

The Székelys: Ancestors of Today's Hungarians? A New Twist to Magyar Prehistory

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Székely szülte a magyart

[Székely begot the Hungarian]

József Thury (1861-1906)

Vékony Gábor. *Magyar őstörténet – Magyar honfoglalás* [Hungarian prehistory – Hungarian conquest]. Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 2002. 224 pages.

Gyönyvér Tömöry, Bernadett Csányi, Erika Bogács-Szabó, Tibor Kalmár, Ágnes Czibula, Aranka Csósz, Katalin Priskin, Balázs Mende, Péter Langó, C. Stephen Downes and István Raskó. "Comparison of Maternal Lineage and Biogeographic Analyses of Ancient and Modern Hungarian Populations." *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*. 134 (2007). Pp. 354-368.

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Bogács-Szabó Erika *et al.* "Genetika és (magyar) őstörténet" [Genomics and (Magyar) Prehistory]. *Magyar Tudomány*, 169, 10 (2008).

In recent years a new science has become available for the study of prehistory: genomics, the study of human inter-relatedness through the examination of DNA. Genomics is sometimes also described as the science of deep ancestry.¹ Genomics was introduced to Hungary just about the time Gábor Vékony's book, *Magyar őstörténet – Magyar honfoglalás*, went to press.²

Because the results of the first genomic inquiries into the Hungarian past did not become public until years later, Vékony was not able to use them to support his theories. Since Vékony died in 2004,³ he never had the chance to find out that the results of these inquiries lend emphatic support to the most dramatic and probably also the most controversial of his conclusions.

The first purpose of this review will be to acquaint the reader with Vékony's book and its unconventional arguments. The second and perhaps more important aim of this review article will be to outline the results of the recent genomic research in Hungary which reinforce Vékony's extraordinary theories regarding the role of the Székelys in Magyar ethnogenesis.

The writer of these lines is not a historian of the pre-modern age. He is not a geneticist by training. Nevertheless, his long-term interest in pre-modern Magyar history and his passion about the new science of genomics hopefully offer some justification for his bringing this book to the attention of an audience that has no knowledge, or has only a limited knowledge of Hungarian, and cannot read Vékony's book in the original Magyar.

Many Hungarians are intensely interested in their national origins and ancient homeland. Not surprisingly, in the past few centuries, and especially in the past several decades, many books appeared dealing with these subjects. Some of these were written by people who had no training in any or most of the relevant disciplines of history, linguistics, archaeology or anthropology — and the conclusions they came to were often exotic or even fantastic, especially as to the question of the ancient Magyar homeland's location. Academics better trained in the relevant disciplines were more reluctant to endorse unconventional theories, but some of them did. In Vékony's book we have a work from an academic who was not reluctant to come to conclusions that most readers will regard as dramatic or even provocative.

We must say in advance that Vékony, a former member of the faculty of the Institute of Archaeology at Budapest's Eötvös Loránd University, does not belong to that very numerous camp of mostly amateur writers who deny the Magyar language's linguistic affinity to the other Finno-Ugric languages and trace the ancient Hungarian homeland to the land of Sumer. He is an ardent believer of the Uralic linguistic ancestry of the Magyar language. Regarding Sumerian, he proclaims that it has no connection to any known tongue, let alone Hungarian. Vékony's unconventional conclusions are made in connection with other aspects of Magyar prehistory.

In his lifetime Vékony published numerous books, mostly in Hungarian but also in English.⁴ He wrote the one at hand late in his life, and it sums up many decades of his researches. It begins innocuously enough, with an outline of the beginnings of Hungarian interest in Magyar prehistory in the 13th

century, in particular with the circumstances of Dominican friar Julianus' travels, in what is now European Russia, in search of the ancient Magyar homeland and "relatives left behind". He then continues with descriptions of the works of the 13th century priests Anonymus and Simon Kézai as well as of the lesser-known Franciscan friar Plano Carpini, Benedictus Polonus. The writings of Anonymus and Kézai have served as the chief sources of information for generations of Hungarian historians on the occupation of the Carpathian Basin by the Magyars at the end of the 9th century. Later in his book *Vékony* will tell us that he, in writing his version of the "conquest" story, refused to use these works, since much of what they say has been proven erroneous. The unreliability of these sources should come as no surprise to anyone. They were written centuries after the events, and they were also influenced by the political views, one might say the propaganda, of the masters (King Béla III and King László IV respectively) whom these authors served.

Vékony then continues with the historiography of the "Hungarian conquest" in the post-13th century period. He notes that attention to the uniqueness of the Magyar language was first paid in the 15th century by Galeotto Marzio, a courtier in King Matthias Corvinus' entourage. Vékony also traces the evolution of knowledge of Hungarian prehistory outside of Hungary, mainly at the Vatican and some European (including Russian) royal courts.

