kommunikáció szemszögéből is, amely Salamon király és rokonai kapcsolatán keresztül jelenik meg. Ez a megközelítés feltárja az elbeszélés ideológiai hátterét, amely Salamon király negatív ábrázolásában is megmutatkozik. Ezért joggal feltételezhető, hogy a szöveg azzal a céllal készült, hogy megkérdőjelezze Salamon uralkodó tekintélyét, ezzel is kiemelve az I. Béla király által képviselt dinasztikus ág erényeit és egyúttal legitimitását is.

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**ИЗМЕЋУ СТВАРНОСТИ И ФИКЦИЈЕ:
ОПСАДА БЕОГРАДА 1071. ГОДИНЕ
У ХРОНИЧАРСКОЈ КОМПОЗИЦИЈИ ИЗ 14. ВЕКА**

Резиме

Угарска хроничарска композиција из времена династије Анжујаца сачувана је у виду две текстуалне групе или „породице“, познате као *Будимска хроника* (Chronicon Budense) и *Бечка илустрована хроника* (Chronicon Pictum Vindobonense), које су настајале у периоду од 11. до 14. века. Ова компилација, између осталог, садржи извештаје о династичким сукобима унутар династије Арпадоваца током 11. века. Ови делови су по свој прилици настали на прелазу између 11. и 12. века, с тим што није искључено да је током времена текст претрпео одређене измене. Посебну пажњу завређује опширан опис опсаде и освајања византијског Београда 1071. од стране угарског краља Соломона (1063–1074) и његових сродника Гезе (I) и Ладислава (I). Анализи овог одломка може се приступити из два различита угла. Прво, текст треба посматрати кроз литерарне елементе карактеристичне за приказ ратовања у историографији 12. века, који се јасно манифестују у самом наративу. Са друге стране, овај одломак се може тумачити из угла јавне комуникације међу актерима, што је представљено кроз однос краља Соломона и његових сродника. Такав приступ открива идеолошку позадину наратива која се огледа у негативној представи краља Соломона. Према томе, разложно је претпоставити да је текст настао с циљем дискредитовања Соломоновог владарског ауторитета, чиме се пред читалачком публиком наглашавају врлине, а самим тим и легитимитет династичког огранка краља Беле I.