MOHÁCS
500
DIALOGUE

Centuries of Conflict and Connection

1526–2026

Edited by:
Richárd Fodor – Áron Fekete –
– Ahmet Cem Durak – Benedek Alpár

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Editors: Richárd Fodor PhD, Áron Fekete PhD, Ahmet Cem Durak, Benedek Alpár
Reviewers: János Setényi PhD, Barnabás Vajda PhD, N. Zeynep Yelçe PhD, Ela Bozok PhD, András Horváth

In memoriam: György Szabó Bakos

Illustrations: Richard Fodor PhD
Layout design: Brigitta Kaltenecker-Takács

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Dialogue with a Shared Past and a Common Future
Preface

At first glance, it may seem unusual to place a bloody early modern battle and the word *dialogue* in the same title. The Battle of Mohács is five hundred years old in 2026 and the societies of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary and the Ottoman Empire were fundamentally different from our own. We no longer share their circumstances, but we continue to engage with the political, cultural and human consequences of their encounters.

Different communities also have different responsibilities towards the past. Generations of historians have fulfilled their scholarly task by researching, debating and disseminating knowledge about Mohács. The approach of the *quincentenary*, the 500th anniversary, has inspired a new wave of academic studies, source editions, semi-academic publications, podcasts, videos and films that examine the battle from Hungarian, Ottoman–Turkish and wider international perspectives.

The *Mohács 500 Dialogue* project entered this discussion from another direction: the field of secondary-school history education. Rather than asking students merely to learn established accounts of the past, we invited them to investigate historical questions together with those ‘others’ from their textbooks. Our aim was to create a platform in which Hungarian and Turkish students could compare sources, question inherited narratives and discover that a shared past cannot always be reduced to a single national interpretation.

International cooperation concerning shared and debated histories has a long tradition in European and international history education. Franco-German, Scandinavian, Balkan and Central European initiatives have demonstrated that cross-national dialogue can contribute to historical understanding while helping participants recognise and reconsider stereotypes and biases. Our collaboration cannot be compared with these programmes in scale, budget or institutional history, but we hope that it may serve as a modest stepping stone towards further Hungarian–Turkish educational cooperation.

Analysing parallel perspectives and interpretations is one of the main objectives of twenty-first-century history education researched by scholars including the colleagues of MCC Learning Institute for a long period. Multiperspectivity requires students not only to recognise that different accounts exist, but also to explore the political, social, cultural and economic contexts in which those accounts were formed. Taking the perspective of a historical person is therefore both a cognitive and an affective challenge. It asks students to understand the interests, intentions, values and limitations of historical actors without simply projecting present-day assumptions onto them. During the project, this task also required understanding the different historical memories and cultural traditions represented by the participants.

The *Mohács 500 Dialogue* was organised as a year-long twinning programme by MCC Learning Institute, MCC High School Program and TEV İnanç High School. The cooperation began with preparatory meetings in the summer and autumn of 2025, followed by the selection of eight Hungarian and eight Turkish secondary-school students. The sixteen talented participants were placed in four mixed national teams, each responsible for a separate research topic. A series of preparatory workshops introduced the students to the relevant historical contexts, scholarly literature and primary sources. Historians helped the teams formulate feasible research questions, while methodological sessions addressed the basic principles of academic research, source criticism, argumentation, referencing and scientific writing. The students subsequently continued their work online with the assistance of their mentors.

An important stage of the programme was the Hungarian students' study visit to Türkiye during the Spring of 2026. Meetings and workshops held at Sabancı University – which holds academic cooperation protocol with TEV İnanç High School – allowed the teams to work together in person, discuss the progress of their research and become acquainted with the historical and cultural environment of their partners. One of the teams later presented its work at an international conference in Brussels organised by EuroClio. The project concluded with the Turkish students' visit to Hungary, the final student conference and the launch of this volume in Budapest.

The academic publication was not the only outcome of the collaboration. The teams also prepared conference presentations, research posters and other forms of scientific communication. These different tasks were intended to develop what we may call a point of view of historians: the ability to formulate questions, handle sources critically, distinguish evidence from interpretation and communicate conclusions clearly. At the same time, the programme strengthened intercultural, linguistic, digital, collaborative and presentation skills.

The core of the project consisted of four cross-national teams supported by institutional coordinators, secondary-school teachers, university-student mentors, historians and history-education experts. The academic team included great Hungarian and Turkish scholars who assisted the students in identifying relevant literature, evaluating evidence and refining their arguments. Additional reviewers, editors and organisers contributed to the preparation of the conference and the present volume.

Four teams' studies form the central part of the volume and represent four different intersections of Hungarian and Turkish history.

The first team reassesses the Battle of Mohács in 1526 through the problems of communication, command and decision-making. Moving beyond explanations based on a single error or Kingdom of Hungary's individual failure, the study examines the structural asymmetry between the fragmented Christian forces and the more centralised Ottoman military organisation.

The second study turns to the Second Siege of Vienna in 1683 and investigates the role of local armies, diplomats, intermediaries and intelligence networks. It presents information not as neutral data travelling directly to decision-makers, but as knowledge filtered through personal interests, political expectations, translation and rumour.

The third team explores early Turkic–Hungarian connections through different angles. Rather than proposing a simplistic narrative of common ethnic origin, the article examines the long-term cultural contacts and multidirectional exchanges that characterised the Eurasian steppe world.

The fourth student study discusses the Hungarian political emigration to the Ottoman Empire after 1849. By comparing the narratives of Hungarian revolutionaries and Ottoman authors, it demonstrates how exile could be interpreted simultaneously as personal experience, diplomatic problem, political strategy and a means of constructing historical memory.

The volume also contains four contributions from Turkish and Hungarian historians that place the students' work within broader scholarly contexts. These studies address the changing cultural memory of Mohács and the relationship between national narratives, primary sources and academic historiography. A further chapter turns explicitly to history education. It examines the position of history teaching in Hungary and Türkiye and compares how the Battle of Mohács has been represented in school curricula and textbooks. Together, these chapters connect historical research, public memory and classroom practice.

This volume is therefore neither a conventional academic monograph nor merely a collection of school assignments. It is the documented outcome of a collaborative learning process. Its chapters naturally differ in style, scope and level of academic experience, but they are united by a shared attempt to look beyond isolated narratives and to approach the past through evidence, comparison and discussion.

The history connecting Hungary and Türkiye includes wars, occupations, political rivalries and competing memories. It also includes diplomacy, migration, cultural exchange, protection, adaptation and cooperation. Dialogue does not require us to ignore historical conflict or to replace critical inquiry with a comforting story of friendship or kinship. Its purpose is to create the conditions in which difficult histories can be examined together.

We hope that the Mohács 500 Dialogue has offered such an opportunity to its participants.

The Editors
Fodor Richárd, Fekete Áron , Ahmet Cem Durak, Alpár Benedek

Párbeszéd a közös múltról és a közös jövőről
Előszó

Első hallásra talán szokatlannak tűnhet, hogy egy véres koraújkori ütközet és a *párbeszéd* fogalma ugyanabban a címben szerepel. 2026-ban lesz 500 éve annak, hogy a mohácsi csatát megvívták amelyben két impérium, a Magyar Királyság és az Oszmán Birodalom hadseregei néztek farkasszemet. A korabeli emberek világa és életkörülményei sok tekintetben idegenek számunkra, hadi, politikai, kulturális és emberi döntéseik következményeivel azonban ma is együtt élünk.

A történeti múlthoz fűződő viszony minden társadalom számára eltérő felelősséget jelent. Történészek nemzedékei végezték el a rájuk háruló tudományos munkát azzal, hogy Mohács történetét kutatták, vitába szálltak egymás értelmezéseivel és a szélesebb közönség számára is hozzáférhetővé tették eredményeiket. Az 500. évforduló közeledtével azonban új lendületet kapott a téma kutatása és bemutatása. Tudományos tanulmányok, forráskiadványok, ismeretterjesztő kötetek, podcastok, videók és filmek sora vizsgálja a csatát magyar, oszmán–török és tágabb nemzetközi nézőpontból.

A *Mohács 500 Dialogue* projekt a középiskolai történelemoktatás felől kapcsolódott be ebbe a közös gondolkodásba. A résztvevő diákokat nem egyszerűen arra kértük, hogy tanulják meg a múltról kialakult kész történeti elbeszéléseinket. Arra hívtuk őket, hogy közösen kutassanak azzal a „másik oldallal", amellyel korábban többnyire csak tankönyveik lapjain találkoztak. Olyan tanulási környezetet szerettünk volna teremteni, amelyben a magyar és a török diákok összevethetik történelmi forrásaikat, megvizsgálhatják az örökölt narratívákat, és felismerhetik, hogy a közös múlt nem szorítható egyetlen nemzeti értelmezés keretei közé.

A közös, ugyanakkor kontroverzív történelmi kérdéseket feldolgozó nemzetközi együttműködések jelentős hagyományokkal rendelkeznek az európai és a nemzetközi történelemoktatásban. Francia–német, skandináv, balkáni és közép-európai kezdeményezések sora mutatta meg, hogy az országokon átívelő szakmai párbeszéd nemcsak a történelmi megértést segítheti, hanem lehetőséget adhat a résztvevőknek arra is, hogy felismerjék és újragondolják saját sztereotípiáikat és feltételezéseiket. Együttműködésünk természetesen sem léptékében, sem anyagi hátterében, sem intézményi hagyományaiban nem mérhető ezekhez a projektekhez. Bízunk azonban abban, hogy szerény kezdeményezésünk újabb lépést jelenthet a magyar–török oktatási együttműködések elmélyítése felé.

A párhuzamos nézőpontok és eltérő történeti interpretációk vizsgálata a 21. századi történelemtanítás egyik központi törekvése, amelynek kérdéseivel számos kiváló gondolkodó mellett az MCC Tanuláskutató Intézetének munkatársai is hosszabb ideje foglalkoznak. A multiperspektivikus megközelítés nem merül ki annak felismerésében, hogy ugyanarról az eseményről többféle elbeszélés létezhet. A diákoknak azt is fel kell tárniuk, milyen politikai, társadalmi, kulturális és gazdasági környezetben születtek meg ezek az értelmezések.

Egy történelmi szereplő nézőpontjának megértése ezért egyszerre jelent értelmi és érzelmi kihívást. Az elmélyült történelemtanulási folyamat során a diákoknak fel kell tárnia a történelmi személy érdekeit, szándékait, értékeit, lehetőségeit és korlátait. Ezt anélkül kell megtenniük, hogy automatikusan rávetítenék saját korunk gondolkodásmódját és erkölcsi kategóriáit. A nemzetközi projekt keretei között ehhez további jelentős feladat társult: a résztvevőknek az eltérő történelmi emlékezeti és kulturális hagyományokat is meg kellett érteniük.

A *Mohács 500 Dialogue* nemzetközi diákprojekt egy 12 hónapon átívelő iskolai programként valósult meg az MCC Tanuláskutató Intézet, az MCC Középiskolás Program és a törökországi Gebzében működő TEV İnanç Gimnázium együttműködésében. A közös munka 2025 nyarán és őszén előkészítő megbeszélésekkel kezdődött, majd nyolc magyar és nyolc török középiskolás diák kiválasztásával folytatódott. A tizenhat tehetséges résztvevő diák négy vegyes kutatócsoportban dolgozott egy éven keresztül, és minden csapat egy-egy önálló történelmi témát vizsgált.

A közös munkát megalapozó felkészítő műhelyfoglalkozások megismertették a diákokat témáik történelmi hátterével, a vonatkozó szakirodalommal és a rendelkezésre álló elsődleges forrásokkal. Történészek és kiváló mentorok segítették őket abban, hogy világos és jól körülhatárolható kutatási kérdéseket fogalmazzanak meg. A módszertani foglalkozásokon a tudományos kutatás, a forráskritika, az érvelés, a hivatkozás és a tudományos szövegalkotás alapjaival ismerkedtek meg. Ezt követően mentoraik támogatásával, elsősorban online folytatták közös munkájukat.

A program egyik meghatározó állomása volt a magyar diákok és kísérőik 2026 tavaszán szervezett törökországi tanulmányútja. Az Isztambulban, Gebzében és a Sabancı Egyetemen szervezett találkozók és műhelyfoglalkozások lehetővé tették, hogy a csapatok személyesen is együtt dolgozzanak, megvitassák kutatásuk eredményeit és nehézségeit, valamint közelebbről megismerjék partnereik történelmi és kulturális közegét. Egy csoport később az EuroClio brüsszeli nemzetközi konferenciáján is bemutathatta munkáját. A projektet a török diákok magyarországi látogatása, a budapesti zárókonferencia és jelen kötet bemutatója zárja le.

A kiadvány ugyanakkor csak az egyik eredmény, amely az együttműködés révén született. A csapatok konferencia-előadásokat és kutatási posztereket is készítettek, így a tudományos kommunikáció több műfajában kipróbálhatták magukat. A feladatok együttesen egy összetett képességrendszer fejlesztését célozták, amelyet a történelemdidaktika történészi látásmódnak nevez. Ez magában foglalja a történeti kérdések megfogalmazását, a források kritikus vizsgálatát, a bizonyítékok és értelmezések megkülönböztetését, valamint a következtetések világos és meggyőző bemutatásának képességét. A program mindemellett erősítette a diákok interkulturális érzékenységét, nyelvi, digitális és együttműködési készségeit, valamint előadói felkészültségét is.

A projekt középpontjában a négy nemzetközi diákcsoport állt, munkájukat azonban intézményi koordinátorok, középiskolai tanárok, egyetemista mentorok, történészek és történelemdidaktikai szakértők szélesebb közössége támogatta. A szakmai csapat kiváló magyar és török kutatókat fogott össze, akik segítséget nyújtottak a megfelelő szakirodalom feltárásában, a történeti bizonyítékok mérlegelésében és az érvelések pontosításában. A konferencia és kötetünk megszületéséhez lektorok, szerkesztők és szervezők további munkája járult hozzá.

A tanulmánykötet gerincét az említett négy diáktanulmány alkotja. Az írások a magyar és a török történelem négy különböző metszéspontját vizsgálják.

Az első csoport írása az 1526-os mohácsi csatát a kommunikáció, a hadvezetés és a döntéshozatal problémái felől értelmezi. A tanulmány túllép azokon a magyarázatokon, amelyek a vereséget egyetlen téves döntésre vagy egyéni mulasztásra vezetik vissza. Ehelyett a széttagolt keresztény haderő és a központosítottabb oszmán katonai szervezet közötti strukturális különbségeket vizsgálja.

A második tanulmány Bécs 1683-as, második ostromához kapcsolódik, és a helyi katonai erők, diplomaták, közvetítők és hírszerző hálózatok szerepét tárja fel. Megmutatja, hogy az információ nem semleges adatként, változatlan formában jutott el a döntéshozókhoz. Útja során személyes érdekek, politikai várakozások, ferdítések, félreértések és szóbeszédek formálták.

A harmadik csoport a korai türk–magyar kapcsolatokat több különböző irányból közelíti meg. Ahelyett, hogy a két nép történetét a közös etnikai eredet leegyszerűsítő elbeszélésére vezetné vissza, azokat a hosszú távú kulturális érintkezéseket és többirányú kölcsönhatásokat vizsgálja, amelyek évszázadokon keresztül jellemezték az eurázsiai sztyeppe világát.

A negyedik diáktanulmány az Oszmán Birodalomba menekült, 1849 utáni magyar politikai emigráció történetével foglalkozik. Magyar szabadságharcosok és oszmán szerzők elbeszéléseit összevetve mutatja be, hogy a száműzetés egyszerre jelentett személyes sorsot, diplomáciai problémát, politikai stratégiát és a történelmi emlékezet alakításának eszközeit.

A kötetben két történészek által készített tanulmány is helyet kapott, amelyek tágabb tudományos összefüggésekbe helyezik a diákok munkáját. Az írások Mohács kulturális emlékezetének változásait, valamint a nemzeti narratívák, az elsődleges források és a tudományos történetírás kapcsolatát vizsgálják. Egy további fejezet kifejezetten a történelemoktatás kérdéseire fókuszál. Bemutatja a történelemtanítás helyzetét Magyarországon és Törökországban, majd összehasonlítja, miként jelenik meg a mohácsi csata a két ország tanterveiben és tankönyveiben. E fejezetek együtt kapcsolják össze a történeti kutatást, a társadalmi emlékezetet és az iskolai gyakorlatot.

Kötetünk tehát nem hagyományos tudományos monográfia, de nem is pusztán iskolai dolgozatok gyűjteménye. Egy közös tanulási és kutatási folyamat dokumentuma és lenyomata. Fejezetei szükségképpen különböznek egymástól stílusukban, terjedelmükben és a mögöttük álló tudományos tapasztalat tekintetében. Összeköti azonban őket az a közös törekvés, hogy túllépjenek az egymástól elszigetelt történeti elbeszéléseken, és a források, az összehasonlítás és a vita segítségével közelítsenek a múlthoz.

Magyarország és Törökország közös múltjához háborúk, katonai megszállás, politikai vetélkedések és egymással versengő emlékezeti törekvések és hagyományok is hozzátartoznak. Az áldozatok emlékét nem feledve ugyanakkor e történelem része a vándorlás és a menekülés, a kulturális és politikai érintkezés, a befogadás, az alkalmazkodás és az együttműködés tapasztalata is.

A kötetben megjelenő *párbeszéd* igénye nem kívánja elhallgatni vagy elhomályosítani a tényszerű történeti konfliktust, a véres háborúk korát, és nem akarja a kritikus vizsgálódást a barátság vagy a rokonság megnyugtató elbeszélésével helyettesíteni. Célja sokkal inkább, hogy megteremtse a nehéz és megosztó történelmi kérdések közös vizsgálatának feltételeit.

A kötet összeállítása után bízunk benne, hogy a *Mohács 500 Dialogue* kísérlete ehhez hasonló lehetőséget teremtett résztvevői számára.

A szerkesztők

Fodor Richárd, Fekete Áron, Ahmet Cem Durak, Alpár Benedek

Ortak Geçmiş ve Ortak Gelecek Üzerine Diyalog
Önsöz

İlk bakışta, kanlı bir erken modern dönem muharebesi ile diyalog kavramının aynı başlıkta yan yana gelmesi alışılmadık görünebilir. 2026 yılı, Mohaç Muharebesi'nin beş yüzüncü yılıdır. Orta Çağ Macar Krallığı ile Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun toplumları hem birbirlerinden hem de günümüz dünyasından bütünüyle farklıydı. O dönemin insanlarının yaşadığı dünya ve hayat şartları bugün bize birçok bakımdan yabancı olsa da o dönemin askerî, siyasi, kültürel ve insani tercihlerinin sonuçlarıyla hâlâ birlikte yaşamaktayız.

Geçmişle kurulan ilişki, her topluluk için farklı bir sorumluluk anlamına gelir. Tarihçi kuşakları, Mohaç'ı araştırarak, farklı yorumları tartışarak ve ulaştıkları bilgileri daha geniş bir kitleyle paylaşarak üzerlerine düşen bilimsel görevi yerine getirdiler. Savaşın beş yüzüncü yıldönümünün yaklaşmasıyla birlikte konunun araştırılması ve kamuoyuna sunulması yeni bir ivme kazandı. Bilimsel çalışmalar, kaynak yayınları, akademik ve popüler nitelikte kitaplar, podcastler, videolar ve filmler, muharebeyi Macar, Osmanlı–Türk ve daha geniş uluslararası perspektiflerden ele almaktadır.

"Mohács 500 Dialogue" projesi, bu ortak düşünme sürecine farklı bir yönden, ortaöğretim düzeyindeki tarih eğitimi alanından katıldı. Öğrencilerden yalnızca geçmiş hakkında oluşturulmuş hazır tarihsel anlatıları öğrenmelerini istemedik. Onları, daha önce çoğunlukla ders kitaplarının sayfalarında karşılaştıkları "ötekilerle" birlikte tarihsel soruları araştırmaya davet ettik. Macar ve Türk öğrencilerin tarihî kaynakları karşılaştırabilecekleri, kendilerine miras kalan anlatıları sorgulayabilecekleri ve ortak bir geçmişin her zaman tek bir ulusal yorumun sınırları içine sığdırılamayacağını görebilecekleri bir öğrenme ortamı oluşturmayı amaçladık.