There is not much to write about Hungarian historiography during the age of Ottoman occupation. Scholarship declined in much of Hungary during this age, as did the study of history. Nevertheless it was in this period that the comparison of the Magyar language to other languages garnered increased interest, and the first language to be focused upon became Hebrew. Similarities between these two languages preoccupied scholars into the 19th century. In time Magyar became compared to other Near Eastern and Asian languages as well. It would not be long before attention would be shifted to the relationship of Hungarian to other Finnno-Ugric languages.

According to Vékony, the first writer to proclaim the similarity of Magyar and Finnish, and even some Samoyed languages, was the 17th century scholar Georg Horn. Other Germans who followed were Martin Fogel and Johann Georg Eckhard, and then in Hungary, Dávid Cwittinger and György Pray. The most influential of the non-Hungarians were Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Philipp Johann von Starhemberg. The latter's work prompted József Torkos, the Lutheran minister in Győr, to conclude in 1747 that the Vogul language was closely related to Magyar (Vékony, p. 25). Though a few Hungarian scholars were aware of the studies of their German colleagues, according to Vékony in the 18th century the study of Finnno-Ugric linguistics,

and even to some extent Hungarian prehistory, was primarily a “German science.” It remained so for many decades, despite the fact that in the 19th century interest in Hungary in Hungarian linguistic relationships and in the ancient Magyar homeland (*őshaza*) increased, as illustrated by the travels of Sándor Kőrösi Csoma in Tibet and India. The age of the French revolutionary wars, Napoleon’s conquests, the reactionary regimes that followed the Congress of Vienna, all contributed to a decline in interest in research about prehistory not only in Hungary but in the German world as well. The exceptions were the Hungarian legal scholar Antal Reguly and the Finnish researcher Matthias Alexander Castrén. These two men, according to Vékony, founded the modern science of Finno-Ugric comparative linguistic studies (pp. 30-31).

Reguly’s researches were evaluated and presented to the scientific world by Pál Hunfalvy, mainly in his book *A vogul föld és nép* [The Vogul land and people] (1864). By the end of his career, Hunfalvy had come to the conclusion that the Magyar language was closest to that of the Voguls (better known today as the Mansi) and the Ostyaks (the Khanti or Hanti). József Budenz, a professional linguist, also came to a similar conclusion, abandoning gradually his earlier belief that Magyar was closest to Turkish (pp. 31-32). Vékony next describes the prolonged debate that took place in Hungary at the turn of the century and early during the 20th, regarding the advocates of the Turkish or Ugric linguistic connection, pointing out that the Orientalist scholar Ármin Vámbéry at one time was on one side of this debate and later on the other.

In the meantime the search for the ancient Hungarian homeland continued. Numerous individuals including Miklós Révai advanced their theories concerning the whereabouts of this land. Most of them placed it west or south of the Ural Mountains, while a few in South-Central Siberia. The last to do so was Erik Molnár, the 20th century Marxist scholar (pp. 34-35). Later historians began using the methods of paleo-ontology and linguistic analyses to determine the place of the ancient homeland. By analysing names of plants and animals in various Finno-Ugric languages, and comparing these to the estimated homelands of these, they sought to gain insights into prehistory and the prehistoric homelands of these peoples. The conclusions they arrived at varied greatly.

In the chapters following these essentially historiographical descriptions Vékony outlines the similarities that can be observed between Hungarian and other Uralic languages. He concludes that the Magyar language is related only to these tongues, since the existence of non-Uralic loan words in Magyar, and Magyar loan words in non-Uralic languages, is no proof of their being

related (pp. 40-49). He then gives his version of the Uralic linguistic family tree and next offers descriptions of the peoples that speak or have spoken these languages (pp. 49-90). This part of his book offers few surprises to believers of the Uralic nature of the Magyar language. Vékony devotes his next chapter to an outline of the methodologies used for the research of prehistory.

The next chapter Vékony covers the history of the ancient homeland of the Uralic and then the Finno-Ugric peoples — which he places on the plains southeast of Moscow, roughly between the present-day cities of Riazan and Tambov.⁵ He also describes life in these lands as it can be reconstructed by archaeologists and historians today. Most of this area was a part of the Middle Volga River basin and was characterized by numerous lakes, meandering rivers, and wetlands. Not surprisingly, Vékony speculates that fishing constituted an important activity for the land's inhabitants, second only to hunting. He also suggests that Finno-Ugric peoples were introduced to agriculture and animal husbandry already in this homeland of theirs, by their Indo-European neighbours.

Vékony's next chapter deals with the "Ugric" age, the time after the separation of the Finnic (Finno-Permian) and Ugric peoples. The reason for this separation is not known to the author. He also has to speculate rather than to say with any degree of certainty that the Magyars and their Ugric relatives continued to live together for quite some time after this separation. One great change in the lives of the Ugric peoples came when they became familiar with horse breeding and the use of the horse as a draft animal as well as a means of transportation. This new, now horse-focused Ugric community lived on the lands south, south-east and east of the previous, the Finno-Ugric homeland — while the ancestors of the Finnic peoples had moved to the north, north-west, and west. Ugric unity in the lands between the Donets Basin and the Ural Mountains continued till about 2,000 b.c. when it gradually began to disintegrate — with the ancestors of the Magyars remaining in the lands between the Don and the Dnepr Rivers, while the ancestors of the Ostyaks (Khanty) and Voguls (Mansi) moving further north.

Vékony's next chapter is devoted to what he calls the "Dark Ages" the early age of Hungarian pre-history. This age lasted from about 1,300 b.c. to the 5th century a.d., that is till the time of the ancient Magyars' increased interactions with Turkic-speaking peoples. This is another age about which we know very little, and we don't even know from what languages some of the loan-words that entered Hungarian had come from, as these languages (and their speakers) have since disappeared. Archaeology also fails to throw much useful light on this period. Still, according to Vékony, there are some glimpses of evidence that makes a cursory outline of this age possible. These

speak of interplay and interaction with numerous peoples, including some Finno-Permiens, Iranians (Skythians, Sarmatians, Alans) and Indo-Europeans. All of these left larger or smaller imprint on the Hungarian language, mainly in terms of loan-words. In the beginning of this age the ancestors of the Hungarians lived in the Donets River Basin. Where they lived at the end of this period Vékony is reluctant to guess, as the arrival of the Huns rearranged the ethnic map of Eastern Europe which fact makes it impossible for the students of this age to track peoples for about two centuries (p. 166). Nevertheless Vékony speculates that the earliest forms of the name that Hungarians later began to call themselves, in its various forms (the Slavic *skul*, *sikulu*, *sikülü*, *sakul*, and the Germanic *Zokel*) which eventually gave rise to the name *Székely*, originated in this period (pp. 169-170).⁶

Vékony's next chapter deals with the last phase of Hungarian prehistory, a period that lasted from the middle of the first millennium a.d. to its end. For the author what characterizes this period most, were contacts and relations with Turkic peoples. In fact, such contacts continued well into the 13th century. The Turkic peoples with whom the Hungarians of the age had the most contacts, judging from the number and kind of Turkic loan-words in the Hungarian language, were the Bulgars. In this connection Vékony remarks that most of these words must have been borrowed in the Carpathian Basin (pp. 174-177). Did Hungarians live there before the end of the 9th century? Vékony answers this question by saying that as far as Hungary's public is concerned they did not, but he adds that the majority of historians who studied this age have come to the conclusion that Hungarians probably did live there. As to the question of the ethnogenesis of Hungarians (how they eventually became a people) however, Vékony argues, there has been no agreement among historians (p. 177). The reason for this, according to the author, is the existence of two kinds of source materials that made for two differing versions of Hungarian prehistory.

The “Hungarian conquest”

When carefully considered according to Vékony, these sources actually tell the history of two different peoples: the ancestors of the Hungarians and the ancestors of the people who entered the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century. Vékony next outlines the history of each of these as he sees them (pp. 178-185). In connection with the history of the people who moved into the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century — who were known to their Muslim contemporaries as *Madzsgirs* — he speculates about the language they

spoke. It was not a Bulgar Turkic language, but one related to the language of the Bashkirs (p. 185). Vékony is not sure about the language of the Madzsgirs' Kavar (Kabar) allies, but believes that it was another Turkic language, one of the several spoken in the empire of the Khazars (pp. 187-188).

The chapter's last pages speculate among other things about the relationships between the newly-arrived Madzsgirs and the autochthonous Székelys — as well as those between the latter and the region's Slavic populations. In connection with the former Vékony guesses that the Székelys interacted and intermarried with the newcomers only or mainly after these became assimilated (p. 189). Indeed, early interaction was probably difficult between the rulers and the ruled, that is between those who lived a primarily nomadic, marauding life, and the locals who were settled and were probably less warlike.

The book's last chapter is entitled "A honfoglalás kora" [the age of the conquest] and deals first of all with the historiography of the so-called "Hungarian conquest" of the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century. Here the author outlines the shortcomings of the works of the 13th century chroniclers Simon Kézai and Master P., better known as Anonymus. He notes that no one has ever found any solid evidence that would support these two scholars' linking of the Huns and Árpád's people. In fact Vékony blames the continued acceptance of the old theory of the conquest on the fantasy-laden myths presented by these two men. When faced by such historical evidence, Vékony feels obligated to reject these stories in their entirety, even if that makes Hungarian history less colourful and thinner, i.e. more *vékony* [thin], to use the pun he favours.

Next Vékony reminds his readers of the massive movements of peoples Europe experienced from the 4th century to the 9th. In the early decades of this age it was the still existing Roman Empire that acted as a receptor of this migration. By the time of the 9th century, it was often the Byzantine Empire. Vékony argues that the arrival of Árpád's people should also be seen as part of this same phenomenon. These people — whom (as has been mentioned) contemporary Muslims called Madzsgirs, the Byzantines Turks, and most Europeans Ungrus or Hungarus — from their early 9th century location east of the Urals began their migration westward and by the second half of the century they turned up, always on the go, in various places in Central Europe. Their behaviour was typically nomadic: they engaged in marauding expeditions to all corners of their known world, and they "rented" their armies to anyone who could pay for them handsomely. As to the size of their army Vékony gives the estimate of "approximately" 5,000.