Ortak, ancak aynı zamanda tartışmalı tarihsel meseleleri ele alan uluslararası iş birliklerinin Avrupa ve dünya tarih eğitiminde köklü bir geçmişi vardır. Fransız–Alman, İskandinav, Balkan ve Orta Avrupa girişimleri, ülkeler arasında kurulan mesleki diyaloğun yalnızca tarihsel kavrayışı geliştirmekle kalmadığını, katılımcıların kendi kalıp yargılarını, önyargılarını ve varsayımlarını fark edip yeniden değerlendirmelerine de yardımcı olabileceğini göstermiştir. Bizim iş birliğimiz elbette ölçeği, maddi imkânları veya kurumsal geçmişi bakımından bu programlarla karşılaştırılamaz. Bununla birlikte, mütevazı girişimimizin Macar–Türk eğitim iş birliklerinin daha da geliştirilmesi yönünde atılmış yeni bir adım olmasını ümit ediyoruz.

Birbirine paralel bakış açılarını ve farklı tarihsel yorumları incelemek, 21. yüzyıl tarih eğitiminin temel amaçlarından biridir. Bu meseleler, birçok seçkin araştırmacının yanı sıra MCC Learning Institute çalışanlarının da uzun süredir üzerinde çalıştığı konular arasındadır. Çoklu bakış açısına dayalı yaklaşım, aynı olay hakkında birbirinden farklı anlatıların var olduğunu fark etmekle sınırlı değildir. Öğrencilerin aynı zamanda bu anlatıların hangi siyasi, toplumsal, kültürel ve ekonomik koşullar içerisinde ortaya çıktığını da araştırmaları gerekir.

Tarihsel bir karakterin bakış açısını anlamak bu nedenle hem bilişsel hem de duyuşsal bir güçlük taşır. Derinlikli bir tarih öğrenme sürecinde öğrencilerin tarihsel aktörlerin çıkarlarını, amaçlarını, değerlerini, imkânlarını ve sınırlarını ortaya çıkarmaları beklenir. Öğrencilerden, bunu yaparken günümüzün düşünce biçimlerini ve ahlaki kategorilerini geçmişe kendiliğinden yansıtmaktan kaçınmaları gerekir. Uluslararası projenin çerçevesi içinde bu göreve bir başka önemli boyut daha eklenmiştir: Katılımcıların birbirinden farklı tarihsel bellekleri ve kültürel gelenekleri de tanımaları ve anlamaları gerekmiştir.

"Mohács 500 Dialogue," MCC Learning Institute, MCC High School Program ve TEV İnanç Lisesi iş birliğiyle yürütülen, on iki aya yayılan uluslararası bir kurumsal ortaklık ve araştırma programı olarak hayata geçirildi. Ortak çalışma, 2025 yılının yaz ve sonbahar aylarında yapılan hazırlık toplantılarıyla başladı; ardından sekiz Macar ve sekiz Türk lise öğrencisi seçildi. On altı yetenekli öğrenci, Macar ve Türk katılımcılardan oluşan dört karma araştırma grubunda bir yıl boyunca birlikte çalıştı. Her ekip, bağımsız bir tarihsel araştırma konusu üstlendi.

Ortak çalışmanın temelini oluşturan hazırlık atölyelerinde öğrenciler, ele aldıkları konuların tarihsel bağlamları, ilgili akademik literatür ve mevcut birincil kaynaklarla tanıştırıldı. Tarihçiler ve danışmanlar, açık, sınırları belirlenmiş ve uygulanabilir araştırma soruları geliştirmelerinde öğrencilere rehberlik ettiler. Yöntem çalışmalarında bilimsel araştırmanın, kaynak eleştirisinin, tarihsel kanıt kullanımının, akademik tartışmanın, atıf yapmanın ve bilimsel yazımın temel ilkeleri ele alındı. Öğrenciler daha sonra danışmanlarının desteğiyle çalışmalarını büyük ölçüde çevrim içi olarak sürdürdüler.

Programın en önemli aşamalarından biri, Macar öğrenciler ve onlara eşlik eden öğretmenlerin 2026 baharında Türkiye'ye gerçekleştirdikleri çalışma ziyaretiydi. TEV İnanç Lisesi'nin akademik protokolü bulunan Sabancı Üniversitesinde düzenlenen toplantılar ve atölyeler, ekiplerin yüz yüze çalışmalarına, araştırmalarının ilerleyişini ve karşılaştıkları güçlükleri tartışmalarına, ayrıca ortaklarının tarihsel ve kültürel çevresini daha yakından tanımalarına imkân sağladı. Ekiplerden biri daha sonra çalışmasını EuroClio tarafından Brüksel'de düzenlenen uluslararası bir konferansta da sunma fırsatı buldu. Proje, Türk öğrencilerin Macaristan ziyareti, Budapeşte'de gerçekleştirilen öğrenci konferansı ve bu kitabın tanıtımıyla tamamlanmaktadır.

Bu yayın, iş birliğinin sonuçlarından yalnızca biridir. . Ekipler konferans sunumları ve araştırma posterleri de hazırlayarak bilimsel iletişimin farklı türlerinde kendilerini ifade etme fırsatı buldular. Bu görevlerin tamamı, kuramsal tarih eğitimi çalışmalarında "tarihçinin bakış açısı" olarak adlandırabileceğimiz kapsamlı bir beceri bütününü geliştirmeyi amaçladı: araştırma soruları oluşturabilme, kaynakları eleştirel biçimde inceleyebilme, kanıt ile yorumu birbirinden ayırabilme ve ulaşılan sonuçları açık ve ikna edici biçimde sunabilme. Program aynı zamanda öğrencilerin kültürlerarası duyarlılıklarını, yabancı dil becerilerini, dijital yeterliklerini, iş birliği yapma kapasitelerini ve sunum becerilerini de geliştirdi.

Projenin merkezinde dört uluslararası öğrenci ekibi yer almakla birlikte, onların çalışmalarını kurumsal koordinatörler, lise öğretmenleri, üniversite öğrencisi mentorlar, tarihçiler ve tarih eğitimi uzmanlarından oluşan daha geniş bir topluluk destekledi. Akademik ekip, öğrencilere uygun literatürü belirleme, tarihsel kanıtları değerlendirme ve ileri sürdükleri görüşleri geliştirme konusunda yardımcı olan seçkin Macar ve Türk araştırmacılardan oluşuyordu. Hakemler, editörler ve organizatörler de konferansın ve elinizdeki kitabın hazırlanmasına önemli katkılar sağladı.

Bu kitabın temelini söz konusu dört öğrenci takımının çalışmaları oluşturmaktadır. Bu çalışmalar, Macar ve Türk tarihinin kesiştiği dört farklı noktayı ele almaktadır.

İlk ekip, 1526 Mohács Muharebesi'ni iletişim, komuta ve karar alma süreçlerinde yaşanan sorunlar üzerinden yeniden değerlendirmektedir. Çalışma, Macaristan Krallığı'nın yenilgisini tek bir yanlış karara veya bireysel bir ihmale bağlayan açıklamaların ötesine geçmekte; parçalı durumdaki Hristiyan kuvvetleri ile daha merkezî bir yapıya sahip Osmanlı askerî teşkilatı arasındaki yapısal farklılıkları incelemektedir.

İkinci çalışma, 1683 yılındaki II. Viyana Kuşatması'na yönelmekte ve yerel askerî kuvvetlerin, diplomatların, aracıların ve istihbarat ağlarının rolünü araştırmaktadır. Çalışma, bilginin karar alıcılara değişmeden ulaşan tarafsız bir veri olmadığını göstermektedir. Bilgi, aktarım süreci boyunca kişisel çıkarlar, siyasi beklentiler, çeviriler, çarpıtmalar, yanlış anlamalar ve söylentiler tarafından şekillendirilmiştir.

Üçüncü ekip, erken dönem Türk–Macar ilişkilerini farklı açılardan ele almaktadır. Çalışma, iki halkın tarihini ortak etnik kökene dayanan basitleştirilmiş bir anlatıya indirgemek yerine, Avrasya bozkır dünyasını yüzyıllar boyunca şekillendiren uzun süreli kültürel temasları ve çok yönlü etkileşimleri incelemektedir.

Dördüncü öğrenci çalışması, 1849 sonrasında Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'na sığınan Macar siyasi göçmenlerin tarihini ele almaktadır. Macar devrimcilerin ve Osmanlı yazarlarının anlatılarını karşılaştıran çalışma, sürgünün aynı anda kişisel bir deneyim, diplomatik bir sorun, siyasi bir strateji ve tarihsel belleğin şekillendirilmesinde kullanılan bir araç olarak yorumlanabildiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Kitapta ayrıca öğrencilerin çalışmalarını daha geniş bilimsel bağlamlara yerleştiren dört tarihçi makalesi bulunmaktadır. Bu yazılar, Mohács'ın kültürel bellekte değişen yerini ve ulusal anlatılar, birincil kaynaklar ile akademik tarih yazımı arasındaki ilişkiyi ele almaktadır. Bir başka bölüm ise doğrudan tarih eğitimi meselelerine yönelmektedir. Bu bölüm, Macaristan ve Türkiye'de tarih öğretiminin konumunu incelemekte ve Mohács Muharebesi'nin iki ülkenin öğretim programları ile ders kitaplarında nasıl temsil edildiğini karşılaştırmaktadır. Bu bölümler birlikte ele alındığında tarihsel araştırma, toplumsal bellek ve sınıf içi uygulamalar arasında bir bağ kurmaktadır.

Dolayısıyla bu kitap ne geleneksel anlamda bir bilimsel monografi ne de yalnızca okul ödevlerinden oluşan bir derlemedir. Bu çalışma, ortak bir öğrenme ve araştırma sürecinin belgesi ve izidir. Bölümler, üslupları, kapsamları ve yazarlarının bilimsel deneyim düzeyleri bakımından doğal olarak birbirinden farklıdır. Bununla birlikte, bu kitaptaki çalışmaların hepsini birbirinden kopuk tarihsel anlatıların ötesine geçme iradesi ve tarihe kaynaklar, karşılaştırma ve tartışma yoluyla yaklaşma yönündeki ortak çaba bir araya getirmektedir.

Macaristan ile Türkiye'yi birbirine bağlayan ortak geçmişte savaşlar, askerî işgaller, siyasi rekabetler ve birbiriyle yarışan bellek gelenekleri de bulunmaktadır. Yaşanan acıları ve verilen kayıpları göz ardı etmeksizin, bu tarihin göçü ve ilticayı, kültürel ve siyasi temasları, sığınma ve kabulü, uyum sağlamayı ve iş birliğini de kapsadığını hatırlamak gerekir.

Bu kitapta amaçlanan diyalog, tarihsel çatışmaları veya kanlı savaş dönemlerini sessizliğe gömmeyi ya da üzerlerini örtmeyi amaçlamamaktadır. Eleştirel tarihsel incelemenin yerine dostluk veya akrabalığa ilişkin teselli edici bir anlatı koymak da hedeflenmemektedir. Amaç, zor ve ayrıştırıcı tarihsel meselelerin birlikte incelenebileceği koşulları oluşturmaktır.

"Mohács 500 Dialogue" girişiminin, katılımcılarına böyle bir imkân sunmuş olduğunu ümit ediyoruz.

Editörler

Richárd Fodor, Áron Fekete, Ahmet Cem Durak, Benedek Alpár

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MOHÁCS
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DIALOGUE

Communication, Decision-Making, and the Asymmetry in the Battle of Mohács, 1526: A Reassessment on the Eve of the Quincentenary

Authors: *Egemen Onur Unan*[1], *Júlia Nagy*[2], *Rüya Atalağ*[1], *Zalán Hajdu*[2]
Advisors: *Ahmet Cem Durak*[1], *Péter Korpai*[2], *Zeynep Nevin Yelçe, PhD*[3]

[1] TEV İnanç High School
[2] Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC)
[3] Sabancı University

Abstract

Few battles in European history have generated such a politically charged body of interpretation as the Battle of Mohács (29 August 1526), which has long occupied a central place in Hungarian national memory and Ottoman imperial historiography. While the 500th anniversary of the Battle provides an occasion to move beyond mythologized narratives on both sides, it invites a reassessment of the conflict to examine the campaign through the structural and institutional lenses that modern military and political history allow. As in the broader corpus of medieval warfare, command hierarchies and systems of communication constituted the primary structural determinants shaping the conduct and outcome of military engagements, forming the underlying basis upon which tactical and strategic decisions were executed. This article proposes that the battle's outcome was substantially shaped by those structural asymmetries in distinct ways of communication and decision-making mechanisms between the Ottoman and Hungarian systems. Drawing on the principal Hungarian eyewitness and near-contemporary accounts alongside Ottoman campaign records and modern secondary scholarship, the article argues that the Ottoman Empire's victory resulted from a centralized command structure across strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Conversely, the Kingdom of Hungary was fatally compromised by fragmented political authority, dysfunctional mobilization, and the subordination of military judgment to aristocratic political pressure. The article examines István Brodarics' Historia Verissima and György Szerémi's Epistola de Perditione Regni Hungarorum—a compilation of oral testimonies assembled decades after the event—and the Ottoman primary source Mohaçname, together with the campaign records, as products of the communication systems under analysis. Their contrasting characteristics illuminate the institutional asymmetry that shaped the outcome at Mohács.

Keywords: The Battle of Mohács, Ottoman Empire, Kingdom of Hungary, military communication, decision-making

INTRODUCTION

In 1526, an Ottoman imperial army numbering in the tens of thousands crossed the Drava River and advanced northward into the heart of the Kingdom of Hungary, threatening to push both nations into the Battle of Mohács, which would reshape the political geography of Central Europe for centuries to come. The Battle continued to inform national and imperial historiography long after the last participants had passed away. As rumors of war spread across the region, the young King, Louis II, who was twenty years old, was left to face Suleiman I at the head of an army assembled under serious political tensions. On the afternoon of August 29, a military engagement lasting no more than two hours took place in the marshy plains south of the town of Mohács. By nightfall, as the spoils of the campaign became apparent, the result was that the Hungarian army had ceased to exist as a military force, while the Ottomans had found a way to march beyond. On top of this duality in the outcomes of the opposing sides, the Battle tended to be understood as a polysemic symbol, and it entered historical records almost immediately as something greater than itself: A national wound, a catastrophe, an epic. Hungarian historiography has, for generations, approached the 29th of August 1526 through the lens of national tragedy, listing the failures, misfortunes, and internal and external betrayals that led the kingdom to the brink of collapse. On behalf of the Ottoman commemorative and literary traditions, the same encounter was presented as an inevitable expression of imperial momentum and divine will. However, paradoxically, all these transcultural labels have obscured what the mechanisms of this war could most instructively reveal to the present day.

As the quincentenary of the Battle of Mohács approaches in 2026, there is both an opportunity and an obligation to look beyond the narratives we have inherited, to examine questions about the causes of the Battle, and to investigate the institutional mechanisms that allowed one side to act consistently while the opposing side was incapable of coordinating its actions. In this article, we will examine the Battle and answer the question: How did the various aspects of communication and decision-making mechanisms affect the outcome of the Battle of Mohács? On this basis, this paper examines the asymmetry between the Ottoman and Hungarian military communication and command systems in the weeks and days prior to the campaign and on the ground during the Battle of Mohács as its primary subject of analysis. Before addressing the relevant query, it bears noting that the factors influencing the outcome at this juncture were beyond the Ottomans' mere numerical superiority or greater experience. We will talk about the language barriers of the multilingual Christian army that fought the Ottomans that day. Their miscalculations about the size and power of the Sultan's army and the flawed command structure led to the defeat of the Hungarians and the death of King Louis II. While this commonly cited argument in the current literature regarding the course of the war holds validity to a certain extent, the fundamentally different organizational structures with which the two armies entered the conflict constitute a notable distinction, as exemplified by different methods of information transmission, different authority structures, and the processes of translating decisions into action. To advance this argument, the article examines primary sources produced within different organizational cultures, evaluating how their narratives reflect contrasting military perspectives on the same events.

István Brodarics, the royal chancellor who survived the Battle and wrote an account of the events immediately afterward in his *Historia Verissima* ("The Truest History") and György Szerémi's *Epistola de Perditione Regni Hungarorum* ("Epistle on the Fall of the Kingdom of Hungary"), compiled from oral testimonies gathered ten years after the Battle of Mohács, constitute the Hungarian side's narrative framework. When viewed together, these sources illuminate the kingdom's concerns, political constraints, and how authority was negotiated and sometimes dissolved under pressure, providing a comprehensive perspective on the historical context of the nation and the events surrounding the Battle of Mohács. The writings of Kemalpaşazâde, titled *Mohaçname* ("Account of Mohács"), and an anonymous

Ottoman military campaign diary that recounts the Battle from the vantage point of the Turkish troops were studied as works that provide the foundation for understanding the Ottoman Empire's decision-making, command, and oversight mechanisms. Within the scope of relevant primary sources and accompanying literature, this analytical study is examined through three comparative frameworks: the communication mechanisms through which both sides coordinated their forces and sought external support; the role of leadership in shaping operational behavior in decisive moments; and the strategic decision-making processes by which both parties determined the timing and manner of combat. The findings indicate that evidence across all three dimensions points to a structural imbalance between the opposing sides. From an institutional perspective, this imbalance shaped the outcome of the battle, while its consequences were ultimately borne by the combatants at Mohács.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

The development of Hungarian–Ottoman studies as an international scholarly field has facilitated increasingly sophisticated comparative research. International conferences, collaborative research projects, and multilingual publications have brought together scholars working in Hungarian, Turkish, English, German, and other languages. Institutions such as the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Turkish Historical Society (*Türk Tarih Kurumu*), and international research centers have supported collaborative research and scholarly exchange. The establishment of specialized journals such as *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, *Tarih Dergisi*, and *Turkish Historical Review* has provided venues for the publication of research bridging national historiographical traditions. Digital humanities initiatives, including online databases of Ottoman documents, digital editions of chronicles, and GIS mapping of Ottoman campaigns, have created new research possibilities and facilitated international collaboration. The earliest stratum of Mohács historiography emerged from the pens of those who witnessed or narrowly escaped the disaster. István Brodarics' Historia *Verissima de Conflictu Hungarorum cum Turcis ad Mohach* (1527), composed within months of the battle by the royal chancellor who survived the carnage, established an interpretive framework that would prove remarkably durable. Brodarics' account, while invaluable as an eyewitness testimony, functioned simultaneously as political intervention, an attempt to explain the inexplicable and to assign responsibility for a catastrophe that had decapitated the Hungarian political elite (Szakály, 1977). György Szerémi's *Epistola de Perditione Regni Hungarorum*, compiled decades later from oral testimonies, supplemented Brodarics with a more explicitly moralizing framework, interpreting Mohács as divine punishment for Hungarian sins. These foundational texts established what might be termed the "catastrophist" interpretation of Mohács, which would dominate Hungarian historical consciousness for centuries. However, the documentary legacy of these early modern chroniclers reveals as much through its silences as through its explicit content. As Fodor (2015) has observed, the fragmentary, testimonial character of Hungarian sources contrasts sharply with the systematic, bureaucratic record-keeping of Ottoman campaign documentation, a disparity that itself illuminates the institutional asymmetries between the two polities. The work of Pál Fodor occupies a unique and pivotal position in Mohács historiography, bridging Hungarian and Ottoman scholarly traditions through a masterful command of sources in both languages and through sustained engagement with historiographical debates in both national contexts. In his seminal work, he demonstrates that Ottoman strategic objectives in Hungary were more limited and pragmatic than either triumphalist Ottoman chronicles or catastrophist Hungarian narratives suggested. Rather than seeking to conquer and directly administer all of Hungary from the outset, Ottoman policy aimed at neutralizing Hungary as a potential threat, establishing client relationships with Hungarian factions, and securing the northern frontier of Ottoman possessions in the Balkans. This interpretation fundamentally challenged both the Ottoman narrative of inevitable conquest and the Hungarian narrative of unprovoked aggression, suggesting a more complex calculus of strategic interests, miscalculation, and unintended consequences. One of his earlier works, *The establishment of Ottoman rule in Hungary: From Mohács to the conquest of Buda* (2009), situates Mohács within an balanced analytical framework, arguing that Ottoman expansion into Central Europe ultimately proved unsustainable and that the battle's long-term consequences were more ambiguous than triumphalist narratives acknowledged. Fodor's Turkish-language publications and his extensive collaborations with Turkish historians have made his interpretations central to Turkish as well as Hungarian historiography (Fodor, 2009). Researchers such as Erhan Afyoncu have examined how the battle has been remembered and commemorated in

Turkish contexts, revealing that while Mohács has not occupied the central place in Turkish national memory that it has in Hungarian consciousness, Ottoman and Turkish representations of the battle have nevertheless reflected changing political ideologies and national narratives (Afyoncu, 2009). Work on Ottoman victory monuments, architectural patronage commemorating the campaign, and literary representations of Süleyman's Hungarian expeditions has illuminated how Ottoman political culture constructed and disseminated narratives of imperial triumph. Studies of later Ottoman historical writing, including how seventeenth- and eighteenth-century chroniclers treated the Mohács campaign, reveal evolving Ottoman understandings of the empire's relationship with Europe and changing assessments of Süleyman's reign.