While Árpád's people were nomadic and Turkic-speaking, the majority of those living in the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century were agriculturalists and Finno-Ugric, i.e. Hungarian speaking. Their descendents would be known as Magyars, a name that was originally that of the newcomers. Such name-change can also be observed in the case of the Bulgarians, a Slavic-speaking people who inherited their name from their nomadic, Turkic-speaking conquerors, and the Russians who got their name Rus from the Scandinavian, i.e. Varangian elite that founded their first ruling dynasty (pp. 213-214).

The ancestors of today's Hungarians, Vékony reminds us in his conclusions, had an earlier name and that name eventually transmuted into the word Székely. Today it denotes the culturally but not linguistically distinct Hungarian ethnic group living in the easternmost counties of Transylvania in the Republic of Romania. In the 9th century the ancestors of these people, and of all Hungarians, lived in various regions of the Carpathian Basin. Further evidence of their presence, in particular in western Transdanubia, was discovered shortly before Vékony wrote his book. This was an inscription found written in Székely runic script dating from the 860s a.d. (p. 214).

While most of Hungary's present-day population descends from these pre-895 inhabitants of the Carpathian Basin (as well as the great variety of peoples who had joined them as immigrants since the 9th century), the Székelys we know today are a distinct group. Vékony suggests that their cultural separation from the rest of Hungarians had started with the Carolingian conquest of the western regions of their lands. Later, as we know, the country's early Árpáadian kings invited those among the Székelys who had been guarding the kingdom's western frontiers (roughly the region known today as the Burgenland), to settle in Transylvania to help consolidate the new, Christian and feudal order in that part of their realm and to guard its by then more threatened eastern approaches.⁷

The conquest of the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century did have significant impact on the future history of Hungarians. In Vékony's opinion the most important of these was the establishment of a dynasty, under whose members, in particular Prince Géza and King St. Stephen, a Christian medieval kingdom could be established and the entogenesis of the Hungarian people could be completed. In this process the rulers, the "conquerors" and their immediate descendents, first became the same as the community they ruled in their language, and later in other aspects of their existence as well (p. 215). They became the elite of a settled, Christian nation — linked to their subjects by their new, common religion and their new, common language.

Vékony adds a postscript to his book in his comments on his sources. Here he says that while his book was in preparation for printing new evidence had come to light — through linguistic, historic, anthropological and demographic research — that should finally put an end to the false interpretation of history that places the arrival of the Magyar language in the Carpathian Basin only at the end of the 9th century, with the so-called “Hungarian conquest”. He continues by saying that the people who arrived at that time made up only about one percent of the region’s total population, and, according to “every piece of evidence” were Turkic in speech, Turkic in their ethnicity, and nomadic in their lifestyle — while most of the ancestors of today’s Hungarians had been living in the Carpathian Basin for three or four centuries (p. 219).⁸

Not surprisingly because of the radical nature of these conclusions, reactions by the Hungarian scholarly community to Vékony’s theories were highly sceptical. Journalist-historian István Riba devoted an entire article to Vékony’s claim, made on various occasions even before the publication of his book, that the inscription found in Transdanubia (mentioned above) was written in the Székely runic script (and pre-dated the conquest). He concluded that there was no consensus among Hungarian archaeologists that this indeed was the case.⁹ In another publication archaeologist László Kovács, disputed Vékony’s estimates (given in this book and in some of his previous publications) of both the pre-895 population of the Carpathian Basin and the number of the “conquerors”. In connection with the latter Kovács remarked that 5,000 armed men would not have been able to accomplish the conquest and keep the subjugated population down, enemies out, *and* part-take in the newcomers’ military expeditions outside the region.¹⁰ What Kovács seems to forget, is that the Varangians had managed to impose themselves and keep themselves as Kievan Rus’ rulers with fewer armed men, and William the Conqueror of England defeated Harold I *and* founded the beginnings of centuries of Norman rule with an army that was not more numerous. Nor is it likely that the previous rulers of all or parts of the Carpathian Basin, the Bulgars in the south-east, the Franks in the West, Svatopluk in the north-west, or even the Avars who for some time ruled all these lands, had larger or better armies. We have to keep in mind that Árpád’s warriors were veterans of many campaigns and battles, and were much-feared horsemen who rode horses superior in toughness to those available to most of their enemies.¹¹

In any case, the conquerors of the Carpathian Basin held on to their lands long enough to see the rise of a Christian feudal kingdom under Árpád’s successors in which they could count on the support of large sections of the local population to defend what by then became “their” country. This was so until the 13th century when internal dissention and an extremely powerful

enemy, the Mongols, brought disaster to the country. By then the legacy Árpád's nomadic horsemen had been forgotten and the new Hungarian army of knights in medieval armour was no match for the light cavalry of the Mongols and their Tatar allies.

The new genomic research

We have no idea what Vékony referred to when he talked about the “new evidence” supporting his conclusions that had surfaced while his book was readied for publication. But we know that a few years later such evidence did come to light. This happened when the results of the genomic research mentioned in the introduction of this review began to be published. There were several publications, both academic and popular, that outlined the findings of this project, but we focus mainly on two, the two most detailed and as a result, most important ones. Both of them are in English and both appeared in internationally-renown journals. Both are available on the internet.

The one I would like to discuss first is the study that examined and compared the mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) of conquest-era women with the mtDNA of present-day women in Hungary and the Székelyföld. Mitochondrial DNA is passed on by women to their children, but it is not passed on by men to their offspring. It is, accordingly, a means of studying the blood-lines of women. The researchers, Gyönyvér Tömöry and her associates, extracted mtDNA from two groups. One of these was made up of slightly over one hundred women living in present-day Hungary along with 76 women from the land of the Székelys in Transylvania. The other group was made up of post-conquest age women. In their case mtDNA was extracted from bones of women buried in post-conquest era graves. This group was further divided into two categories. Some bones came from graves of the elite, presumably wives and daughters of the “conquerors.” These graves were identified by the rich grave goods they and adjacent graves contained. The other group represented commoners whose bones were found in graves of the common people, as identified by the lack of rich grave-goods and/or by their location in places reserved for poor people in cemeteries.

When the mtDNA of the modern Hungarian (including Székely) populations were compared to the two groups of the ancient ones, interesting results emerged. It became evident that the variance between the present-day populations' mtDNA and that of the occupants of graves of the elite was considerable, while variance between the mtDNA of people found in common graves and the mtDNA of modern Hungarians was “negligible.” This suggests

that modern-day Hungarian and Székely women are not descendants of the “classical conquerors” as the researchers call the post-895 elite, while no significant distances exist between the mtDNA of women in post-conquest age commoners’ graves and the mtDNA of modern Hungarian and Székely women. Since most of the occupants of commoners’ graves must have been members of the subject peoples (they made up the vast majority of the Carpathian Basin’s population in the 10th century), these findings clearly indicate a genetic link between the region’s pre-conquest population and its present-day people.

The finding that many present-day women in Hungary and the Székelyland are related by blood or may even be directly descended from the common people of the Carpathian Basin in the 10th century is significant. It means that immigration into this part of Europe in the last millennium, however substantial it had been at times, did not result in a complete replacement of the region’s population. “Genetic drift” to use the scientific jargon of genomic research, in the Carpathian Basin in the last eleven centuries was by no means total.

The other article under consideration resulted from the research that examined the DNA of men. In this project the researchers looked for the incidence of Tat polymorphism, i.e. the marker Tat C allele, in the Y chromosomal DNA of two populations: male occupants of 10th century elite graves and modern-day Hungarian and Székely men. It should be noted here that Y chromosomes are passed on by men to their sons and as such are sources of study for male blood-lines. In the case of the ancient DNA, extraction took place from the bones of men resting in “rich” graves identified by grave goods (often weapons, horse harness or even the head or all of a warrior’s horse). In the case of present-day residents, DNA samples were collected from nearly 200 Magyar and Székely men. The results of the investigation were startling. The research revealed that while in the ancient DNA the Tat polymorphism was common, among the modern samples it was virtually absent. Only one man, a Székely, carried the Tat C allele.¹²

The researchers also described the nature of the Y chromosome DNA found in the modern samples. They concluded that their research allowed the classification of today’s Hungarian and Székely male populations into a large number of haplogroups, most of them typically European. These were the groups E, F, G, I K, N3, P and the R1 group, the last one being the most common. They also noted some differences between the Y DNA of men living in present-day Hungary, and those living in Transylvania’s Székely counties. The most notable is the difference between the frequency of R1b1b2

(formerly R1b1c, R1b3) haplotypes in the two populations. In the Hungarian sample this frequency is 15%, while in the Székely it is close to 20%.¹³

It should be explained that frequency for most R1b subclades is much higher in Western Europe, including the German lands, than in Eastern Europe. The greater frequency of the R1b1b2 haplotype among the Székelys is surprising as it was Hungary proper that had received massive influxes of Western and Central European settlers throughout the ages and especially in the three centuries of Habsburg rule. The exception to this was the 12th century when a great many German-speakers (later called the Saxons) immigrated to Transylvania, at the invitation of King Béla III. Is the unusually high frequency of Rb1 types among Székely men due to this particular migration or is it a legacy of their prolonged proximity to western European peoples during the time they lived in western Transdanubia under Frankish rule? It is difficult to say. We do not know the social circumstances of the Székelys' lives during their stay on the western frontiers of the Carpathian Basin. We know however that in the centuries since the arrival of the Saxons in Transylvania the two groups lived in social isolation from each other. They had no common language. The Székelys were agriculturalists while the Saxons were predominantly urban dwellers. Since the Reformation, furthermore, the two peoples belonged to different religions.¹⁴