Ottoman chronicle traditions developed a parallel but fundamentally different narrative architecture. Kemalpaşazâde's Mohaçname and the anonymous campaign diary presented the battle as a relatively straightforward demonstration of Ottoman military superiority and righteous conquest, embedded within the broader trajectory of imperial expansion under Süleyman I (Emecen, 2010; Uzunçarşılı, 1988). These accounts, while attentive to tactical details and campaign logistics, largely elided questions of contingency or strategic uncertainty, preferring instead to emphasize the inevitability of Ottoman victory. The Ottoman historical tradition, as İnalcık (2009) has demonstrated, was rooted in a well-established bureaucratic culture of record-keeping that produced accounts less concerned with assigning moral blame than with documenting the administrative and logistical achievements of the imperial war machine. Thus, the contrast between the anguished immediacy of Brodarics and the administrative matter-of-factness of Ottoman campaign diaries illuminates the very structural asymmetries that would prove decisive on the battlefield, a point that has only recently received sustained scholarly attention (Ágoston, 2014). This divergence in documentary practice reflects deeper differences in political culture and institutional capacity, differences that extended from the scribal office to the battlefield itself, as Uzunçarşılı (1988) noted in his comprehensive treatment of Ottoman military organization.

András Kubinyi's meticulous reconstruction of late medieval Hungarian political structures reveals the extent to which the kingdom's defeat stemmed not from contingent failures of military leadership but from deeper structural weaknesses: a chronic fiscal crisis, aristocratic factionalism, the weakening of royal authority, and the inability to implement military reforms comparable to those undertaken by the

Ottomans (Kubinyi, 2006). Kubinyi's research on the Hungarian political elite in the decades before Mohács demonstrated systematic dysfunctions in governance, taxation, and military organization that made defeat virtually inevitable regardless of battlefield contingencies. His work shifted analytical attention from the battlefield itself to the decades of political dysfunction that preceded it, arguing that Mohács was lost not on 29 August 1526 but in the council chambers and diets of the preceding generation. This approach aligns with broader trends in European historiography emphasizing long-term structural factors over individual agency and contingent events, trends associated with the Annales school in France and with historical sociology in general. Géza Pálffy's extensive research on the Kingdom of Hungary within the Habsburg composite monarchy has further nuanced our understanding of Mohács's consequences, demonstrating that even after 1526, Hungarian political elites retained considerable agency and that the battle, rather than ending Hungarian statehood, inaugurated a complex tripartite division that would characterize Hungarian history for the next century and a half (Pálffy, 2009). Pálffy's work exemplifies a broader trend in contemporary Hungarian historiography toward embedding Mohács within comparative frameworks of early modern state formation, composite monarchies, and confessional conflict, rather than treating it as an exceptional national tragedy. His scholarship has been enriched by extensive archival research in Hungarian, Austrian, and Ottoman collections, revealing the extent to which contemporary political actors understood the battle's consequences in terms substantially different from those imposed by later nationalist interpretations. Pálffy's research has also illuminated the sophisticated political strategies employed by Hungarian nobles navigating between Habsburg and Ottoman spheres of influence in the decades after Mohács, challenging simplistic narratives of Hungarian passivity or victimhood.

Gábor Ágoston's research has fundamentally reshaped the scholarly understanding of Ottoman military effectiveness through sustained attention to technological adaptation and institutional innovation. In his seminal article *Firearms and Military Adaptation: The Ottomans and the European Military Revolution, 1450–1800*, Ágoston (2014) challenged longstanding assumptions about Ottoman technological stagnation, demonstrating instead that the empire maintained technological parity with European powers well into the seventeenth century and in some domains achieved superiority. His analysis of Ottoman firearms production, artillery deployment, and the institutional mechanisms supporting military innovation reveals that Ottoman success at Mohács rested on systematic investment in gunpowder technology and the administrative infrastructure necessary to manufacture, transport, and employ artillery effectively in campaign conditions. The Janissary corps, central to Ottoman combined-arms tactics at Mohács, has received extensive scholarly attention as the archetypal early modern standing infantry force. Sylvia Ducharme's examination of Janissary recruitment, training, and military culture illuminates how the *devşirme* system of converting Christian youths into elite Muslim soldiers created a professional military force whose discipline, firearms training, and battlefield cohesion gave Ottoman armies decisive advantages over opponents relying on feudal levies or short-term mercenary contracts (Ducharme, 2001). The Janissaries' effectiveness derived not from individual martial prowess alone but from institutional structures that produced soldiers socialized from youth into military service, trained in coordinated firearms tactics, and integrated into a broader imperial system that rewarded military achievement.

Recent scholarship has witnessed important methodological innovations that promise to refine the understanding of Mohács through interdisciplinary approaches integrating traditional historical analysis with archaeological investigation, spatial analysis, and scientific methodologies. The groundbreaking study by Pap et al. (2025) represents perhaps the most significant archaeological contribution to Mohács scholarship in decades. Through systematic excavation and the analysis of the five mass graves associated with the battle, combined with osteological examination, DNA analysis, and historical contextualization, this research has provided unprecedented material evidence regarding the composition of forces engaged at Mohács, patterns of combat trauma, and the immediate aftermath of the battle. The findings confirm the multinational character of the Hungarian-led coalition forces while also revealing details about age profiles, health status, and the types of injuries sustained, which literary sources cannot provide. This archaeological turn in Mohács studies builds upon earlier Hungarian scholarship that established rigorous empirical foundations for understanding the battle. András Kubinyi's influential 1981 article "A mohácsi csata és előzményei" ("The Battle of Mohács and its Antecedents)" represents a landmark in Hungarian historiography, systematically analyzing the political, military, and fiscal developments in the decades preceding 1526 that created the conditions for Hungarian defeat (Kubinyi, 1981). Kubinyi's attention to structural preconditions rather than battlefield contingencies established interpretive frameworks that subsequent scholars have refined but not fundamentally displaced. The integration of archaeological evidence with this tradition of structural analysis exemplifies how contemporary Mohács scholarship increasingly transcends disciplinary boundaries, bringing together historians, archaeologists, geneticists, and geographers in collaborative research that yields insights unavailable to any single disciplinary approach.

Recent historiography has increasingly emphasized the importance of communication systems, information flows, and decision-making processes in determining early modern military outcomes, reflecting broader methodological trends in military history that emphasize institutional and organizational factors over narrow focus on battlefield tactics or great commanders (Parker, 1988). The work of scholars such as Mária Lupescu Makó on Hungarian royal administration and Geoffrey Parker on military communications in early modern Europe has opened new analytical possibilities for understanding how information asymmetries and divergent command cultures shaped the Mohács campaign. This scholarship aligns with research on multilingual communication, translation practices, and the coordination of composite armies, which has illuminated challenges facing early modern military coalitions. These challenges are particularly acute for the Hungarian army at Mohács, which included Hungarian, Croatian, Czech, and mercenary contingents with diverse command cultures and languages.

METHODOLOGY

Campaign diaries and other recordings of events regarding the preparation and discourse of the Battle of Mohács from both sides were used as primary sources and referenced the most, as they provided a direct explanation of the events. However, considering contemporary historians' perspectives on recording such events may be biased due to various factors, other Western sources were also included in the research process.

The most significant primary source from the Hungarian perspective is István Brodarics, who was the royal chancellor of King Louis II, as he was among the few authors who directly experienced the events, and many later accounts were based on his work. Nevertheless, his narrative must be approached with caution, as it was shaped by the contemporary political context. At the time of writing, the kingdom was undergoing a contested succession following the double election of 1526, and Brodarics sought to present events in a manner that was sympathetic to the position of János Szapolyai. In addition to primary sources, the research incorporates modern scholarly literature, including contemporary historical monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, and recent historiographical studies. These modern sources were used to contextualize the 16th-century material, support interpretative analysis, and engage with current academic debates surrounding the topic. The integration of both early modern chronicles and modern academic scholarship enables a more balanced and critically informed reconstruction of historical developments.

The Ottoman primary sources analyzed in this study are Kemalpaşazade's *Mohaçname* and the aforementioned campaign diary. These primary sources appear to have a relatively subjective approach to the Battle. However, this biased perspective does not distort the credibility of the narrative of the discourse of the Battle but rather portrays its outcome in a manner that glorifies the Sultan and the Ottoman Empire. In Kemalpaşazâde's *Mohaçname*, the preparation and process of the military campaign are explained along with the reasonings that legitimatize the campaign from an Ottoman perspective. Similar to the idealization of the King in Hungarian contemporary sources, the Sultan's deeds and previous victories of the Ottoman forces were mostly mentioned in elaborate and complex language (contrary to parts where the language used to explain campaign preparations and processes was relatively simple). One of the most frequently mentioned figures alongside the Sultan is Louis II, containing several references that depict him as *küffar-ı füccarın muazzamlarından* ("one of the greatest of infidels") (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, pp. 201–202), allowing the campaign to be legitimized through Islamic grounds. Another aspect that is highlighted in the references to Louis II is that he is a young and inexperienced leader due to his age and lack of battle experience. Compared to *Mohaçname*, the campaign diary, written by the scribes of the Sultan, appears to be objective in portraying the preparation and the aftermath, along with the discourse of the Battle.

To provide a clearer analytical framework, this study examines both the Hungarian and Ottoman armies through several key aspects, allowing for a comparative analysis of the multifaceted processes surrounding the Battle. These aspects were selected to enable a detailed comparison of the decision-making mechanisms of both forces, taking into account their development before the

Battle as well as the consequences of decisions made on the battlefield. The following three analytical frameworks are used to examine the Hungarian and Ottoman forces and are operationally defined and elaborated below.

MILITARY CAPACITY AND STRUCTURE

Military capacity and structure refer to the general military aspects that affected the internal dynamics of both Hungarian and Ottoman forces. In this context, while the primary aspect analyzed is the weapons inventory and relative capacity to operate, the diverse structure within the army is also addressed, as the interactions between these diverse groups affect the communication mechanisms of both forces greatly. The types of weaponry used by both forces are analyzed and compared, potentially linking decisions regarding military capacity to the outcome of the Battle. Diversity within the armies is addressed similarly, with an explanation of why soldiers were deployed from different regions or ethnicities. Furthermore, the motivations of soldiers and their perspectives towards the Battle are also evaluated.

COMMUNICATION MECHANISMS

Communication mechanisms refer to which internal or external bodies the Hungarian and Ottoman authorities interacted with before and (if any instance was recorded) during the Battle and in what context, which may have affected the discourse or the outcome of it. This perspective aims to address whether the governments communicated with regional forces or external ones for military support or any other specific purpose. By identifying the motivations behind forming such dialogues and analyzing the responses in each dialogue, the study can include how dialogues formed by the Hungarian and Ottoman forces ultimately affected the outcome of the Battle.

COMMAND PERSONALITY AND OPERATIONAL OUTCOMES

Command personality and operational outcomes refer to how the accumulated experiences and capabilities of the military generals or personnel leading both Ottoman and Hungarian forces affected the behavior of the army during the Battle. By analyzing the command capability of each force's leading personnel, the study is able to form a correlation between the outcome of the Battle and the dynamics of both sides. In this section of the analysis, the social and political factors underlying the authority of both leaderships are examined, with particular attention to how military capacity was connected to perceived legitimacy.

STRATEGIC DECISION-MAKING

Strategic decision-making refers to long-term tactical decisions regarding the Battle, including army size, choice of weaponry, distribution of communication and intelligence devices, and logistic planning, battle strategy, and instantaneous decisions made throughout the discourse of the Battle. With the analyzation of the different battle strategies adopted by both sides, the aim was to form a clear connection between success in battle and swift decision-making.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE OPPOSITION AND TERRAIN

Knowledge of the opposition and terrain refers to the general knowledge both forces gathered through the campaign regarding any aspect of the Battle. While this type of information can be acquired through intelligence networks, information acquired before the campaign also serves as a great advantage. With the analyzation of the forces' knowledge regarding the enemy and the battlefield, the aim was to understand the reasons behind both forces adapting different strategies.

ANALYSIS

Throughout the preparation of the campaign, detailed directives were sent to different Ottoman provinces (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, p. 201). While Anatolia and Rumelia provinces were instructed to prepare for the campaign, the *Melikü'l ümera* ("General Commander") of the forces in Ottoman Arab provinces was commanded to maintain order in the respective region to prevent any possible uprising or defend the region from any attacks, mainly from the Safavid forces, specifically in regions such as Egypt, Damascus, and Aleppo (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, p. 201). This series of commands sent to the Arab provinces during the preparation of the campaign signals the Ottoman Empire's effort to balance regional powers and prevent political destabilization from occurring. As Ottoman military command is consolidated in the Balkan region to lead the campaign (Pálosfalvi, 2018, p. 425), forming strong communication with forces in the Arab provinces highlights aspects of the comprehensive and thorough process behind the preparations for the campaign in order to maintain order.

Within the army, most soldiers' motivations to participate were based on the fact that the people of the Ottoman Empire viewed taking part in campaigns as highly prestigious. This was most probably due to the fact that the soldiers could personally acquire the defeated opposition's valuable belongings and treasures, along with captives distributed to victorious soldiers as war booty (*ganimet*) (Feridun Ahmed Bey, 1858, p. 10); it is mentioned that this is lawful according to Islamic law (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, pp. 191–192). Therefore, it can be inferred that the soldiers participated in the campaign and followed commands without any major uprising within the army due to the great financial advantage that the position brought.

Aside from financial advantages, due to the campaign being undertaken as a religious duty (*gaza*) in terms of broadening the scope of the Ottoman dynasty based on the principles of Islam (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996 pp. 191–196), the soldiers also had principles that they could use as ethical bases. Combined with the Sultan's strong religious and hierarchical authority, this ensured that Ottoman soldiers remained highly obedient to the orders of their commanders. (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, pp. 191–193). Furthermore, the army was led in a strict manner, with the campaign diary mentioning that soldiers faced harsh punishments when not obeying the commands of the leadership (Feridun Ahmed Bey, 1858, pp. 2, 6).

During the preparations for the Battle, it is stated that İbrahim Pasha and Bâli Bey decided upon a different strategy of advancement (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, pp. 288–290). Differing from the customary battle arrangement (*resm-i kadîm*), where the forces directly charge to the enemy from the front and cover the rear with baggage and heavy camp material (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, p. 289), it was decided that the army should allow the Hungarian forces to pass through. One of the primary reasons for this decision is mentioned by Bâli Bey in the text, where it is mentioned that the usual Hungarian battle method included fully armored soldiers (Feridun Ahmed Bey, 1858, p. 16), allowing the army to break through whatever they strike (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, pp. 288–290). Therefore, the traditional battle method was not viewed as a sensible decision as blocking the rear would leave no space for soldiers to avoid the heavy charge and reposition.

When tailoring a strategy to counter the attack of the Hungarian army, İbrahim Pasha and Bâli Bey decided to remove heavy baggage and camp material from behind, allowing a direct passage that the Hungarian attack could pass through (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, p. 290). This way, the Ottoman army had an opportunity to avoid direct impact and then surround the enemy, avoiding heavy losses. To further stretch the scope of attack and prepare for additional support, *akıncı* forces were also kept aside (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, p. 290).

In *Mohaçname*, throughout the discourse of the Battle, repeated references to swords, shields, bows, lances or spears, maces, armor, helmets, and banners provide insight into the weaponry of the Ottoman forces (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, pp. 292–296). In addition, Ottoman forces were armed with Janissaries and cannons, which, according to the text, were some of the primary factors affecting the outcome of the battle, since the Hungarian forces could not break through them during the attacks (Feridun Ahmed Bey, 1858, p. 16). *Mohaçname* states that 2,000 Janissary musketeers accompanied İbrahim Pasha during the Ottoman attack, together with 150 cannon wagons (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, p. 238). It also mentions an additional 4,000 *tüfekli* soldiers, 150 cannon wagons, and nine ranks assigned to the Rumelian force (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, p. 293, n. 2). Furthermore, Ali's narrative refers to a further 12,000 Janissaries, although this figure does not appear in Kemalpaşazâde's main narrative. (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, p. 230, n. 4).

The positioning of the Ottoman forces appears to have received little attention in the Hungarian order of battle, representing an important strategic difference between the two armies. One Ottoman tactical feature was the implementation of a previously established system referred to as the "Crescent Formation" in the emerging Western literature, a military formation used primarily by Nomadic communities, which greatly affected the discourse of the Battle.

On the day of the Battle, the Ottoman forces initially held their position (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, p. 290). Following the Hungarian army's initial assault, they appeared to disperse briefly (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, p. 292). This maneuver represented a departure from the conventional Ottoman order of battle and resembled the aforementioned Crescent Formation. The Ottoman army subsequently regrouped into two commands (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, p. 297): one under İbrahim Pasha, Beylerbeyi (Governor-General) of Rumelia and the other under the Sultan together with the Anatolian forces (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, pp. 297–303), before resuming the engagement.

The main determinant behind the rapid recovery of the Ottoman forces directly correlates to the Crescent Formation. One aspect of the Crescent Formation that possibly prevented the complete dispersion of the army upon the initial strike of the Hungarian forces is its autonomous structure. With each wing being led by separate commanders, the three wings of the Ottoman forces could advance simultaneously on the battlefield, which implies that the defeat or retreat of one group does not directly affect the general command chain.

Furthermore, the effect the respective generals (Kemalpaşazâde, 1996, p. 297) had on the decision-making mechanism of the Ottoman army throughout the Battle may be considered an important factor that mitigated the risk of the disintegration of the army. Upon assembling the campaign army from forces gathered from various provinces, the participation of *Akıncılar Beyleri* ("Frontier Lords")—commanders experienced in frontier warfare and familiar with the region—suggests that the Ottoman forces employed a pragmatic approach to battlefield decision-making, particularly in contrast to the factors previously identified in relation to King Louis II in *Mohaçname*.

A common misconception is calling the army „Hungarian" because it was far more diverse. One of the principal difficulties was the linguistic diversity within the forces, particularly between native troops and foreign mercenaries, which hindered effective communication. This communication breakdown resulted in chaos along the battle lines.

Pap's research on the mass graves at Mohács supports the fact that there were foreign soldiers among the battle lines. This was a combination of German and

Polish mercenaries, Czech and Croatian nobles, and the Hungarian commanders. Kubinyi mentions that an important foreigner is Lénard Gnoienski, a mercenary commander of 1500 Polish soldiers (Pap et al., 2025). This means that even in the higher levels of the military, there were foreigners, which made decision-making in the upper circles far more complicated and much slower. This diverse army created significant challenges for the leadership; they struggled to relay commands effectively between units. The Hungarian army faced significant structural and organizational challenges.

The leadership of the Christian army made several crucial errors in decision-making, even before entering the battle. First, it is important to note the poor timing of the attack. For example, contemporary accounts describe that before the battle, the commanders saw that the formations of the Ottomans were far from complete, so a decision was made to attack before they had the chance to defend themselves. But because the orders had to be communicated across different language groups, the process was clumsy and slow; the opposing side reacted fast, and the tactic was unsuccessful. This shows how difficult it was to keep an army this diverse in line and how it changed the dynamics of the battle.