The most important of the findings of Professor István Raskó's team is emphasized in all of their reports, namely that their research points to the fact that the "conquerors" who arrived in the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century were not numerous. In one of the studies the team concluded that, once they established themselves there, the "invaders" made up only a "small fraction" of that land's total population.¹⁵ We have to keep in mind that this interpretation is not new. More than a century ago, the internationally renowned archaeologist József Hampel (1849-1913) came to the same conclusion, i.e. that the conquering Hungarians were "only a small minority" of the Carpathian Basin's population.¹⁶

Despite the opinion reached by Raskó and his associates that the invaders of 895 were few in numbers, the team did not come to Vékony's conclusion that the conquerors were not Hungarian-speaking. Raskó and his team-mates assumed that, because of their superior position as rulers, the conquerors were able to impose their language — or more exactly one of their languages as they were a federation of tribes of assorted ethnicities — on the vastly more numerous local population. But this is not how societal evolution worked in the 9th and 10th centuries. There was no mass media or schools to implement such a drastic socio-cultural change, even if the conquerors cared what language their subjects spoke. The contemporary examples of the

Scandinavians in north-eastern England, or those in northern France (the future Normans of Normandy), the Varangians in ancient Rus, the Bulgars on the Lower Danube, and somewhat later the Normans in England, speak to this point. In all these cases the conquerors sooner or later “melted into” the more numerous, indigenous populations. True, at least two of them, bequeathed to the ethnic groups they subjugated their name: Rus (Russian) in the first instance and Bulgar (Bulgarian) in the second. The conquerors of the Carpathian Basin did the same: the peoples they conquered became known by their name: Magyar. They also bequeathed the Hungarian nation their first dynasty of rulers, as Vékony pointed out — and much of their mythology, including the myth that they, the conquerors, were genetic founders of the Hungarian nation.¹⁷

The main title of this review article is slightly misleading. It suggests that the Székelys were the ancestors of today’s Hungarians. What really happened, however, according to the evidence outlined in this study, is that the ancestors of today’s Hungarians were known as Székelys before they came to be known to themselves as Magyars, and to others as Ungari, Ungar, Hungarians, etc. The subtitle of the article also has to be qualified. Vékony did not give a new twist to Hungarian prehistory. He gave numerous twists to the old version of the story — which culminated in his new explanation of the “conquest” of the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century.

Few authors of radically novel historical theories received such massive endorsement as a result of new research within a few short years of their passing as Vékony did. This happened when the genomic research project, that had started probably just at the time his book *Magyar őstörténet* went to press, was completed. Only time will tell whether this fortuitous circumstance will be enough to elevate Vékony’s theories from relative obscurity to the limelight. We have to keep in mind that what he had suggested, that Hungarians had lived in the Carpathian Basin before the so-called “Hungarian conquest,” is not new. The people who said so, however, are unknown or forgotten. Not only foreigners such as the Italian paleo-linguist Mario Alinei but Hungarians as well, including the teacher and museum worker Lajos Marjalaki Kiss (b. in 1887) and the writer and amateur archaeologist Ferenc Móra (1879-1934) — and we do not even mention the supporters of the “dual conquest” theory such as Gyula László, his predecessors and followers, since their ideas are not endorsed by Vékony and are not supported by the researches of István Raskó and his team.¹⁸

Old theories, once endorsed and cherished by entire nations, do not die easily. Nevertheless, we hope that, at the very least, this review of

Vékony's book and of the evidence that had surfaced since its author's passing will foster a new debate about the subject.

Prehistory is a complex field of study. It involves numerous disciplines none of which can do much to elucidate the past. As Csanád Bálint warned us, it is full of insurmountable difficulties and innumerable pitfalls.¹⁹ This warning should be kept in mind when we search for new explanations to old, time-honoured theories. This admonition, however, should also apply to the sources that had been the building blocks of the old theories. In the science of genomics we have a new instrument to do this, yet we have to keep in mind that this tool too, has shortcomings and imperfections — that might not be eliminated for some time, perhaps never. Only much new research, in this new field — as well as in the traditional disciplines — can bring us a little closer to the truth.

NOTES

¹ Spencer Wells, *Deep Ancestry, Inside the Genographic Project* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2006). A massive volume of what might be called applied genomics is Stephen Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British* (London: Robinson, 2007). This book suggests that the ancestors of the English were not the Angles, Saxons and Jutes who invaded Britain in the Dark Ages, but West Germanic-speaking migrants who had started to settle in that land before the Roman Conquest.