Internal pressure was also a factor that made the leaders' situation more complicated and difficult. Regarding the overall mood amongst the lines, István Brodarics in *Historia Verissima* claims that many soldiers openly made threats to turn against their own commanders if an attack was not launched that day. This phenomenon can be partly explained by the soldiers' perception of their own strength. In this context, the soldiers likely experienced a heightened sense of collective power and confidence, which contributed to their impatience and willingness to force a decision.

Hungarian military commanders also considered constructing a wagon fort (szekérvár) ahead of the coming engagement, but this resulted in additional arguments, claims Hungarian historian Jenő Gyalókai. The leadership drew heavily on the precedent of the Battle of Muhi (1241), where a similar defensive wagon formation had proven catastrophic. The wagons, rather than serving as a shield, had become a cage, denying the Hungarian horsemen the freedom to maneuver, upon which their entire fighting doctrine depended. The final decision was to not build one because it could not fit into the tactics of the army, and they had to make a decision immediately, since they were short on time and had to react fast. This phenomenon led the Christian army to launch the initial attack, as it was the only effective way to utilize their heavy cavalry.

The army also had a weak leadership structure. The King did not have the same kind of authority as the Sultan. He was young and inexperienced, and other nobles were questioned and distrusted him. András Kubinyi mentions that the king decided to give Pál Tomori, Archbishop of Kalocsa, and György Szapolyai the position of commander-in-chief. Kubinyi notes that even the appointed leaders expressed doubts about their ability to command such a large force effectively. Also, the Christian army had to face another problem: the soldiers were not familiar with each other, unlike the Ottoman army, which had been cooperating for much longer.

The Hungarian side also faced difficulties in mobilization and lacked sufficient knowledge of the Ottoman army. Additional troops failed to assemble due to ongoing agricultural obligations as well as widespread disillusionment following the suppression of the Dózsa György peasant uprising, which further weakened the kingdom's capacity to field a united and effective army.

In this sense, communicational failure was not limited to the battlefield but extended to the gathering and interpretation of strategic information before the engagement. These differing viewpoints demonstrate that the outcome of the battle cannot be explained with a single factor but with a series of mistakes. While primary sources such as István Brodarics emphasize immediate failures in leadership and coordination, modern historians tend to situate these issues within a broader structural context. This suggests that communication breakdowns and flawed decision-making were not merely accidental but deeply rooted in the political and military organization of the Hungarian Kingdom.

Brodarics also notes that the Hungarian army was unable to fully mobilize, as until the last moment, it remained unclear which route the Ottoman forces would take in their advance against the Kingdom. The military leadership was divided, unable to determine whether the Ottomans would attack through Transylvania, advance along the Danube, or approach from the direction of Croatia. As a result of this uncertainty, Szapolyai János was unable to arrive in time for the battle and reportedly received conflicting orders. Consequently, the Hungarian forces were significantly smaller than they might otherwise have been.

The Christian army had to face another difficulty: their own flawed judgment of the Ottomans. The Hungarian leadership lacked reliable and timely information about Ottoman troop movements, their strength, and their tactical organization. This deficiency directly influenced decision-making, as strategies were formed on incomplete or inaccurate assumptions.

What they did not calculate was the technology that the attacking army had. This intelligence would have helped them better prepare for the threat and fight back with more refined tactics. It was not the kind of force they were used to; the Sultan's power was far greater than anticipated. The Ottomans rolled 300 cannons to Mohács. In contrast, the Hungarians had 81. They had a special tactic of positioning these cannons: the *tabur cengi* or "wagon fort," which was a fortified spot on the battlefield for artillery, and they used them perfectly: the cannons effectively broke up the charging cavalry and slowed them down so that the infantry could separate and neutralize them. It is important to note that the Hungarian army possessed artillery of a high standard, comparable to that of other European powers. However, due to the marshy terrain of the battlefield, this artillery could not be deployed effectively, which represented a significant disadvantage for the Hungarian forces. On the Ottoman side, a significant part of the infantry was the Janissaries, the elite force of the Sultan's personal army. The Janissary Corps is credited with being first organized by Sultan Murad I (1362–1389), whose aim was to supply infantry against the Byzantine Empire after 1377. The first Janissaries were slaves and prisoners from the Sultan's court, writes Sylvia Ducharme. Later, some of them were trained from childhood and were considered professionals of warfare. Their training and discipline gave them a considerable advantage against even heavy cavalry units. Ágoston Gábor further explains that the Ottomans deployed around 4,000 Janissaries on the battlefield. Their tactic was to arrange 9 consecutive rows (*darbzen*) of gunners (*tüfekendaz*), who would then fire in coordinated volleys, row by row.

The Ottoman Empire was centralized around the authority of the Sultan. This kind of control made sure that the army was a well-organized force. Ogier de Busbecq writes in detail about how the Sultan was seen. His wisdom and sense of strategy made him a strong and experienced leader in warfare. He ensured that individuals were appointed to positions for which they were well-suited, creating a clear and efficient chain of command. His commanders were experienced and capable of responding effectively in combat situations. Furthermore, the soldiers had developed strong familiarity and cohesion through years of service and frequent military campaigns together. They spoke the same language, so each command was clear to all. Of course the large Ottoman army had non-Turkish speakers, but the high command and elite forces spoke the same language, making sure that the most important parts of the army operated flawlessly. Compared with the Christian forces, the Ottoman army demonstrated a higher degree of cohesion and coordination.

According to Pál Fodor, the defeat at the Battle of Mohács should be seen not as the result of a single poor decision but rather as the outcome of deep-rooted structural weaknesses within the Hungarian Kingdom. He highlights how the weakening of royal authority and the growing independence of the nobility seriously undermined centralized decision-making, which in turn disrupted military coordination. This fragmentation of communication across different army units was compounded by the feudal nature of the military system, making rapid mobilization and unified strategic planning extremely challenging. This explains why key forces, such as those led by Szapolyai János, arrived too late. From this perspective, the communication breakdowns and poor choices before and during the fight were not accidental but directly linked to a deteriorating political and military framework. This reinforces the idea that failures in communication and leadership at Mohács were systemic problems tied to the broader institutional decline of Hungary.

Brodarics recounts that, before the battle, there were deliberations about whether the King should refrain from personally participating in the Battle. However, the army strongly objected, insisting that the king lead them into battle in accordance with established tradition. An alternative proposal was put forward to dress another individual in the King's armor as a decoy but was ultimately rejected out of concern that it would provoke the soldiers' anger. Before the battle broke out, some of the commanders in the Hungarian encampment noticed a unit of Ottoman scouts behind a ridge. They suspected that this unit wanted to cut off their escape route and trap the king. They wanted to pursue them, so without a better choice, they sent the king's bodyguards to deal with them. Sadly, they underestimated the size of the unit, and the force sent after them soon was massacred. This left the king unprotected, and when the lines crumbled, without a better option, the king, with his servant, took a dangerous route through the nearby marsh. Sources say that after swimming and wading through shallow waters, the king fell off his horse and drowned in the shallow, muddy part of a river. The weight of his armor likely prevented him from staying afloat. A couple of days later, the news about the King's death reached the capital and the royal court. A search party later found the young king's body.

DISCOURSE OF THE BATTLE	
Ottomans:	**Hungarians:**
The 28th: Rest day ▪ Execution of 2 rebellious soldiers ▪ Preparation for announcements	The 28th: ▪ Forming the main lines ▪ Building a cannon nest ▪ Waiting for further reinforcements
The 29th: ▪ Slow advancements; deployed in front of the Hungarian camp ▪ First strike from the Hungarian side (cannons are fired) ▪ While the Ottomans are trying to process the attack, another round of cannon fire happens ▪ Rumelian forces were disarrayed; some consulted the sultan ▪ Yahyan & Bosnian troops split the army into two ▪ Full-scale janissary assault (3 to 4 times) ▪ Retreat of the Hungarian Army ▪ Stayed on standby all night	The 29th: ▪ Spotted advancing Ottoman teams ▪ Canons were fired, and war horns were sounded ▪ Changed formation from defense to offense ▪ Cavalry tries to advance ▪ Janissary forces counter the advancing Hungarians ▪ Main lines are scattered or retreated ▪ The King's whereabouts are unknown
The 30th: ▪ Prisoners were gathered /2000 prisoners/ ▪ The Sultan toured the battlefield	The 30th: ▪ The Ottomans captured and kill prisoners /1500 prisoners/ ▪ Ottoman forces pillaged nearby villages ▪ The Ottomans speared several prisoners for additional information

Table 1. Discourse of the Battle

CONCLUSION

The defeat at Mohács resulted at multiple levels of the Christian army's organization. The communication failures, flawed decision-making, and misjudgments about Ottoman forces were closely connected, creating a situation in which even reasonable choices led to disastrous outcomes. The army's multilingual composition made clear communication difficult, weakening the chain of command and slowing responses to changing battlefield conditions. Opportunities—such as attacking the Ottomans before their formation was complete—were lost or poorly executed, allowing the enemy to regain the initiative. These communication problems directly affected strategic and tactical decisions. Because orders were delayed or misunderstood, the army could not reorganize or adapt once battle began. Simultaneously, Christian commanders underestimated Ottoman military power, failing to grasp the significance of Ottoman artillery, the wagon fortress system, and the professionalism of the Janissaries. This miscalculation encouraged aggressive tactics based on outdated assumptions, placing a fragmented force against a centralized and technologically advanced army. Leadership tied these factors together.

The Ottoman command structure, centered on Sultan Suleiman's unquestioned authority, ensured that communication, discipline, and execution functioned as a unified system. In contrast, Hungarian leadership was weakened by political rivalry, limited royal authority, and lack of shared experience. Although Pál Tomori brought military competence, he could not overcome the structural problems of an army assembled too quickly and divided by language and loyalty. The death of King Louis II represents the final consequence of these interconnected failures—not only a result of battlefield chaos but a symbol of collapsed leadership and coordination. The immediate power vacuum accelerated Hungary's defeat and long-term fragmentation, leaving the kingdom without political or ecclesiastical leadership and unable to organize its defense. In a broader sense, Mohács demonstrates the decisive importance of communication, intelligence, and cohesive leadership in warfare—a lasting reminder that military strength depends not only on numbers or courage, but on the ability to integrate information, authority, and action into a functioning whole.

DISCUSSION

The evidence assembled across the three analytical frameworks of "military capacity and structure", "communication mechanisms", and "command personality and operational outcomes" converges on the outcome at Mohács being determined by fundamental asymmetries in institutional capacity to coordinate military action under the pressures of campaign and combat. The Hungarian-led coalition forces possessed experienced commanders, high quality artillery comparable to that of other European armies, and a tradition of effective heavy cavalry. Yet they were fatally compromised by structural weaknesses that manifested at every level of military organization. Linguistic fragmentation prevented effective coordination among Hungarian, Croatian, Czech, and German-speaking contingents. Political divisions undermined unified command authority and left the young king subject to aristocratic pressure and unable to impose strategic discipline. Inadequate intelligence-gathering mechanisms resulted in critical miscalculations about Ottoman strength, routes of advance, and tactical capabilities. The absence of centralized administrative infrastructure meant that mobilization remained incomplete, and forces arrived piecemeal rather than as a coordinated whole. These were not isolated failures but represented systematic manifestations of a kingdom whose political fragmentation and institutional underdevelopment prevented the effective translation of available military resources into battlefield effectiveness. The Ottoman forces, by contrast, operated within a centralized command structure supported by a sophisticated bureaucratic apparatus for campaign planning, logistics, intelligence gathering, and tactical coordination. The rapid recovery from the initial Hungarian assault, the effective deployment of combined-arms tactics integrating artillery, the Janissary infantry, and cavalry, and the maintenance of command coherence across autonomous wings of the army all reflect institutional capacities developed through generations of administrative systematization and military campaigning.

The primary sources themselves reveal these asymmetries through their contrasting documentary characteristics. Brodarics offers an anguished and fragmentary eyewitness testimony. Szerémi compiled scattered oral memories years after the battle. Both reflect a political system lacking mechanisms for systematic documentation and institutional memory. However, Ottoman campaign records and chronicles exhibit the standardized forms and administrative regularity of established bureaucratic practice. This study has approached sources not merely as repositories of factual information but as artifacts of the communication systems that produced them. This helped reveal how documentary practices themselves constituted elements of the institutional asymmetry that determined military outcomes. The findings suggest that explanations emphasizing contingent factors mistake symptoms for causes. The youth of Louis II mattered, certainly. Szapolyai's failure to arrive proved consequential. The decision to attack immediately rather than await reinforcements shaped the battle's course. But these contingencies unfolded within and were shaped by deeper structural contexts. Weakened royal authority left the King vulnerable to pressure from soldiers and magnates, while political fragmentation prevented coordinated mobilization. Institutional weaknesses made effective intelligence gathering, strategic planning, and tactical coordination difficult or impossible, regardless of individual leadership qualities. Thus, the Battle of Mohács emerges not as a catastrophic accident or a moment when everything suddenly went wrong. Rather, it appears as the revelation of institutional realities that had developed over decades, which would have shaped outcomes regardless of specific battlefield contingencies. Future research might extend this analysis comparatively to other early modern military encounters between institutionally asymmetric forces. Such work could test whether similar patterns of communication breakdown and command fragmentation characterized other defeats of composite armies. It might also examine how lessons from Mohács were or were not incorporated into subsequent military–administrative reforms in Habsburg Hungary.

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Exile and Historical Memory Competing Narratives of Hungarian Revolutionaries in the Ottoman Empire (1849–1850)

Authors: *Anett Karin Imre[2], Defne Karaman[1], László Péter Csoma[2], Arda Turgut Çapraz[1]*
Advisors: *Ahmet Cem Durak[1], Benedek Alpár[2]*

[1] TEV İnanç High School
[2] Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC)

Abstract

After the demise of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848–1849, a number of major personalities of the Revolution chose to seek refuge in the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, exile became their reality as well as a political notion. In this context, this paper analyses the works of Lajos Kossuth, Lázár Mészáros and Ahmed Cevdet Pasha, in order to determine to what extent the narratives of Hungarian emigration can be seen as a way of remembering the past through personal testimonies and to what extent they help form the memory of the events. However, the three texts discussing the same historic period differ in their approaches to the subject. Kossuth's letter, for example, does not see exile as the conclusion of a failed revolution but as a way to ensure the continuation of Hungarian affairs and the political importance of the author. Refugees in the Ottoman Empire are considered a result of Austrian and Russian expansion in the works of Ahmed Cevdet Pasha. Finally, Mészáros' journal is a different kind of personal narration, with his history of transmission and proven authenticity. His testimony is essential in that it does not strive to glorify the Hungarian exiles but rather underlines their uncertainty and disunity in their lives. Thus, the three narratives not only enable us

to view these memories of exile in remembrance but also allow us to evaluate the failure of the Revolution and the sustained political identity of its followers.

Keywords: Hungarian Revolution of 1848–1849, Ottoman Empire, Hungarian émigrés, Exile, Memoir

INTRODUCTION

The defeat of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848–1849 forced many Hungarian political leaders and revolutionaries into exile, becoming a turning point in both Hungarian and Ottoman political history. A large number of these refugees sought refuge in the Ottoman Empire, where their presence quickly became an international diplomatic issue. Austria and Russia demanded their expulsion, while the Ottoman government faced the challenge of balancing external pressure and internal needs. As a result, Hungarian political exile became a highly politicized event significantly affecting the relationship between the major powers of Europe throughout the 19th century. This period is reported both in Ahmed Cevdet Pasha's and the Hungarian leader of the Revolution, Lajos Kossuth's memoirs. This research demonstrates how the exile of Hungarian revolutionaries to the Ottoman Empire was interpreted differently in the memoirs of Ahmed Cevdet Pasha and Lajos Kossuth, revealing contrasting political perspectives and perceptions of diplomacy during the aftermath of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848–1849.

WHY DID THE HUNGARIAN REFUGEES CHOOSE TO FLEE TO THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE?

Hungarian refugees fled to the Ottoman Empire during the early 1850s after the defeat of the 1848-1849 Hungarian Revolution. After Russian and Austrian forces crushed the Revolution in August 1849, leaders faced arrest and execution. Lajos Kossuth led thousands into exile in 1849. Many groups crossed into Ottoman lands within weeks (Farkas, 2012).

There are several reasons why they chose to emigrate to the Ottoman Empire, one of which was political expediency. The Ottoman state and Sultan Abdülmecid I. rejected Austria and Russia's extradition demands, instead offered protection when other states refused. Ottoman law allowed political asylum unlike many other states at the time. The empire followed a long practice of sheltering political exiles which dated back centuries and applied regardless of religion. The Ottoman Empire's geography was also highly advantageous for Hungarian refugees, as the land routes through the Balkans led directly into Ottoman territory. Hungarian refugees settled in places such as Kütahya between 1849 and 1851. The state provided housing and stipends. Lajos Kossuth arrived to Ottoman lands in September 1849. Later on, Józef Bem accepted service in the Ottoman army under the name Murad Pasha in 1849. Sultan Abdülmecid I. issued direct protection orders during the same year. In summary, Hungarian refugees chose Ottoman Empire due to safety, legal protection, and political shelter in a moment of extreme risk (Csorba, 2007; Farkas, 2012).

HOW DID THE HUNGARIAN LEADERS SEE THE EMIGRATION?

Most political leaders did not perceive emigration as a form of exile; rather, they regarded it as a continuation of the Revolution through alternative means. Therefore, the experience of exile was interpreted not as political defeat but as an opportunity to sustain resistance internationally. Lajos Kossuth provides a significant example of this perspective. He viewed exile as a strategic phase of active resistance against the Habsburg Empire and believed that Hungarian independence could still be achieved through determination and international diplomacy. In this way, Kossuth actively promoted the Hungarian cause abroad. His objective was to transform the Hungarian struggle into an issue of international concern. As Csorba (2021) argues, Kossuth relied on newspapers, personal networks, and numerous public speeches to disseminate his ideas and mobilize support. This approach represented a relatively innovative and effective strategy of political communication and advocacy (Rácz, 2016; HunReview, 2022).

PRIMARY SOURCES AND METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

Ottoman Turkish primary sources are an integral component of this research, helping us understand the consequences of the Hungarian War of Independence. Nevertheless, the use of nineteenth-century bureaucratic jargon and Ottoman Turkish creates certain limitations and difficulties for direct interpretation. The materials analyzed consist of the memoirs of Ahmed Cevdet Pasha and Lajos Kossuth: Cevdet Pasha's Tezakir represents the perspective of a politician integrated inside the imperial administration whereas Kossuth's memoir articulates a viewpoint influenced by political exile. These sources indicate that Hungarian migrants were perceived not solely as a demographic concern but also in the context of wider political issues. These sources provide only limited insight into exile from the refugees' perspective; therefore, they are supplemented by secondary literature, as discussed in the following chapters.

LITERATURE REVIEW
THE EXPERIENCE OF HUNGARIAN REFUGEES

What does political emigration mean and what is its purpose? As Kunz (1973) says, the motivation behind emigration is involuntary exit. According to Shain (1989), political emigration's purpose is to avoid persecution or even death. He argues that emigration is not only about escaping danger but also about continuing political influence.

Who was Perczel, and why was he important in the Revolution? Perczel was a radical general and political figure during the 1848 revolution. According to Farkas (2012), during the War of Independence, he had many conflicts with known politicians, especially Kossuth. Perczel criticized Kossuth's leadership and his choices, and he thought that the loss was Kossuth's fault. After the surrender of Világos, Csorba (2007) investigates how Perczel and his brother fled to the Ottoman Empire, where he was given a role in the military; his research points out that Kossuth and Perczel's rivalry was not due to emigration but started during the Revolution.

The Turks treated Hungarian refugees as guests and prisoners at the same time. Why is that? According to Farkas (2012), the Hungarian refugees were treated as guests and prisoners at the same time. The Turkish officials and guards knew what the refugees went through, so they treated them well but constantly reminded them that they are captives, not guests.

A NOTE ON PERCZEL'S MEMOIR

Due to the limited availability of secondary literature on Lázár Mészáros' memoirs, this section relies on secondary sources related to Perczel Mór's journal. Mészáros' memoirs have received little scholarly attention and have remained largely neglected in previous research; therefore, related historiographical discussions and contextual studies have been incorporated where appropriate.

STATE, DIPLOMACY AND MIGRATION IN TURKISH SCHOLARSHIP

The Turkish perspective interprets the aftermath of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848–1849 through a state-centric lens, positioning the refugee crisis within the broader framework of significant issues such as diplomacy and imperialism. In this sense, Gümüş (2010) and Binici (2018) may not be viewed as addressing the influx of Hungarian refugees into the Ottoman Empire as a humanitarian crisis but rather as a case study for examining the empire within the framework of nineteenth-century European geopolitics. Gümüş (2010) may be interpreted as addressing the Ottomans' refusal to extradite the refugees, despite pressure from Austria and Russia, as an issue of political authority and prestige. Additionally, the crisis can be contextualized by examining prior instances of political asylum involving the Ottomans and the Hungarians, establishing continuity in the political behavior of the Ottomans as a state that can be analyzed through the lenses of both geopolitics and history.

The administrative structures of the Ottoman Empire are intricately connected to the depictions of Hungarian refugees, particularly within this broader context. Turkish secondary literature views settlement and integration processes as advancements within this administrative framework. Geniş (2020) shows that refugees moving to the center of the empire and taking on different military and professional roles is always described as part of a well-planned administration framework.

Csorba's (2002) study provides a more comprehensive understanding of Hungarian émigrés by focusing on their experiences and processes within the Ottoman Empire. Csorba's work does not focus on diplomacy; his analysis shows that the settlement of Hungarian refugees was not a passive process. Instead, they were spread out around the empire, fulfilling their military and professional obligations while remaining politically active in exile. The analysis also shows that the group of émigrés was not united but had varied political viewpoints. This shows that their political activity was not only due to their exile, it was also about continuing the fight. Thus, Hungarian emigration not only affected the Ottoman empire but was also linked to political events in Europe.

Kızılkaya's study (2020) on Ottoman migration policy also shows a similar concern for the institutional and conceptual aspects of this issue, as it also looks at the legal aspects. Kızılkaya does not consider migration policy in terms of population or government issues but rather through the lens of Islamic law and the concepts of *hijra* and *amān*. From this point of view, migration is a planned and organized process in which rules are to be followed in a legal and moral manner and settling down is a part of these rules. This perspective also corroborates the idea that, apart from being an administrative framework, the Ottoman Empire also represents a political framework in which the migration policy was shaped based on a rich conceptual heritage.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative comparative methodology to examine memoirs produced by participants of the 1848–1849 Hungarian Revolution, with particular emphasis on how experiences of exile in the Ottoman Empire were represented, interpreted, and politically framed. The analysis treats memoirs not as transparent historical records, but as constructed narratives shaped by individual perspective, political positioning, and the retrospective organization of memory.

The primary source base consists of memoirs written by individuals in exile directly involved in, or closely connected to, the revolutionary events and their aftermath. The central source is the journal of Lázár Mészáros, written during his exile in Kütahya between 1849 and 1850. This text is considered a key reference point due to its contemporary aspect and its recognition as authentic by the civil court of Szatmár County. Its value lies in its immediate reflection of exile conditions and political uncertainty, offering a grounded perspective on Hungarian refugee life within the Ottoman Empire.

To broaden its analytical scope, the study also incorporates the memoirs of Lajos Kossuth, Mór Perczel, and Ahmed Cevdet Pasha. These sources were selected to ensure a structured contrast between different political, cultural, and institutional viewpoints. Kossuth's writings represent the perspective of a leading revolutionary statesman engaged in shaping international perceptions of the Hungarian cause. Perczel's memoir provides an additional internal revolutionary viewpoint, allowing for comparison within the Hungarian political–military elite. In contrast, Ahmed Cevdet Pasha offers an Ottoman administrative and intellectual perspective, documenting events from within the imperial framework. Together, these texts create a multi-perspectival foundation for analyzing how exile was understood and narrated across different actors and contexts.

The methodological core of the study is close reading, applied systematically to each memoir. This involves a detailed examination of narrative structure, language use, and rhetorical strategies, with particular attention to how exile is constructed as a lived and political experience. The analysis focuses on identifying how authors describe displacement, how they interpret the role of the Ottoman Empire, and how they situate exile within broader political narratives of legitimacy, defeat, and survival. Rather than isolating factual content, the method prioritizes the interpretive dimensions of the texts.

Building on this textual analysis, comparative methodology is employed to identify convergences and divergences across the selected memoirs. This comparison makes it possible to trace how similar historical events are narrated differently, depending on authorial position and intended audience.

Secondary literature is used to contextualize these primary sources within established historiographical debates concerning the 1848–1849 Revolution, transnational exile networks, and Ottoman–Hungarian relations in the mid-nineteenth century. This scholarly framework assists in distinguishing between contemporaneous observation and later retrospective interpretation, while also highlighting the political and ideological dimensions embedded in personal memoir writing.

Within this analytical design, Mészáros's journal functions as an important anchoring source due to its relative proximity to the events described. While not treated as entirely neutral, it provides a valuable point of comparison against which more political or retrospective narratives can be assessed. Its detailed depiction of exile life also contributes to a deeper understanding of the everyday realities experienced by Hungarian refugees in the Ottoman Empire.

Overall, this methodology integrates qualitative textual analysis with systematic comparative interpretation in order to explore how memoirs of the revolutionary period construct, negotiate, and contest meanings of exile, political legitimacy, and historical memory.

DISCUSSION

THE LEGITIMACY OF MÉSZÁROS LÁZÁR'S JOURNAL

Lázár Mészáros' journal (Mészáros, 1999), written between 1849 and 1850 during his exile in Kütahya, has been formally recognized as an authentic historical manuscript by the Civil Court of Szatmár County. This legal confirmation was issued at a session held on 14 April 1871, which certified that the manuscript was written by Mészáros himself. The decision was signed by Minister János Tróéh and deputy notary Elek Hegedüs. As the former Minister of War of independent Hungary, Mészáros' authorship carries significant historical weight, and this official validation provides an important institutional foundation for the manuscript's credibility.

In addition to this legal ruling, the authenticity of the journal has also been supported by contemporary scholarly and journalistic analyses. Journalist Viktor Szokoly (1835–1913) offered a particularly detailed defense of its legitimacy, presenting a three-part argument based on the manuscript's origin, transmission, and material consistency. His account is valuable because it reconstructs the history of the text and situates it within a clearly traceable chain of custody.

First, Szokoly describes the circumstances in which the journal was written. According to his findings, Mészáros began composing the memoir during his exile in Kütahya and later completed it in St. Helier on the island of Jersey, where he spent his final years in exile in Britain. The manuscript consists of 284 sheets, reflecting a long and fragmented writing process across different locations and stages of exile. Of these, approximately 140 sheets were dictated by Mészáros to Miklós Katona, a Transylvanian colonel, which explains the variation in handwriting in the earlier sections. However, from around the 140th sheet onward, the handwriting is consistently identifiable as Mészáros' own, reinforcing the continuity of authorship throughout the later portion of the text.

Second, Szokoly highlights the careful preservation and transmission of the manuscript. Mészáros is said to have entrusted the journal to the Minister of Justice in 1849 with the clear intention that it would be preserved and eventually published. From there, the manuscript passed into the hands of Miklós Puky in Geneva, where it was later used as a primary source by Mihály Horváth in his work *The History of Hungary's War of Independence*. This early scholarly use is significant, as it indicates that the manuscript was already considered a reliable historical source within academic circles. Eventually, the journal was transferred to Tibor Ács, who edited the text and wrote its preface, further formalizing its publication and dissemination.

Third, Szokoly supports the journal's authenticity through its documented chain of custody and its consistency when compared with other contemporary memoirs. The fact that the manuscript can be traced from Mészáros to Puky, and later to Ács and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, strengthens its provenance and reduces the likelihood of later alteration or fabrication. In addition, its content shows strong correspondence with other firsthand accounts from the same historical period, which further supports its reliability. Taken together, the legal certification, the documented transmission history, and the internal and external consistency of the text collectively establish Mészáros' journal as a credible and historically valuable primary source for understanding the 1848–1849 Hungarian Revolution and the experience of exile that followed.

ANALYSIS OF MÉSZÁROS LÁZÁR'S JOURNAL

Lázár Mészáros (Mészáros, 1999), the first Minister of Defense of the independent Hungarian government during the 1848–1849 Revolution and War of Independence, left behind a complex and highly revealing diary documenting his exile in the Ottoman Empire. Following the defeat at the Battle of Temesvár and the surrender at Világos, he crossed into Ottoman territory on 14th of August 1849, seeking refuge from Austrian retaliation. His diary, composed primarily during his internment in Kütahya, offers a deeply subjective and internally consistent account of the Hungarian post-revolutionary emigration. At the same time, it provides valuable insight into the physical, psychological, and ideological dimensions of exile, as well as the reasons why the manuscript remained neglected in historiography for an extended period.

One of the most striking features of Mészáros' journal is its detailed depiction of the lived experience of exile, which is marked by constant instability, deprivation, and dislocation. The narrative traces the gradual movement of the Hungarian exiles through Vidin, Şumnu, Bursa, and ultimately Kütahya in Asia Minor, each stage intensifying their sense of uncertainty and dependence. Mészáros repeatedly emphasizes the harshness of his material conditions, including inadequate housing, exposure to severe weather, and recurring illness. His descriptions of freezing interiors, where even water would solidify, function not merely as environmental observations but also as symbols of the broader vulnerability and marginalization experienced by the exiled community.

Alongside physical hardship, the diary reveals a profound psychological strain. Mészáros expresses persistent feelings of isolation and stagnation, compounded by the collapse of the revolutionary project to which he had devoted his career. His reflections on the loss of the Ludoviceum military academy, which he had founded, illustrate a personal dimension of political defeat, in which institutional failure is experienced as an intimate and deeply emotional loss. The exile environment is further characterized by dependency and disconnection: Communication with Europe is irregular and delayed, while survival is largely dependent on financial support from the Ottoman authorities under the protection of the Sultan. This condition of enforced passivity is counterbalanced in the diary by attempts at self-structuring, including disciplined daily routines, language study, reading, walking, and sustained engagement with memoir writing. These practices function as coping mechanisms, allowing Mészáros to preserve a sense of intellectual and personal continuity under conditions of political and social suspension.

A particularly significant dimension of the journal is its ideological positioning, which diverges markedly from the dominant narratives of the Hungarian migration community. Whereas many of his contemporaries framed exile primarily within the language of national restoration and political sovereignty, Mészáros articulates a broader and more unconventional intellectual framework. His engagement with the utopian socialist ideas of Charles Fourier reflects a belief that political struggle is incomplete unless it is accompanied by structural social transformation. In this view, the failures of nineteenth-century Europe are not solely political or military in nature but are rooted in deeper social inequalities and systemic deficiencies. His endorsement of what he terms "sensible socialism" indicates an attempt to reinterpret the meaning of revolution beyond national independence, situating it within a wider moral and social critique of European order.

This ideological stance also informs his critical assessment of leading figures within the Hungarian revolutionary movement. Mészáros does not idealize the leadership of the Revolution; instead, he offers often severe judgements of its key actors. Lajos Kossuth is portrayed in highly critical terms, not as an unchallenged national symbol, but as a figure associated with political manipulation and excessive intervention in military affairs. Similarly, Artúr Görgey is depicted in deeply negative language, reflecting enduring tensions within revolutionary leadership and differing interpretations of responsibility for defeat. Beyond individual figures, Mészáros extends his critique to the broader émigré community, which he describes as fragmented and self-indulgent, marked by internal disputes, ineffective political organization, and a failure to develop meaningful collective discipline in exile.

Religious identity also emerges as a stabilizing and distinguishing element in his narrative. In contrast to several contemporaries who converted to Islam during their stay in the Ottoman Empire in order to integrate into military service or secure better prospects, Mészáros explicitly refuses religious conversion. He presents this refusal as a matter of principle rather than expediency, reinforcing a sense of personal integrity and continuity in the face of political collapse and cultural displacement.

Despite its historical richness, the diary remained marginal within scholarly discourse for nearly a century following its acquisition by the National Széchényi Library in 1886. This marginalization can be attributed to several factors. The manuscript itself presents significant paleographic difficulties, as it was written for personal use rather than publication, resulting in inconsistent and challenging handwriting that complicated transcription and analysis. More importantly, the content of the diary conflicted with established national narratives of the 1848–1849 Revolution. Its unfiltered critiques of widely venerated figures, combined with its refusal to conform to idealized representations of revolutionary unity and heroism, rendered it uncomfortable within traditional historiographical frameworks. Finally, Mészáros' engagement with utopian socialism further contributed to its neglect, as such ideological positions did not align easily with dominant interpretations of nineteenth-century Hungarian political thought. As a result, the manuscript was long regarded as ideologically inconvenient, despite its clear value as a primary source.

Overall, Mészáros' journal provides a rare and multidimensional perspective on exile, combining detailed empirical observation with introspective psychological reflection and unconventional ideological positioning. Its significance lies not only in what it reveals about the lived conditions of Hungarian exiles in the Ottoman Empire, but also in how it challenges simplified narratives of the revolution and its aftermath.

ANALYSIS OF MÓR PERCZEL'S MEMOIR

Mór Perczel's diary (Csorba, 2007) presents emigration after the failed 1848 Hungarian Revolution as a political state rather than a temporary journey. We can see exile shaped by surveillance, permission, and dependence. Departure from Kütahya depends on Ottoman decisions and pressure from Austria and Russia. Freedom appears delayed and conditional. Emigration operates through regulation, not choice.

Life in the Ottoman Empire places former revolutionary leaders under constant oversight. Authorities restrict travel and control financial support. These measures create fear. We can observe how international politics enter everyday life through housing limits, movement bans, and payments. Emigration becomes a system of supervised presence, to neutralize political risk.

Political engagement does not disappear. Perczel continues to judge key figures from the war. He criticizes Kossuth, Görgei, and questions Bem's legacy. Exile turns memory into a political tool.

The memoire also records a shift in political strategy. Perczel accepts dependence on Western support for any future Hungarian cause. Political ambition narrows and adapts to power balance. Exile forces a move from military leadership toward diplomatic expectation.

Family conditions shape political behavior. Personal responsibility increases reliance on host authorities, and this reliance limits resistance. We can also see how private needs reshape the public stance. Emigration mixes political defeat with domestic pressure.

Networks among Hungarian exiles remain active. Letters, visits, and shared locations sustain political discussion. These ties replace lost institutions. Trust stays fragile. Suspicion reflects fractures left by failure. The diary shows emigration as an extension of political struggle, defined by constraint, reassessment, and survival within foreign control.

DIVERGENT PERSPECTIVES IN MEMOIRS AND JOURNALS

The memoirs of Lajos Kossuth and Ahmed Cevdet Pasha do not merely offer differing accounts of Hungarian exile; they create entirely different meanings of exile based on their political agendas and narrative tactics.

Kossuth describes his exile as a continuation of the Hungarian struggle for independence rather than as a conclusion to it. His narrative does not come to a close. He does not accept defeat and instead redefines his exile as a transitional phase within an ongoing political mission. He does so through a rhetorical strategy of consistently not bringing the narrative to a close and projecting an action into the future. He redefines his exile as a moral imperative wherein leadership must be maintained and validated. When he describes his exile strictly as a "continuation of the struggle," he does so in an emotive and political way. In this sense, Kossuth's memoir not only offers an account of the revolution of 1848–1849 but also becomes an interventionist political move regarding how the Revolution ought to be remembered. He does not describe his exile as a rupture so as not to compromise his personal authority and the political ideology of the Revolution.

In stark contrast, in Ahmed Cevdet Pasha's memoir, exile is removed from the arena of personal and political struggle and relocated within the arena of imperial governance. While Kossuth employs the rhetoric of revolution, Cevdet Pasha employs the neutral idiom of statecraft in describing the arrival of Hungarian refugees strictly as a complex legal and diplomatic issue. Situated within this larger context of Ottoman sovereignty, Cevdet Pasha focuses on the pressures brought by Austria and Russia on the Ottoman Empire to extradite Hungarian refugees. It is not merely glossed over as a side issue; it is constructed as a definitive defense of legal and sovereignty issues. For instance, by describing the Porte's reliance on Islamic traditions of asylum (Emân) and international law, Cevdet Pasha positions the diplomatic notes of Austria and Russia as a direct affront to the sovereignty of the Sultan. In this way, exile is no longer a personal and political issue but a definitive case study through which the Ottoman state establishes its legitimacy in international society.

Yet another layer of contrast is added by the writings of Lázár Mészáros whose journal adds an explicitly intercultural dimension to the experience of exile. While the tone of Cevdet Pasha's writings is distant and bureaucratic, Mészáros often makes observations about Ottoman society and culture from the perspective of an exile. Indeed, his journals are replete with observations about the inefficiencies of the Ottoman administration, the social mores of the Ottomans, and the general inconveniences of living in Ottoman society. In these passages, we see a great tension between adaptation and cultural distance. While these passages do not offer a straightforward narrative about Ottoman society, they offer a narrative about the position of the author vis-à-vis Ottoman society.

In the narrative of exile offered by the writings of the Ottoman bureaucrat, the society and administrative system under review by Mészáros are not described because they are supposed to be a smoothly functioning administrative machine under extreme duress.

	Target Audience	Definition of Exile	Relationship with the Ottoman Empire
Mészáros Lázár	Internal/personal intention, marked by unfiltered criticism of the Revolution	Physical and environmental deprivation, intellectual stagnation and routine, loss of institutional legacy, and crucible of realism	Life-saving protection, administrative bureaucracy and frustration, and refusal of assimilation

Mór Perczel	European “powerhouses”	Restricted freedom and constant supervision	Protected the refugees while also controlling them
Ahmed Cevdet Pasha	Ottoman bureaucratic audience	Political and diplomatic issue shaped by international pressure	Protective yet controlling imperial authority

Table 1 Comparative Visualization of the Memoirs

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the experience of Hungarian exile in the Ottoman Empire (1849–1850) through three distinct but complementary narrative perspectives: the journal of Lázár Mészáros, the memoir of Mór Perczel, and the writings of Ahmed Cevdet Pasha, supplemented by the political correspondence of Lajos Kossuth. Rather than treating these texts as transparent historical records, the analysis approached them as constructed narratives shaped by individual positioning, political intent, and the retrospective organization of memory. What emerges is not a single, coherent story of exile, but a chorus of competing voices, each offering its own version of the same events. These accounts reveal as much about their narrators as they do about the events themselves.

Mészáros’ journal is the most grounded and empirically detailed of the sources examined. Written under conditions of internment in Kütahya, it resists the heroic register that characterizes much of the emigrant literature of the period. Instead, it documents the physical hardship, psychological stagnation, and internal fragmentation of the Hungarian exile community with a candor that many of his contemporaries would have found deeply uncomfortable. His ideological heterodoxy—most notably his engagement with utopian socialist thought and his refusal of religious conversion—positions him as a critical outsider even within his own community. That his journal remained marginalized in scholarly discourse for nearly a century is itself telling; it reflects the political conditions governing how revolutionary memory was constructed and, just as importantly, who was allowed to shape it.

Perczel's memoir, by contrast, shows what exile does to a man accustomed to action. Military leadership, once defined by decision and command, gives way to supervised political waiting. His account reveals how personal circumstances, such as family responsibilities, material dependence on host authorities, and the collapse of institutional networks quietly reshaped political behavior in ways that grander narratives of resistance tend to overlook. His continued critical engagement with figures such as Kossuth and Görgey suggests that the failures of the Revolution were never truly left behind. Defeat has a way of travelling with people. It turns up in the margins of diaries, in the tone of letters, and in arguments that flare up between men who have nothing left to fight over except the past. For Perczel, exile did not close the book on 1849, it simply gave him more time to reread it and disagree with how others were choosing to remember it.