² The background to the research projects that resulted in the studies on genomics reviewed here is described in Csanád Bálint, "Az ethnos a kora középkorban (a kutatás lehetőségei és korlátai)," in *Századok*, 140, 2 (2006): 277-348. I am indebted to Dr. Bálint for sending me an electronic draft of this study. See also Mihály Szolláth, "Gének és nemzetek" [Genes and nations] in *PR Herald* available at http://prherlad.hu/cikk_print.php?idc=20081109-164345

³ Gábor Vékony was born in the village of Csengőd on 15 December 1944. Csengőd is in the heartland of the Carpathian Basin, on the Great Hungarian Plain. During the final phases of World War II his small settlement was occupied by the Red Army just before he was born, which means that he might have been the first child in the village to come into existence after the passing of the "old order" in Hungary. He finished his grade school in the nearby village of Tabdi, and his secondary schooling in the town of Kiskőrös, which happens to be the birth-place of Hungary's favourite lyrical poet Sándor Petőfi. Vékony continued his studies at Budapest's Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in the field of prehistory and archaeology. After a two-year stint as a museologist in the city of Tata, he returned to ELTE to teach these subjects, and remained in that position until his untimely death in 2004. He was a prolific author. In many of his publications he disagreed with previous commentators as well as his contemporaries, especially in the fields of his specialization: the evolution of Magyar

runic scripts and the ethnogenesis of the Hungarian people. *Magyar őstörténet...* was the last of his volumes to appear in his lifetime, two more of his books saw the light of day after his death. *Magyar őstörténet* has no footnotes. An annotated version of this manuscript had been at one point deposited with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (private information from István Erdélyi).

⁴ One of his books is available in English translation: *Dacians, Romans, Romanians* (Hamilton ON: Corvinus, 2000).

⁵ Traditional interpretations of the Uralic and Finno-Ugric homelands place them further east, in some cases east of the Ural Mountains. László Kontler, *Millennium in Central Europe: A History of Hungary* (Budapest: Atlantisz, 1999), 35-37. Also, László Makkai, "The Hungarians' Prehistory, Their Conquest of Hungary and their Raids to the West to 955," chapter II of *A History of Hungary* ed. Peter F. Sugar, Péter Hanák and Tibor Frank (Bloomington IN.: Indiana University Press, 1990), 8-14. For another, much more detailed treatment of the subject in English see András Róna-Tas, *Hungarians & Europe in the Early Middle Ages: An Introduction to Early Hungarian History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999). For a shorter work by the same author, available in large part online, see "The Migration and Landtaking of the Magyars," *The Hungarian Quarterly*, 37 (winter 1996): <http://www.hungarianquarterly.com/no144/p37.shtml>

⁶ For those not familiar with Hungarian: the sz in the word Székely is pronounced as the s in English (and not as the sz in Polish!), the é as the é in French, the k as the k in English, the e as the e in the English word men, and the ly as the y in the English word yet.

⁷ From about 907 to the early 1040s, for example, the western frontier was not threatened. The arrival of the Székelys in Transylvania is usually dated to the first part of the 11th century. See László Makkai and András Mócsi, *Erdély története, A kezdetektől 1606-ig* [The history of Transylvania from earliest time to 1606] (Budapest:Académiai Kiadó, 1986), 293. The authors of this volume stress that different theories exist regarding the Székelys' early history. The suggestion that the transfer of the by then largely Christian Székely population from Pannonia to eastern Transylvania was motivated more by considerations of internal power politics than external threats is made by József Kolombán-Antal, *Székely honfoglalás* [Székely conquest] (Székelyudvarhely: Litera-Veres, 2008), see the conclusions.

⁸ Vékony's precise words are "a VI-VII század óta," which suggests from 500 a.d. to the end of the 690s, that is, at least 200 years before the conquest. This vagueness about the Székelys' arrival will probably elicit critical remarks, but it is not surprising in view of the lack of evidence. The movements of peaceful settlers did not make much news in the 6th or 7th centuries. Yet, the influx into the Carpathian Basin in the 670s of unidentified peoples is noted even by such stalwart believer of the traditional version of the Hungarian conquest as István Fodor, "A népvándorlás és honfoglalás kora Erdélyben" [The age of the great migrations and the Hungarian conquest in Transylvania], in *Tanulmányok Erdély történetéről* [Studies about Transylvania's history] ed. István Rácz (Debrecen: Csokonai, 1988), pp. 47f.

⁹ István Riba, “Reading the Runes: Evidence of the Dual Conquest?” *The Hungarian Quarterly*, 41 (no. 157, spring 2000), accessed at the website <http://forums.skadi.net/showthread.php?t=105291>

¹⁰ László Kovács, “Remarks on the evaluation of the 10th – 11th century cemeteries of the Carpathian Basin,” in *Research on the Prehistory of the Hungarians: A Review*, ed. Balázs Gusztáv Mende (Budapest: Institute of Archaeology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2005), 352, n. 5. This is a very informative volume, written often in very awkward English. Another critic of Vékony is Ferenc Makk who emphatically disagrees with Vékony’s claim that the Carpathian Basin’s autochthonous population greatly outnumbered the conquerors. See Makk’s review of Vékony’s book in *Századok* 139 (2005): 459-476.

¹¹ On the subject of the superior horses ridden by Árpád’s warriors see the interview with István Raskó in *Élet és Tudomány* 47 (2007): 1478-80, the last part.

¹² According to the article’s authors, this finding, i.e. the virtual absence of this C allele in modern Hungarian populations, is consistent with the findings of several other research teams, which they cite. Tat polymorphism, that is the Tat C allele, is the diagnostic marker of a subgroup (N1c) in the y-chromosomal haplogroup N. On this group see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haplogroup_N_\(Y-DNA\)#N-Tat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haplogroup_N_(Y-DNA)#N-Tat).