Ahmed Cevdet Pasha's perspective is a useful corrective to any temptation to view this story purely through Hungarian eyes. From his vantage point within the Ottoman imperial administration, the Hungarian refugees were not protagonists, they were a complication. Their arrival created a delicate diplomatic situation that threatened to draw the empire into conflict with Austria and Russia at a moment when it could ill afford further pressure. The Ottoman refusal to extradite them, grounded in the legal traditions of amān and a clear-eyed reading of the empire's own strategic interests, was less an act of solidarity than a careful assertion of sovereignty. The Porte was not opening its arms; it was making a calculated point about who held authority within its own borders. For the exiles themselves, this distinction may have mattered little in the short term. But it serves as a sobering reminder that their fate was never entirely their own to determine. They were, in a real sense, guests whose welcome depended on forces far beyond their control.

What is perhaps most striking, when reading these accounts together, is how differently the same experience could be lived and understood. For Kossuth, exile was a platform; for Mészáros, a reckoning; for Perczel, a waiting room; and for Cevdet Pasha, a diplomatic episode to be managed. These are not simply differences of personality or style, they reflect the structural positions each author occupied and the audiences they were, consciously or not, writing for. Exile, it turns out, is not one thing. It is shaped by power, hope, resentment, and the human need to make sense of loss.

There is a broader lesson in all of this about how historical memory is made and unmade. Memoirs and journals are not neutral containers for facts. They are arguments, written by people with reputations to protect, causes to advance, or wounds that had not yet healed. Kossuth wrote to remain relevant. Mészáros wrote, it seems, because he needed to be honest with himself, even when that honesty was unlikely to win him admirers. Cevdet Pasha wrote as a servant of the state, and his account reflects that loyalty in every carefully chosen word. None of them simply recorded what happened. They each decided what it meant and in doing so, helped determine what future generations would be able to see.

The long neglect of Mészáros' journal is perhaps the most instructive detail in this entire study. It was not lost; it was uncomfortable. Its criticism of beloved national figures, refusal to romanticize the revolutionary cause, and ideological restlessness made it an awkward fit for a historiography that preferred uncomplicated heroes. That it has since been recovered and taken seriously is encouraging, but it also raises an obvious question: How many other voices from this period remain on the margins, not because they have nothing to say, but because what they have to say does not suit the story we have decided to tell? A fuller understanding of the 1848–1849 Revolution and its aftermath depends on whether we can sit with this discomfort rather than turn away from it.

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A Diachronic Analysis of Turkic–Hungarian Cultural Synthesis Through Archeology, Linguistics, and Mythology

Authors: *Zsófia Vaszi*[2], *Ecrin Özyiğit*[1], *Ömer Kısacık*[1], *Márk Csurgai*[2]
Advisors: *Mehmet Ali Neyzi PhD*[1], *György Szabó-Bakos (†)*[2], *Benedek Alpár*[2]

[1] *TEV İnanç High School*
[2] *Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC)*

Abstract

Cultural interactions in the Eurasian steppes played a significant role in the formation of early societies, particularly in the historical relationship between Turkic and Hungarian communities. This article investigates how archaeology, mythology, linguistics, and religious history together reveal the depth and direction of early Turkic–Hungarian interactions. While previous studies have analyzed these concepts separately, this study addresses them within an interdisciplinary framework. Using methods from comparative mythology and burial archeology, the paper analyzes material culture, mythological narratives, ritual practices, religious transformations, and the literary traditions of both Hungarian and Turkic societies. The findings suggest that neither early Hungarian nor Turkic history can be fully understood in isolation, as material culture, mythic structures, and linguistic exchange demonstrate long term, multidirectional interaction and mutual cultural formation. The study further shows that religious transitions reshaped old steppe traditions without eliminating them and influenced subsequent state formations. These findings help supplement a comprehensive understanding of the early cultural history of Eurasia and highlight the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in the restructuring processes of cultural interaction and identity formation.

Keywords: Turkic–Hungarian interactions, mythology, burial archeology, steppe cultures, cultural exchange

INTRODUCTION

The question of early Hungarian origins has long occupied a central place in Hungarian historiography and identity formation, while Turkic peoples similarly view the Eurasian steppe as a foundational civilizational space. For this reason, Turkic–Hungarian relations could be treated as a key issue in understanding how cultures, political communities, and identities were shaped across Inner Eurasia. Modern scholarship broadly agrees that the early Hungarians emerged within the steppe and maintained contact with Turkic-speaking populations through migration, alliance-building, warfare, and cultural exchange. These interactions unfolded across multiple regions, including the Ural area, the Volga–Kama basin, Etelköz, and the Pontic steppe. Despite this general consensus, academic interpretations often remain fragmented, as linguistic research is frequently separated from archaeology and mythology, while medieval narrative sources are often prioritized over material culture and comparative evidence. The Hungarian language is demonstrably Finno-Ugric in origin, a fact firmly supported by grammatical structure, core vocabulary, and comparative Uralic linguistics. However, this linguistic foundation does not contradict the equally well-documented reality that Hungarian culture and identity were profoundly shaped by long-term, multidirectional interaction within the steppe. Archaeological remains, mythic structures, political integration, and extensive lexical borrowing together demonstrate that Hungarians are active participants in the civilization of the Eurasian steppe. Archaeological evidence provides some of the strongest support for this conclusion. Excavations across the Ural region, the Volga basin, Etelköz, and the Carpathian Basin reveal consistent parallels between early Hungarian material culture and that of Hun, Avar, and Turkic populations. Burial customs are particularly revealing: Horse burials, partial horse sacrifices, riding equipment, sabretaches, decorated belts, and animal-style ornamentation all reflect a nomadic warrior ethos characteristic of the steppe. These elements appear not only in Avar-period cemeteries but continue in early Hungarian graves following the conquest of the Carpathian Basin. Such continuities suggest shared cultural frameworks shaped through long-term coexistence rather than superficial imitation. Importantly, these practices should not be interpreted as uniquely Hungarian or uniquely Turkic, but as part of a broader steppe tradition whose roots extend back to earlier nomadic civilizations. Based on this evidence, this paper argues that neither early Hungarian nor Turkic history can be fully understood in isolation, as material culture, mythic structures, and linguistic exchange demonstrate long-term, multidirectional interaction and mutual cultural formation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Modern scientific literature reveals, through numerous studies, that the social structures and cultural identities of early Eurasian societies cannot be understood from a single perspective. On the contrary, to examine the complex formation of identity in steppe societies, it is necessary to analyze the synthesis of archeology, mythology, and ethnogenesis. Recent research has revealed that the historical development processes of early Turkish and Hungarian communities were closely intertwined, demonstrating that these groups did not develop in isolation from one another but rather through continuous and multidimensional interactions in the realms of material and literary culture. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that while religious transitions altered social structures, they did not eliminate traditional steppe practices, which continued to influence the formation of subsequent states. However, the shared origins of the Turkic and Hungarian people have generally been studied within the confines of separate disciplines rather than through a dialogical approach. Similarly, the process of identity formation among these communities has been addressed through independent studies in archeology and mythology rather than through a synthesis of the two fields. These fragmented studies have also been addressed by Klima (2019). In his article published in the journal *Archaeologiai Értesítő*, Klima states that scholars working in the disciplines related to prehistoric studies, such as archaeology, ethnography, mythology, art history, and linguistics, have increasingly distanced themselves from interdisciplinary research over the past quarter century because they fear professional criticism for committing the error of mixed argumentation. As Hoppál (2014) noted at a conference on Hungarian prehistory, the findings of these research fields must have been evaluated together; this methodological necessity defines the purpose of this article.

Archaeological findings provide evidence of Turkic–Hungarian interactions. A number of significant archeological studies have traced the material culture of the ancient Hungarians from the Eurasian steppe to the Carpathian Basin. Since there are no definitive records about the Hungarians before the ninth century, and the identification of archaeological cultures with specific peoples is methodologically controversial (Berend & Róna-Tas, 1999), Hungarian prehistory is generally understood as a framework constructed on linguistics, folkloric parallels, archaeology, and later written evidence. Among the most significant recent contributions are the research studies conducted by Türk (2020) at the Uelgi cemetery and in the Volga-Ural region. These studies have presented evidence linking early Hungarian material culture to Eastern-steppe Turkic traditions and tracing the migration corridor between the Urals and Carpathians. Another significant discovery, the Subotsi horizon, is a clearly defined collection of ninth century belt ornaments found in Ukraine and Moldova that are linked to the ancestors of the conquering Hungarians. This has attracted particular attention from the academic community because it reveals not only Turkic connections but also various religious connections associations. Klima's (2019) analysis of the human-figured belt ornaments from the Subotsi horizon (Subotsi, Katerinovka, Novonikolaevka) and their counterparts in the Southern Urals (Ishimbay) and Upper Kama (Redikor) regions demonstrates that the iconographic content of these objects reflects a mixture of Buddhist, Manichaean, and indigenous Turco–Mongol religious motifs transmitted through Sogdian merchant networks operating via the Volga Bulgar Khanate. An archaeogenetic study conducted by Neparáczki et al. (2019), using the ancient DNA analysis of grave samples from the Conquest period, also confirmed that the maternal gene pool of the Hungarian conquerors was a mixture of elements from Western Eurasia and Central and Northern Eurasia. In this context, it can be said that the Turkish and Central Asian invasions left genetic traces alongside the Finno-Ugric sublayer. This serves as material evidence supporting the argument of polyethnic and multicultural formation. In addition, Reich's work *Who We Are and How We Got Here* (2018) provides a methodological and theoretical framework for interpreting data acquired via ancient DNA analysis within the broader context of population history, demonstrating how different groups are deeply interconnected in ways that fundamentally challenge narratives of ethnic isolation throughout world history. This framework is directly applicable to the Turkic–Hungarian case.

Based on all these sources, this article argues that neither early Hungarian history nor Turkic history can be fully understood in isolation, as they demonstrate a long-term, multifaceted interaction and mutual cultural formation involving material culture and mythological structures. Structural parallels between mythological systems, such as the World Tree, the Csodaszarvas, and the Carpathian Basin, collectively demonstrate a long-term interaction that is foundational to both traditions. By engaging these fields in a continuous and open dialogue, the diachronic analysis aims to pursue a research objective that the existing literature demands but has not yet provided.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an interdisciplinary, diachronic comparative approach to analyze the early-period cultural synthesis between Turkish and Hungarian communities. Rather than examining historical development through the lens of a single discipline, this framework moves beyond traditional academic approaches by fostering an open dialogue among funerary archaeology, comparative mythology, historical linguistics, and ethnohistory. The research design focuses on tracing spatial and geographical transfers along the Ural–Carpathian migration corridor. While mapping settlements in the Trans-Ural, Volga-Ural, and Dnieper regions in comparison with 10th-century settlements in the Carpathian Basin, the study incorporates material artifacts as well as intangible cultural expressions such as folklore and linguistic borrowings.

Since the isolated, early written records pertaining to these communities are extremely fragmented and methodologically controversial, the primary and secondary source base has been compiled from reputable, peer-reviewed archaeological datasets, historical studies, and scientific literature. These include Uelgi, Bolshie Tigani, Subotsi, Karos-Eperjesszög, and Rakamaz; established secondary academic studies in the fields of historical linguistics, archaeogenetics, and the history of religion; and visual evidence consisting of photographs of excavation plans and museum artifacts, such as the perforated braided hair disk from Rakamaz and the Karos sabretache plaque.

The collected evidence is evaluated through overlapping interpretive frameworks. To trace technological evolution, this study incorporates the typological seriation of iron and silver equestrian equipment. It also examines grave orientation, stepped projections, and microgeographic clan clusters through grave cartography, interpreting these features as semiotic expressions of social hierarchy and kinship. In addition, it applies a mythological analysis based on Mircea Eliade's concepts of *axis mundi* and *imago mundi* to explain how palmette motifs and sacred domestic spaces functioned as extensions of a shared steppe worldview. Finally, it synthesizes evidence from linguistic borrowings and ancient DNA profiles to contextualize multi-ethnic population mixing. Furthermore, it draws on ethnographic parallels from culturally neighboring Siberian and Finno-Ugric peoples. The text focuses generally on the migrations and cultural interactions of the Hungarians and Turks, addressing in particular the 10th-century Conquest Period following these communities' arrival in the Carpathian Basin.

DISCUSSION

The Eurasian steppe, together with its forest-steppe margins, is defined by an almost uninterrupted horizontality. For the equestrian communities of the ninth and tenth centuries, this spatial condition posed a particular challenge. Authority could not rely on permanent architectural markers. Instead, it emerged through selective interventions in the landscape, most visibly through burial placement. In this context, the positioning of the dead acquires both spatial and political meaning. Burial grounds are often constructed on elevated terrain such as ridges, riverbanks, and lake terraces. Archaeological evidence from the Volga–Ural region indicates that sites associated with early Hungarian groups, including Bolshie Tigani and Uelgi, were often established in such topographically dominant locations, suggesting a patterned preference rather than isolated choice. Elevation itself was prestigious, looking down to others and preserving symbolic dominance (Fodor, 1996; Türk, 2014). Elevation offered practical advantages. It reduced exposure to seasonal flooding and improved conditions for long-term preservation. At the same time, it provided visibility. Burial sites placed above river systems or near movement corridors remained within sight of routes tied to seasonal mobility and exchange. In this sense, cemeteries formed part of a broader spatial network rather than existing as isolated ritual zones (Révész, 1996). The cemetery at Bolshie Tigani, located along the Kama river system, illustrates this relationship. The site occupies elevated terraces overlooking waterways that functioned as key communication and exchange routes during the early medieval period. Archaeological assessments date the cemetery broadly to the ninth and tenth centuries and associate it with populations linked to early Hungarian groups (Fodor, 1996; Róna-Tas, 1999). A comparable spatial configuration appears at Uelgi in the Trans-Ural region, where burial clusters are positioned along slopes facing the lake basin, an area closely tied to recurring seasonal activity (Türk, 2014). Following the migration into the Carpathian Basin, similar spatial choices persist. Cemeteries in the Upper Tisza region, including Karos-Eperjesszög, are situated on sandy ridges rising above floodplains. These sites are among the most significant burial complexes of the tenth century and provide key chronological and social data for the conquest-period population (Fodor, 1996; Révész, 1996). While the environmental context differs from the Volga–Ural region, the continued preference for elevated ground suggests continuity in spatial practice as can be seen below, in the Figure 1.

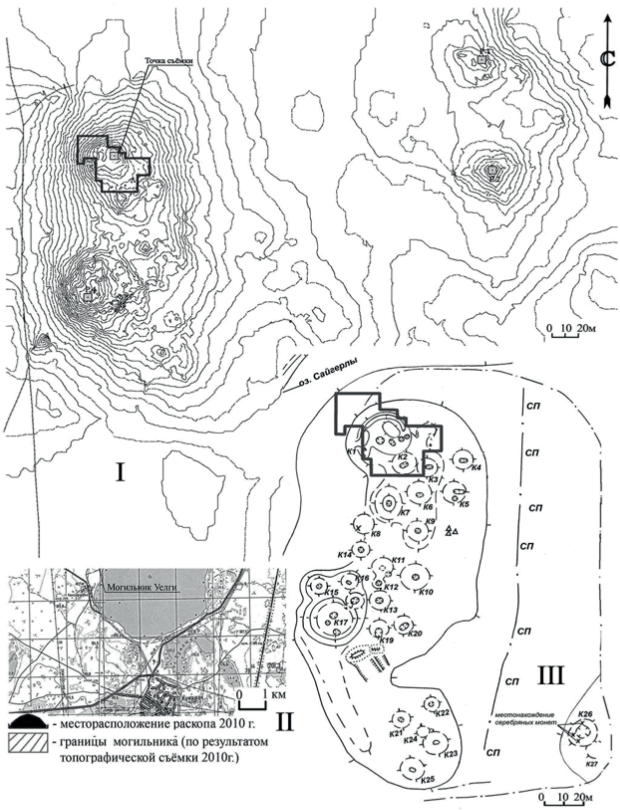

Fig. 1 The Uelgi burial complex. I –Topographic map (Including the borders of the 2010 excavations). II – the position of the Uelgi complex. III – the visual estimation plan

Figure 1

Note. Elevated burial sites along river terraces and ridge systems in the Volga-Ural and Carpathian regions, illustrating the strategic selection of high ground for visibility and territorial signaling. (Ivanov, 2012; Révész, 2014)

This repetition points to the presence of a transferable landscape logic. The selection of comparable geomorphological features across distant regions implies that burial placement was guided by established cultural expectations rather than purely local conditions. Archaeological and archaeogenetic research supports the connection between populations of the Volga–Ural region and those in the Carpathian Basin, indicating the persistence of shared practices across this corridor (Türk et al., 2020; Róna-Tas, 1999). Elevation also introduces a perceptual separation within the landscape. Burial grounds occupy a distinct visual layer, set above zones of everyday activity. They remain present without being embedded in daily movement. This positioning contributes to how territory is experienced and remembered, embedding the dead within the visible structure of the environment.

SUBTERRANEAN RESILIENCE AND THE MATERIALITY OF THE GRAVE SHAFT

The construction of the grave shaft in early medieval steppe contexts reflects a controlled engagement with the subsoil. The grave is not merely opened; it is prepared. Across the Volga–Ural region, as well as in the Carpathian Basin, burial pits display recurring architectural interventions that suggest an awareness of soil behavior, moisture dynamics, and long-term preservation (Fodor, 1996; Türk, 2014). One of the most consistent features observed in Trans-Ural and forest-steppe contexts is the use of organic lining materials, particularly birch bark (*Betula*). Archaeological evidence from sites such as Uelgi and related burial complexes indicates that bark sheets were deliberately placed along the walls and floors of grave shafts. Birch bark possesses natural hydrophobic and antimicrobial properties, making it a practical solution in environments where seasonal moisture could compromise both the body and associated grave goods (Türk, 2014). Its application suggests a repeated technical choice embedded within funerary practice.

In a number of higher-status burials, the intervention extends beyond lining into the construction of an internal chamber. Timber elements, typically arranged through vertical posts and horizontal planking, create a defined void within the grave shaft. This structure prevents direct soil pressure on the body and preserves the spatial arrangement of the burial assemblage. Excavations in both the Volga–Kama region and the Upper Tisza basin have documented such chamber-like constructions, indicating a continuity of architectural logic across the migration corridor (Fodor, 1996; Révész, 1996). Material substitution becomes visible after the arrival in the Carpathian Basin. While birch bark remains present in some contexts, the increasing availability of oak and pine leads to more robust timber constructions. At sites such as Karos-Eperjesszög, grave chambers display heavier structural components, reflecting both environmental opportunity and a shift toward more durable subterranean frameworks (Révész, 1996). Despite this change in material, the underlying principle remains the same: The body is enclosed within a deliberately maintained interior space, separated from the surrounding earth. The base of the grave shaft introduces another layer of material investment. Soil analyses conducted in several conquest-period cemeteries reveal elevated phosphorus concentrations arranged in patterned distributions. These chemical signatures are commonly interpreted as the remains of organic materials such as felt, woven mats, and animal furs placed beneath the deceased (Türk et al., 2020). The presence of these materials suggests that the burial environment was structured to replicate elements of the domestic interior, particularly the layered flooring of nomadic dwellings. Stratigraphic observations further indicate that the closure of the grave was not a neutral act. In several Upper Tisza cemeteries, including Karos and Kenézlő, distinct layers of charcoal and burnt soil appear within the fill. These inclusions are typically localized rather than dispersed, suggesting controlled burning episodes during or immediately before the sealing of the grave (Révész, 1996). The thermal alteration of the fill material introduces a permanent chemical marker into the stratigraphy, one that distinguishes funerary activity from ordinary soil deposition.

Together, these elements point to a form of subterranean construction that balances environmental pragmatism with ritual structuring. The grave shaft is shaped through a sequence of deliberate interventions: lining, framing, layering, and sealing. Each stage modifies the interaction between body and soil. What emerges is not simply a protected burial, but a stabilized micro-environment, one that preserves both physical remains and the spatial logic of the funerary act.