¹³ In this connection see the Hungarian report on this research: Erika Bagácsi-Szabó, *et al.*, Genetika és (magyar) őstörténet [Genomics and Magyar prehistory], *Magyar Tudomány*, 169, 10 (Nov. 2008) (table 7 on p. 1212) accessed in June 2009 at <http://epa.oszk.hu/00600/00691/00058/05.html>. This report differs substantially from the reports that the same team of researchers published in English.

¹⁴ In any case the “Saxon” men in Transylvania are more likely to be members of the R1b subclade R1b1b2a1a1. On the matter of the Székelys’ DNA, in the study of mtDNA by Tömöry *et al.*, the researchers conclude that there is more evidence of Asian genetic imprint among Székely populations than among Hungarian ones, suggesting that the Székelys are of even more varied genetic background than the Hungarians. Indeed, an ongoing genomic Y-DNA study of Bukovinan Székely men has so far concluded that this Székely sub-group, which was selected for study because it was believed to be geographically quite isolated, is of very mixed “deep” ancestry. The scores of individuals tested for this study belong to fourteen different haplogroups. I am indebted to Dr. Elizabeth Long, the study’s leader, for her periodic reports to me on this project’s progress.

¹⁵ In the study of the female bloodlines (mtDNAs) by Tömöry *et al.*

¹⁶ Hampel’s work and views are discussed in Péter Langó, “Archaeological Research on the Conquering Hungarians: A Review,” in *Research on the Prehistory of the Hungarians: A Review*, ed. B. G. Mende, *op. cit.* pp. 202-205.

¹⁷ According to Hungarian-American historian Denis Sinor of Indiana University, “Hungarians... have always considered themselves the descendants of the conquerors....” Denis Sinor, “The Outlines of Hungarian Prehistory,” *Journal of World History*, 4 (3): 513-540, accessed online in June 2009 at <http://forums.skadi.net/showthread.php?t=105291>. The list of peoples who conquered lands but failed to

“impose” their language on the local population could go on. It would include some of the Germanic tribes of the age of great migrations during the late Roman period. Especially interesting is the case of the Visigoths. Driven by military events into the Iberian Peninsula, they imposed their rule in the late 460s, accepted Christianity, formed a medieval kingdom complete with a code of laws, and gradually exchanged their Germanic vernacular for the proto-Romance language spoken by their subjects. Their kingdom fell to the Moors in the early 8th century, who were also unable to impose their language on the local population. Another example is that of the Germanic-speaking Lombards who, in the decades after their arrival in northern Italy around 568 a.d., assimilated to the local population.

¹⁸ Mario Alinei’s book, originally published in Italian, is available in Magyar: *Ősi kapocs: A Magyar-etruszk nyelvrokonság* [Ancient link: the Hungarian-Etruscan linguistic relatedness] (Budapest: Allprint, 2005). Alinei places the arrival of a proto-Hungarian population in the Carpathian Basin in the 9th century B.C. Lajos M. Kiss concluded in one of his studies of place-names in the Carpathian Basin that the “population” of this region “at the time of Árpád’s conquest could only have been Hungarian.” See the website <http://www.acronet.net/~magyar/english/96-07/kisshist.html>. For Móra’s comments on this subject, see his work entitled *Igazlátók (karcolatok)* [Truth seers (sketches)] (Budapest: Móra Ferenc könyvkiadó, 1979), pp. 20-31 *in passim*. While the “Double Conquest” theory is not supported by the results of recent genomic research, some of the evidence marshalled to support it also underpins Vékony’s arguments. After Gyula László’s retirement of from active academic life the most articulate supporter of this theory became János Makkay. See his “Embertannal kapcsolatos adatok a ‘kettős honfoglalás’ vitájához” [Anthropological data concerning the debate about the ‘dual conquest’], *Anthropologiai Közlemények*, 35 (1993): 213-219. The research of Raskó and his team also doesn’t support the theory, advanced by Adorján Magyar (1887-1978) and others, that Hungarians have been living in the Carpathian Basin since the end of the last Ice Age but groups of them had migrated to the East. According to these writers, Árpád’s people were the descendents of one of these groups — who had come “home” in 895. On Magyar’s writings see the website http://yamaguchy.netfirms.com/magyar_a/adorjan_index.html

¹⁹ Bálint, *op. cit.* See also Bálint’s essays in the 2008 no. 10 issue of *Magyar Tudomány*, pp. 1166-1187, 1217-1218. Much of this volume is devoted to genomics, with other essays by Gusztáv Mende Balázs, István Raskó and his team, and Péter Langó (co-author). The volume is entitled *Genetika és (Magyar) Őstörténet* [Genetics and (Magyar) prehistory] and is guest-edited by Csanád Bálint.

P.s. Since this review was written I published a summary of my views: “The Lessons of Genomic Research,” *Hungarian Quarterly*, 50 (winter 2009): 50-55. It is available in part at <http://hungarianquarterly.com/no196/8.shtml>