RITUAL GEOMETRY AND THE SOLAR TRAJECTORY

Across the burial grounds associated with ninth- and tenth-century steppe populations, a recurring pattern can be observed in the orientation of the human body. From the Volga–Ural region to the cemeteries of the Carpathian Basin, individuals are most commonly placed along a west–east axis, with the head positioned toward the western end of the grave (Fodor, 1996; Révész, 1996). This alignment appears with sufficient regularity to suggest a shared convention. The persistence of this orientation across geographically distant sites indicates that burial alignment was governed by a stable set of expectations. While minor deviations occur, the dominant directional logic remains consistent. Such regularity implies that orientation formed part of the formal structure of the burial rite (Róna-Tas, 1999). The relationship between this alignment and solar movement has been widely discussed. A west–east positioning situates the deceased in a fixed relation to the daily trajectory of the sun, with the body facing toward the direction of sunrise. In this configuration, the eastern horizon becomes a constant reference point within the burial space. Although this does not require precise astronomical measurement, it does reflect a shared sensitivity to directional order within the landscape. Small angular variations within this general axis have been documented in several cemeteries. In some cases, these deviations correspond loosely to the shifting position of sunrise across the annual cycle. While it would be excessive to treat each burial as an exact seasonal marker, the cumulative pattern suggests an awareness of solar movement at a practical level (Härke, 1997). Orientation, in this sense, operates within a flexible range. Evidence from sites such as Uelgi and the Upper Tisza cemeteries, including Karos-Eperjesszög, supports the continuity of this practice across the migration corridor. Despite changes in local topography, the internal geometry of the grave remains relatively stable. The axis of the body does not adapt to the slope of the land or the direction of nearby features. Instead, it maintains its own internal order. This consistency introduces a distinct spatial layer within the burial environment. While the external placement of the grave responds to terrain, the internal arrangement follows a separate directional logic. Thus, the grave operates with two overlapping frameworks: one tied to landscape, the other to orientation. Their interaction remains structurally present across the archaeological record.

In this context, orientation can be understood as a stabilizing principle. It provides a repeatable structure that can be reproduced regardless of location. As burial grounds are established in new regions, the same directional pattern reappears, creating continuity across distance. The body, placed within this axis, becomes part of a spatial order that extends beyond the immediate site.

MICRO-GEOGRAPHY OF CLAN CLUSTERS AND KINSHIP BOUNDS

The internal configuration of early medieval steppe necropolises operates as a high-fidelity mirror of the nomadic social organism, where the horizontal distribution of grave shafts translates kinetic kinship-ties into a static, territorial ledger. Unlike the dense, haphazardly superimposed urban cemeteries of contemporaneous sedentary Europe, the burial grounds extending from the Trans-Ural Lake Uelgi to the Hungarian Karos-Eperjesszög are characterized by a rigorous, low-density clustering. These small, isolated groups of ten to twenty-five burials reflect a demographic reality; they function as a semiotic expression of the *Gens* or extended family unit, where the spatial gap between clusters serves to maintain the same degree of social distance in the afterlife as that which existed between yurt camps on the open steppe.

Within these micro-geographical nuclei, the positioning of an individual grave is rarely an arbitrary act of convenience, but rather a calculated placement within a rigid seniority-based hierarchy. A central, "founder" burial, frequently distinguished by a greater depth of the shaft and a higher concentration of prestige goods, often dictates the subsequent expansion of the cluster, with kin members arranged in a satellite fashion around the patriarch or matriarch. This radial or linear growth of the cemetery provides a visual chronology of the clan's generational succession, embedding the history of biological lineage directly into the geological record. By meticulously measuring the inter-grave distances, archaeologists can effectively reconstruct the invisible boundaries of the *Aul*, revealing a society that prioritized the integrity of the familial cell over the collective anonymity of the larger tribal federation.

Spatial feature	Cluster interior	Inter-cluster zone
Grave density	High (1.5–2.5m spacing)	Null (20–50m void)
Social meaning	Immediate kinship / Lineage	Clan autonomy / territorial buffer
Archaeological trace	Overlapping ritual horizons	Sterile soil / absence of artifacts

Table 1
Spatial Variance and Social Distance

*Note***.** The presented data reveal that the horizontal spatial distribution in steppe necropolises is a projection of intra-clan hierarchy and inter-clan autonomy. While intra-cluster density seals the physical continuity of blood ties and ritual unity, the deliberately left sterile spaces between clusters document the reflex of independence preserved even in the burial ground of the nomad social fabric.

This deliberate maintenance of "sterile" zones between clusters constitutes a sophisticated form of funerary cartography, where the void is as communicative as the monument itself. In the Upper Tisza region, the emergence of these distinct family plots suggests that the trauma of relocation appears to have reinforced the necessity of clan-based solidarity. Even as the diverse elements of the nomadic confederation integrated into the new Carpathian landscape, they resisted the atomization of their social fabric by replicating their traditional camp layouts within the necropolis. Therefore, the soil acts as a primary source of sociological data, documenting a world where the physical proximity of the dead was a non-verbal affirmation of the loyalty and blood-bonds of the living.

Consequently, the micro-geography of the steppe grave transcends simple mortuary practice to become a defensive architecture of identity. By clustering in tight, recognizable units separated by significant spatial buffers, the clans asserted their distinct legal and social status within the broader tribal hierarchy. This spatial strategy ensured that the transition from a mobile existence to a sedentary or semi-sedentary state in the Danubian plains did not result in a loss of ancestral continuity. The necropolis became a permanent, petrified version of the steppe camp, a landscape where every void and every cluster served to remind the surviving members of the precisely calibrated degrees of their kinship and the enduring strength of their hereditary claims.

GEOGRAPHICAL TRANSFERENCE FROM THE VOLGA STEPPES TO THE DANUBIAN TERRACES

The migration from the Volga-Ural heartland into the Carpathian Basin represents a profound transplantation of cognitive frameworks, where the physical relocation of tribal bodies necessitated a corresponding re-mapping of the ancestral landscape onto an unfamiliar geography. Although the environmental transition from the semi-arid, open horizons of the Trans-Ural forest-steppe to the temperate, river-veined plains of the Danubian terraces was objectively significant, the spatial logic governing funerary sites remained remarkably static. This phenomenon suggests that the tenth-century federations operated within a durable cultural template, actively seeking topographical analogues in the west that could resonate with the sacred and strategic requirements established in the east. In the Kama and Volga river systems, the positioning of complexes such as Bolshie Tigani served to consolidate the authority of the clan over crucial aquatic trade routes and seasonal grazing paths. Upon their arrival in the Upper Tisza region, these same populations identified the *homokhátság*, the prominent sand ridges rising above the floodplains, as the ideal geomorphological equivalent to their original lake-shore terraces. The selection of the Karos and Zemplén ridges demonstrates an intentional effort to replicate the "watcher's perspective" established in the *The Watcher's Perspective and Topographic Domination* section of this paper, ensuring that the deceased maintained a symbolic hegemony over the new river confluences. By occupying these specific topographic niches, the migrating elite effectively domesticized the Pannonian landscape, rendering the foreign soil legible through the familiar grammar of ancestral burial practices. The continuity of this spatial blueprint across such a vast migratory corridor indicates a high degree of ritual cohesion that successfully resisted the centrifugal forces of a long-distance relocation. Even as the federations integrated diverse cultural elements during their transit through the Dnieper and Prut regions, the fundamental criteria for a legitimate burial space survived without significant alteration. The necropolis continued to function as a stationary anchor, a permanent claim of sovereignty in a world that lacked the traditional landmarks of the East. This architectural and topographic persistence transformed the Danubian plains into a psychological extension of the steppe, where the "subterranean resilience" discussed in the *Subterranean Resilience and the Materiality of the Grave Shaft* section was applied to new materials, such as oak and pine, without losing their insulating purpose. Therefore, the grave became the primary instrument of territorialization, reconciling the memory of the old world with the physical reality of the new. The soil of the Carpathian Basin was systematically incorporated into a pre-existing cosmological order through the sheer geometry of its cemeteries. This spatial integrity provides the essential foundation for understanding the more intricate, ritualistic behaviors that occurred within these graves, particularly those involving the animal companions that followed the warriors across this immense geographical bridge.

THE RITUAL OF PARTIAL INHUMATION AND ANIMAL COMPANIONSHIP

Eurasian steppe federations of the ninth and tenth centuries conceptualized the horse as a metaphysical vehicle, an indispensable companion whose presence in the funerary realm facilitated the soul's transit across the ontological divide. However, the archaeological record from the Volga-Ural core to the Carpathian fringes rarely reveals a complete equine skeleton within the human grave shaft. Instead, we encounter the highly codified practice of *Pars pro Toto*, a ritual logic wherein a carefully selected part represents the sacred whole. This symbolic distillation involved the deposition of the horse's skull and its distal limb bones (the cannon bones and phalanges), typically arranged within the original hide of the animal. The anatomy of this ritual suggests a sophisticated economy of sacrifice that synchronized spiritual necessity with the pragmatism of nomadic survival. During the funeral proceedings, the horse was slaughtered to provide the caloric foundation for a communal feast, a pivotal event that reinforced the bonds of the living clan through the consumption of the animal's flesh. The parts reserved for the grave—the head and the lower legs—were precisely those of minimal nutritional value but maximal symbolic significance. By placing these skeletal remains inside the hide and positioning them alongside the deceased, the tribe effectively preserved the "essence" of the mount. Thus, the horse was simultaneously consumed by the community and preserved for the ancestor, satisfying both the earthly hunger of the mourners and the celestial requirements of the departed warrior. Within the grave, the placement of these equine remains follows a strict, non-random orientation that mirrors the "watcher's perspective" discussed in our previous analysis of landscape memory. Often situated at the feet of the deceased or on a separate, elevated ledge within the shaft, the skull was almost invariably directed toward the east, aligning with the solar trajectory of the human occupant. The hide, which once contained the flesh and spirit of the animal, was frequently folded or draped to support the warrior's saddle and harness, creating a functional, ready-to-use ensemble for the afterlife. This stratigraphic arrangement demonstrates that the horse was a calibrated piece of "hardware" integrated into the very architecture of the tomb. Tracing this *Pars pro Toto* tradition from the Trans-Ural Uelgi complex into the Danubian plains reveals a remarkable standardization of the ritual's anatomical "vocabulary." While the early Volga-Ural burials occasionally exhibit variations in the number of limb bones included, the cemeteries of the Hungarian conquest period show a rigid adherence to a specific skeletal shorthand. The presence of the skull and four lower leg bones became a definitive archaeological signature of the nomadic elite, a material consolidation that signaled the individual's membership in an equestrian aristocracy. This anatomical distillation did not diminish the horse's role; rather, it elevated the animal to the status of a heraldic symbol, ensuring that the warrior entered the next world with the undying spirit of a sacred mount.

STRATIGRAPHIC HIERARCHY AND THE SEPARATE DEPOSITION OF EQUINE REMAINS

The internal architecture of the nomadic grave frequently utilizes verticality to establish a functional and symbolic distance between the human occupant and their animal companion. Archaeological excavations in the Upper Tisza region and the earlier Uralic sites identify a specialized burial form known as the "stepped grave" (*lépcsős sír*), where a narrow ledge is carved into the longitudinal side of the shaft to accommodate the horse's remains. By elevating the equine elements, the hide, skull, and distal limbs, above the primary floor of the pit, the ritual practitioners achieved a distinct stratigraphic separation that preserved the spatial integrity of the deceased individual. This architectural nuance suggests that the horse was conceptualized as a prestigious piece of "external equipment" situated within reaching distance, effectively functioning as a celestial vehicle parked on a higher plane than its driver. The meticulous arrangement of the harness and saddle within these separate deposits further reinforces the idea of a ready-to-use ensemble intended for immediate post-mortem mobility. In high-status burials, the iron bit is often placed directly within the horse's skull, while the stirrups and cinch buckles are laid upon the folded hide in a manner that replicates their functional positions on a living animal. This deliberate layering ensures that the transition between the earthly and the ancestral realms remains seamless, as the warrior is provided with a "hardened" set of tools that have been systematically isolated from the direct weight of the human body. The separate deposition prevents the potential ritual contamination or physical crowding of the sacred human space, maintaining a hierarchical order even within the confined limits of the subterranean chamber. Furthermore, the placement of the equine remains at the foot of the grave, even in cases where a separate ledge is absent follows a persistent logic of accessibility and subordination. Positioning the animal beneath the visual horizon of the supine warrior anchors the mount to the "exit" of the grave, orienting the entire assemblage toward the eastern exit point discussed in section *Ritual Geometry and the Solar Trajectory*. Thus, the stratigraphic hierarchy functions as a silent narrative of ownership and command, where the physical layering of wood, hide, and bone documents a society that viewed death as a highly organized military and social departure. Through this vertical and horizontal calibration, the grave shaft is transformed from a static pit into a dynamic, multidimensional vessel prepared for the final gallop across the cosmological steppe.

FUNCTIONAL HARDWARE AS CHRONOLOGICAL MARKERS IN THE URAL-CARPATHIAN MIGRATION

The transition of equestrian equipment from a functional necessity to a chronological diagnostic tool provides a granular view of the migration's tempo and its fluctuating metallurgical standards. These objects, iron bits, stirrups, and harness buckles, are highly sensitive indicators of typological seriation. By mapping the morphological shifts in these iron components, we can effectively trace the movement of federations from the Trans-Ural forest-steppes toward the Danubian basin, identifying the exact moments of technological adaptation and regional contact. The stirrup serves as the primary chronological anchor within this assemblage. In the ninth-century horizons of the Volga and Kama regions, such as the early phases of the Uelgi necropolis, stirrups typically exhibit a circular or slightly flattened base with a thick, robust loop. These early "Uralic" forms prioritized structural durability, often lacking the refined decorative elements seen in later periods. However, as the migration progressed into the Dnieper-Prut corridor, a distinct morphological evolution occurred. The circular base gave way to the "pear-shaped" stirrup, characterized by an arched top and a wider, slightly curved footrest. This transition reflected an advancement in forging techniques that allowed for thinner, lighter, yet stronger frames. By the time these populations reached the Upper Tisza, the pear-shaped stirrup had become the standardized elite marker, frequently featuring silver inlay or geometric ribbing along the outer frame. This progression from the round, heavy iron of the East to the elegant, arched steel of the West provides a clear material timeline of the Carpathian entry. The evolution of the bridle bit (snaffle) offers further evidence of the shifting technological landscape. Early steppe burials frequently contain two-jointed iron bits paired with bone or antler cheek-pieces (psalia), a combination that reflects an archaic, pastoral tradition. As these groups interacted with the metallurgical centers of the Khazar Khaganate and later the Carolingian frontiers, the organic psalia were replaced by iron S-shaped or ringed cheek-pieces. This shift indicates an increased reliance on specialized blacksmithing and a move toward standardized military hardware. The "S-shaped" bit, in particular, became a hallmark of the tenth-century Magyar cavalry, providing the high-leverage control necessary for the complex, light-cavalry maneuvers that defined their early European campaigns. The presence of these specific iron forms in a grave shaft confirms that the occupant belonged to a post-migration, tactically evolved generation. Furthermore, the decorative metallurgy applied to the harness, the phalerae, and strap-ends links the Ural-Carpathian corridor through a shared artistic vocabulary. The use of silver-plating and niello work on the iron surfaces of the harness hardware reveals a direct connection to the "post-Saltov" artistic tradition of the Don and Volga regions. These decorative elements were often applied to the buckles and cinch-rings, transforming a functional equestrian kit into a display of martial prestige. The stratigraphic association of these refined metallic components with the *pars pro toto* horse burials discussed previously ensures that the hardware was not a later intrusion but an integral part of the original funeral assemblage. This technical and artistic continuity consolidates the identity of the migrating groups, proving that their material culture crystallized into a distinct, recognizable elite style. This hardware, through its unyielding iron and silvered surfaces, provides a "fossilized" record of the migration's logistical demands. A warrior's kit was a living inventory of their journey, containing bits forged in the Volga workshops and stirrups refined on the edges of the Carpathian Basin. Each component carries the chemical and morphological signature of its origin, allowing us to reconstruct the technological biography of the federation as it moved across the Eurasian land bridge.

MORPHOLOGICAL AFFINITIES BETWEEN SUBOTSI AND TISZA RIVER HORSE BURIALS

The identification of a shared ritual grammar between the Subotsi-type horizons of the Dnieper region and the tenth-century necropolises of the Tisza River valley provides the most compelling archaeological evidence for the cohesive westward movement of the Magyar federations. This transitional "Subotsi" layer, primarily localized in modern-day Ukraine, represents a critical chronological link where the Turkic nomadic traditions of the Khazar Khaganate's sphere began to crystallize into the specific material signature of the Hungarian conquest. When examining the morphological affinities of these sites, the focus rests on the near-identical execution of the partial horse burial, a practice that remained remarkably immune to the cultural pressures encountered during the trek across the Pontic-Caspian steppe. At sites such as Subotsi and Manvelivka, the anatomical arrangement of the equine remains, specifically the placement of the skull and the four distal limbs within a folded hide, mirrors the high-status burials found at Karos-Eperjesszög with forensic precision. This structural repetition suggests that the ritual practitioners accompanying the Magyar elite maintained a rigid adherence to a specialized mortuary code that was deeply rooted in the Turkic-Oghuric traditions of the Volga-Kama region. The Subotsi burials function as a diagnostic prototype; they document the moment when the diverse Turkic and Uralic elements of the federation unified their funerary aesthetics before descending into the Carpathian Basin. The spatial relationship between the human occupant and the separate horse-ledge (*padmaly*) remains consistent across these geographies, indicating that the social hierarchy governing the "watcher's perspective" was a fully mature system long before the settlement of the Danubian plains.

Beyond the skeletal remains, the stylistic evolution of the equestrian hardware found within these two regions confirms a direct metallurgical lineage. The silver-gilt harness mounts and the distinctively arched stirrups recovered from the Subotsi horizon share a decorative "palmette" vocabulary with the later Tisza River finds, a motif heavily influenced by the artistic standards of the Khazar and Abbasid frontiers. This shared artistic language proves that the Magyars brought a sophisticated, Turkic-influenced aesthetic that had already been refined in the Dnieper workshops. The morphology of the iron bits found in Subotsi, featuring the transition from archaic bone cheek-pieces to the more advanced S-shaped iron variants, appears virtually unchanged in the early Hungarian cemeteries of the tenth century, suggesting a continuity of both blacksmithing techniques and equestrian tactics. The affinity between the Subotsi and Tisza sites serves to collapse the perceived distance between the Eastern Turkic steppe and the Western Magyar settlements. By tracing the specific wear patterns on the horse bits and the consistent placement of the saddle-buckles within the grave shafts, archaeologists can reconstruct a society that viewed its material culture as a portable architecture of identity. The Subotsi horizon acts as the experimental phase of the conquest-era ritual, where the nomadic elites solidified the funerary standards that would eventually consolidate their dominance over the Pannonian landscape. Consequently, the Tisza River burials should be viewed as the final, matured expression of a ritual journey that began in the Turkic heartlands of the East, carried forward through the morphological persistence of the sacred mount and its metallic harness.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION REFLECTED THROUGH MARTIAL AND SARTORIAL ARTIFACTS

The belt in tenth-century Turkic and Magyar societies operated as a primary semiotic device, functioning as a non-verbal ledger of an individual's legal status and military rank. Within the context of graves, the presence of a "belt-set" (*veretes öv*), composed of silver, bronze, or gilded mounts, indicates a person's inclusion in the "belted warrior" class, a specific stratum of the nomadic elite entitled to bear arms and participate in tribal councils.

The leather belt was far more than a functional garment; it was a portable office, a "social spine" from which the essential tools of nomadic life, the knife, the fire-starter (*tűzszerszám*), and the sabretache, were suspended. The belt demarcated the physical and legal boundaries of the free man, and its removal in a social context was equivalent to a total loss of civil rights and ancestral standing. Archaeological data from the elite necropolises of the Upper Tisza reveals a direct correlation between the material complexity of the belt-mounts and the individual's position within the clan hierarchy. In high-status burials, such as those identified in the Karos clusters, belts are often adorned with twenty to thirty solid silver mounts, frequently executed in the "palmette" or "griffin" styles that characterize the post-Saltov artistic tradition. These mounts were not merely decorative; their quantity and composition served as a visual code for the wearer's seniority. A belt featuring gilded-silver mounts represented the apex of the military aristocracy, while simple bronze or unadorned leather belts identified the lower-ranking free warriors. The stratigraphic placement of these belts, often found still encircling the waist of the deceased or placed carefully alongside the torso, ensures that the individual's social identity remained intact during their transition into the subterranean realm. The craftsmanship of the belt-mounts also provides a window into the metallurgical exchange between the Turkic east and the Carolingian west. While the fundamental structure of the belt remained rooted in the steppe tradition, the use of *niello* inlay and specific casting techniques reveals an integration of foreign artistic influences. This hybridity suggests a society that utilized its most personal sartorial artifacts to project a sense of both ancestral continuity and contemporary power. The belt was an active participant in the "landscape of memory" discussed in previous sections; it bound the warrior to the historical legacy of the Volga-Kama region while simultaneously asserting their dominant role in the new Carpathian territories.

Social tier	Primary material	Decorative technique	Artifact association
Clan leadership	Gilded silver	Niello, high-relief casting	Sabretache plate, ornate sword
Elite warrior	Solid silver	Palmette incisions	Archery gear, belt mounts
Free clansman	Bronze / iron	Simple geometry / unadorned	Basic utility knife, quiver

Table 2

Note. The "unbolting" of a deceased individual before interment would have been a catastrophic ritual failure, as it would effectively strip the soul of its legal persona before it entered the ancestral halls. Consequently, the preservation of the belt-set within the grave shaft acts as a final, unyielding declaration of the individual's loyalty to the tribal federation.

METALLURGICAL PRESTIGE AND THE ARTISTIC VOCABULARY OF THE TARSOLY PLATE

The *tarsolylemez*, or the silver-gilt sabretache plate, represents the aesthetic and symbolic pinnacle of the tenth-century Magyar elite's material culture, functioning as a definitive heraldic marker within the martial hierarchy. These ornate metal facings, which adorned the leather pouches containing fire-starting tools and personal items, are recovered almost exclusively from the "founder" burials of high-status clan clusters, such as those at Karos-Eperjesszög and Rakamaz. The limited number of these artifacts, barely exceeding forty significant specimens across the entire Carpathian Basin, underscores their role as exclusive insignia granted only to the highest echelons of the military aristocracy. Beyond its role as a functional container, the sabretache plate acted as a permanent, shimmering surface upon which the clan's ancestral lineage and its claim to divine protection were publicly declared.

The intricate "palmette" ornamentation that dominates these plates provides a direct visual bridge to the artistic traditions of the broader Turkic world, specifically echoing the Sassanid and Abbasid influences mediated through the Khazar Khaganate. These stylized floral motifs, characterized by symmetrical, interlocking vines and leaf-clusters, are frequently interpreted as an abstract representation of the "Tree of Life" (*Világfa*), a central pillar of the Eurasian cosmological order. The execution of these designs involved sophisticated metallurgical techniques, including chasing, punching, and the application of mercury gilding to create a contrast between the polished silver foliage and the recessed, often niello-darkened backgrounds. This play of light served to activate the plate during movement, ensuring that the warrior's status remained visible even across the dusty, sun-drenched horizons of the steppe.

Panel [A]

Panel [B]

Figure 2

Tree-of-Life Motifs in Anatolian Carpet Tradition and on the Karos-Eperjesszög Silver-Gilt Sabretache Plate

Note. Panel [A] presents a tree-of-life motif in Anatolian carpet tradition. Panel [B] presents the silver-gilt sabretache plate from Karos-Eperjesszög. A stylized "Tree of Life" motif from an Anatolian Decorated tarsoly plate with palmette motifs, carpet, representing the cosmological connection representing elite martial identity and reflecting between earth, sky, and the spiritual realm. The steppe artistic traditions, influenced by Khazar motifs, function as symbols of continuity and Abbasid metalwork as well as apotropaic devices within Turkic visual culture *(after Madame Ottoman; cf. broader Anatolian textile traditions)*.

An examination of the "unfilled" or negative spaces within the palmette designs reveals a distinct apotropaic function, where the density of the pattern was intended to ward off malevolent spiritual forces. This protective symbolism mirrors the "subterranean resilience" discussed in the architectural analysis of the grave shaft, as the plate continued to shield the individual's essence long after their physical demise. The specific layout of the motifs, often emanating from a central, rooted point and expanding toward the sky, replicates the vertical axis of the nomadic universe. Consequently, the sabretache was a ritual shield, a piece of portable sacred geometry that connected the wearer to the cosmic rhythms of growth and endurance.

In the context of the migration from the Volga-Ural regions, the sabretache plate serves as a crucial piece of "material DNA" that survived the logistical pressures of the journey. While the leather components of the pouch inevitably decayed, the survival of the silver plates allows archaeologists to trace the persistence of specific artistic workshops that moved with the federations. The morphological similarity between the plates found in the Upper Tisza and the earlier mounts from the Subotsi horizon confirms that this heraldic tradition was fully matured long before the settlement of the Danubian terraces. The *tarsolylemez* remains the ultimate testament to a society that utilized metallurgy as a language of power, turning the functional gear of a horseman into a permanent monument of the Turkic–Magyar identity.

PALMETTE FOLIAGE AND FLORAL SYMBOLISM ACROSS THE STEPPE HORIZONS

The inclusion of the composite reflex bow within the burial assemblage represents a synthesis of biological materials and aerodynamic engineering. While the organic components of the bow, the sinew, wood, and glue, inevitably succumb to the taphonomic pressures of the grave, the survival of the bone and antler reinforcement plates (*iyahs*) provides a rigid, fossilized blueprint of the weapon's original power. These plates, recovered in high-status clusters throughout the Upper Tisza and the earlier Subotsi horizons indicate the presence of a specialized military class whose entire existence was predicated on the mastery of long-range kinetic force. The bow was a personal extension of the warrior's physiology, and its placement within the grave ensured that the individual's role as a protector of the *Gens* remained unchallenged in the afterlife. The stratigraphic positioning of the quiver (*tegez*) and its accompanying arrows reveals a meticulous ritual choreography designed to keep the weapon ready for immediate deployment. Arrows are frequently found bundled alongside the right femur or placed within reaching distance of the hand, their iron heads often pointing toward the feet to facilitate a rapid, upward draw from the subterranean chamber. This spatial arrangement mirrors the active-combat posture of the nomadic light cavalryman, where the speed of the first shot dictated the outcome of the skirmish. The morphology of the arrowheads themselves, ranging from broad, leaf-shaped blades for soft targets to narrow, armor-piercing "bodkins," documents a society that was in constant dialogue with the diverse military architectures of both the Turkic East and the

Carolingian West. Each arrowhead is a forensic record of a tactical decision, reflecting the specific types of opposition the federations anticipated during their westward expansion. Beyond its lethality, the bow served as a potent symbol of social and legal adulthood within the Turkic–Magyar hierarchy. The engineering required to produce a single reflex bow demanded a multi-year manufacturing cycle, involving the seasonal curing of bone and the precise tensioning of animal sinew. Owning such a weapon was a privilege reserved for the free man, and its deposition in the grave functioned as a posthumous verification of his citizenship and martial honor. In the elite burials of Karos, the quivers were often embellished with bone carvings or leather appliqués that shared the same "palmette" aesthetic seen in the sabretache plates. This stylistic unity suggests that the entire martial kit was viewed as a singular, cohesive heraldic system, where the bow and the belt worked in tandem to broadcast the individual's rank to both the living and the dead. Thus, the material remains of the bow and quiver collapse the distance between the domestic and the martial spheres of nomadic life. The same hands that crafted the intricate silver mounts for the belt were responsible for the delicate fletching of the arrows and the carving of the bow-plates, creating a culture where technical precision was inextricably linked to social standing. By interring these weapons alongside the warrior, the community consolidated the narrative of a life defined by the tension of the string and the flight of the shaft. The grave became a permanent, subterranean armory, a silent testament to a migration that was as much an engineering triumph as it was a territorial conquest.

GENDER DYNAMICS IN FUNERARY CONTEXTS

The female burial assemblages within the tenth-century Turkic–Magyar necropolises function as a sophisticated semiotic system, where the distribution of jewelry and dress accessories provides a precise stratigraphic record of a woman's life stage and her family's economic weight. Unlike the martial equipment of the men, which emphasizes individual rank within the military federation, feminine ornamentation is deeply rooted in the concept of "Hearth-Continuity" (*Ocak Sürekliliği*). Excavations at high-status sites such as Karos and Kenézlő reveal that a woman's social value was physically manifested through the weight and material of her head-dresses and hair-braid discs (*hajfonatkorong*). These silver or gilded-bronze discs, often found in pairs near the skull, are frequently decorated with the same palmette and griffin motifs observed in the male sabretache plates, suggesting that the clan's heraldic identity was shared equally across gender lines.

Figure 3
Gilded Silver Hair-Braid Disc from a Tenth-Century Burial at Rakamaz

Note. Gilded silver hair-braid disc from a 10th-century burial at Rakamaz, featuring stylized mythological bird motifs associated with protective and cosmological symbolism in early Hungarian elite female dress (see Rakamaz burial finds; cf. Tóth 2023; Hungarian National Museum).

The accumulation of these metallic ornaments indicates a transition from the "transient" status of a young bride to the "established" authority of a matriarch. In the burials of older women, the archaeological record often reveals a higher concentration of silver rings, beaded necklaces composed of carnelian and glass paste, and heavy "S-ended" earrings that distinguish the wearer as a senior member of the lineage. This generational layering of jewelry served a dual purpose: It functioned as a portable dowry that remained under the woman's personal jurisdiction and acted as a visual signal of her family's success in the competitive economy of the steppe. The presence of high-quality silver, often sourced from the same Abbasid and Khazar dirhams used to forge the warriors' belt-mounts, underscores a shared pool of wealth that flowed through both the battlefield and the yurt. Beyond mere aesthetics, the specific placement of these ornaments, such as the rows of small silver buttons (*pityke*) sewn onto the *kaftan*, reflects a rigid sartorial code that governed a woman's movement and public visibility. These buttons were not solely functional; their metallic glint and rhythmic sound during motion provided a non-verbal affirmation of the wearer's presence within the social space. This "audible hierarchy" ensured that a woman of high standing was recognized by both sight and sound, turning her very attire into an instrument of social communication. The persistence of these specific jewelry forms from the Volga-Ural regions to the Carpathian Basin proves that the feminine role was a pillar of the migration's logistical success, maintaining the cultural and ritual integrity of the clan during decades of displacement. Thus, the archaeological trace of the feminine hearth provides the necessary counterpoint to the warrior's grave. While the man's kit documented the external expansion and territorial claims of the federation, the woman's ornaments preserved the internal, genealogical memory of the tribe. By interring these artifacts with the deceased, the community ensured that the "hearth" remained lit even in the subterranean world, bridging the gap between the ancestral past of the East and the unfolding future of the Danubian terraces through the enduring brilliance of silver and stone.

THE MATERIAL LANGUAGE OF FEMALE ORNAMENTS AS KINSHIP SIGNIFIERS

The deposition of spindle whorls (*orsógomb*) and small utility knives within feminine burial contexts functions as a material testimony to the woman's central role as the primary architect of the nomadic household's micro-economy. Unlike the expansive, outward-facing martial equipment of the warriors, these domestic implements emphasize the interiority and cyclical nature of life within the yurt. A spindle whorl, typically fashioned from clay, bone, or occasionally semi-precious stone, represents the transformative power of the hearth, the ability to turn raw, chaotic fibers into organized, structural threads. This act of spinning was an ontological metaphor for the weaving of the clan’s fate, where the woman served as the literal and figurative weaver of the social fabric. In the high-status burials of the Carpathian Basin, the quality and placement of these tools suggest a deliberate ritualization of domesticity that transcends simple utility. When recovered from the graves of matriarchs, spindle whorls are often found near the left hand or tucked into small leather pouches, indicating that the capacity for production was a fundamental attribute of the deceased's soul. The presence of these tools highlights a dual-track hierarchy where control over textile production, and by extension, the creation of clothing and yurt-felt, was a significant source of political and familial leverage. The woman was the master of the “soft architecture” of the steppe, and her tools were the instruments through which the harsh environment of the Volga-Ural trek were rendered habitable.

Moreover, the small knives found in female graves, often distinguished by their delicate bone handles and silver-capped sheaths, articulate a different form of authority than the male saber. These blades were the primary instruments for the processing of food and the management of the immediate domestic space, marking the woman as the guardian of the hearth’s metabolic cycles. The stratigraphic association between these domestic tools and the prestigious “palmette” jewelry reveals a society that did not separate artistic beauty from functional labor. The same aesthetic language that adorned the warrior's harness was applied to the woman’s weaving tools, suggesting a unified cultural vision where every object, no matter its scale, contributed to the collective resilience of the federation. The survival of these humble artifacts across thousands of kilometers of migration provides a poignant record of cultural persistence. As the clans moved from the eastern riverbanks to the Danubian terraces, the technical standards of spinning and domestic management remained unchanged, acting as an anchor for the community’s identity in a shifting world. The spindle whorl, in its quiet and repetitive rotation, mirrored the seasonal cycles of the migration itself, a constant, stabilizing force that ensured the survival of the *Gens*. By interring these tools, the community consolidates the narrative of a woman whose hands constructed the very foundation of its physical and spiritual existence.

SARTORIAL PROJECTIONS OF INHERITED STATUS AND LINEAGE ACROSS GENERATIONS

The recovery of cowrie shells (*Monetaria moneta*) and semi-precious carnelian beads from tenth-century feminine burials identifies the steppe woman as a central node in the vast, intercontinental trade networks stretching from the Indian Ocean to the Baltic Sea. These items, found in significant concentrations within the high-status graves of the Upper Tisza and the earlier Subotsi-type horizons, represent far more than decorative surplus. In the cognitive framework of the Volga-Ural and Danubian federations, the cowrie shell was a potent amuletic device, its distinctive morphology serving as a universal symbol of fertility and protection against the "evil eye." The presence of these shells, often pierced and worn as part of a necklace or attached to the leather straps of the hair-braid discs, indicates that the female body was a sanctified space, shielded by exotic talismans that had traveled thousands of kilometers to reach the Carpathian frontier. The stratigraphic association of these shells with carnelian and rock crystal beads provides a material record of the "metabolic exchange" between the nomadic elite and the sophisticated urban centers of the Abbasid Caliphate and the Khazar Khaganate. Each bead was a unit of high-density value, a portable currency that the woman curated and wore as a public declaration of her lineage's commercial reach and spiritual fortification. Unlike the standardized military hardware of the warriors, these beads exhibit a high degree of individual variation, suggesting a culture that valued the unique "biography" of an object. A single carnelian bead, multifaceted and deep red, functioned as a chromatic anchor for the soul, its fiery hue believed to bolster the life-force of the wearer during the precarious cycles of migration and childbirth. Furthermore, the integration of these exotic materials into the traditional "palmette" aesthetic reveals a society that was remarkably adept at synthesizing foreign luxury with ancestral ritual. The cowrie shell was seamlessly incorporated into the sartorial grammar of the Turkic–Magyar woman, often hanging alongside the silver buttons and discs that defined her rank. This synthesis suggests that the feminine role involved the "domestication" of the exotic, turning the raw products of global trade into the sacred ornaments of the hearth. By wearing these items, the woman embodied the extent of the federation's worldview, connecting the local yurt to the distant shores of the East through the physical presence of the seashell. The survival of these delicate amulets within the grave shaft consolidates the narrative of a world where spiritual security was inextricably linked to economic agency. The cowrie and the carnelian were the silent guardians of the migration, providing a sense of metaphysical continuity as the clans navigated the treacherous transition between river systems and mountain passes. By interring these exotic beads with the deceased, the community ensured that the woman remained protected in the afterlife by the same global forces that had sustained her family during their earthly journey. Therefore, the grave became a museum of the Silk Road's westernmost reach, where the most intimate ornaments of a woman's life bore witness to the vast, interconnected reality of the medieval steppe.

ART AND SYMBOLISM

Material culture provides some of the most compelling evidence for reconstructing early Turkic–Hungarian cultural interactions, particularly where written sources remain fragmentary or retrospective. Beyond their aesthetic or utilitarian functions, ritual objects, ornamental motifs, and symbolic artifacts reveal deeper layers of shared cosmological thought and religious practice. In the context of early Eurasian steppe societies, visual symbolism functioned as a medium through which metaphysical concepts, such as sacred authority, transcendence, and communication with the spiritual world, were materially encoded and transmitted across generations (Eliade, 1964). The archaeological and ethnographic record suggests that many symbolic structures preserved in early Hungarian culture cannot be fully understood without reference to their broader Turkic and Inner Asian antecedents. One of the clearest indicators of this continuity is the persistence of avian symbolism, particularly in ritual headdresses and elite insignia. Across Siberian, Turkic, and Mongolic shamanic traditions, bird imagery represented ecstatic flight, spiritual mediation, and the soul's capacity to traverse cosmic boundaries. Shamanic costumes often imitated the morphology of birds through feathered crowns, wing-like appendages, and skeletal metallic structures intended to facilitate ritual transformation (Eliade, 1964). Bird-headed crowns and feathered headgear, widely attested in steppe archaeological contexts, symbolized not merely decoration but ontological metamorphosis—the ritual ascent of the shaman to celestial realms. Comparable symbolic structures appear in Hungarian cultural memory. The Turul, the mythic bird central to Hungarian dynastic origin narratives, preserves this ancient association between avian imagery and divine legitimacy. Likewise, ethnographic accounts of the *táltos* describe supernatural flight and extraordinary mobility, suggesting continuity with broader Eurasian concepts of ecstatic soul-travel (Diószegi, 1967). These parallels indicate that bird symbolism functioned simultaneously as a political emblem, a spiritual technology, and a cosmological signifier linking Hungarian traditions to the wider Turkic-steppe world. Equally significant is the widespread presence of the World Tree (Axis Mundi) motif, which occupies a central place in both archaeological ornamentation and mythological imagination. Within shamanic cosmology, the World Tree connects the underworld, the human realm, and the celestial sphere, serving as the principal route of spiritual ascent and descent (Eliade, 1964). Archaeological representations of tree-like forms on horse harnesses, weapon decorations, and ritual objects from the Hungarian conquest period suggest that this cosmological model was embedded within material culture. The symbolic importance of the World Tree is further reflected in Hungarian folk tradition through the recurring motif of the *égig érő fa* ("sky-high tree"), which preserves the same vertical cosmological logic. This symbolic axis frequently appears in conjunction with solar and astral imagery, including representations of the Sun, Moon, and celestial pathways such as the Milky Way. Among both Turkic and early Hungarian populations, celestial bodies were understood not merely as natural phenomena but as animate or sacred entities participating in cosmic order. Their appearance in heraldic traditions, ritual symbolism, and decorative art suggests a shared astral framework rooted in steppe religious traditions (Róna-Tas, 1999). The symbolic association between heavenly bodies and political legitimacy may also reflect Tengrist influences, particularly the concept of divinely sanctioned rulership derived from celestial favor. Animal symbolism more broadly further reinforces these intercultural connections. Motifs such as griffins, antlered crowns, serpents, and dragon-like figures appear throughout steppe material culture and later Hungarian visual traditions. Antlered ritual crowns, known from Inner Asian shamanic contexts, symbolized transformation and union with protective animal spirits, while serpent and dragon imagery often marked liminal or underworld domains. Although such symbols were later reinterpreted within Christian visual culture, their structural role within earlier cosmological systems suggests significant continuity rather than rupture. Elite artifacts also reveal the political and intercultural dimensions of symbolic exchange. The decorated belt (*kur*), richly ornamented tarsoly plates, and ceremonial sabers found in Hungarian conquest-era graves served not only as indicators of social rank but also as carriers of symbolic meaning rooted in Turkic political culture. The ceremonial significance of the sword, for instance, extended beyond warfare into sacred legitimacy and oath-making traditions, echoing broader steppe practices associated with divine authority and martial sovereignty. Similarly, the famous Kyiv sword, whose hybrid stylistic composition combines Scandinavian craftsmanship with ornamentation closely aligned with Hungarian aesthetic preferences, exemplifies the mobility of artistic forms and the permeability of cultural boundaries across the Eurasian steppe.

Together, these material and symbolic continuities demonstrate that early Hungarian culture emerged not in isolation but within a dynamic intercultural environment shaped by sustained interaction with Turkic-speaking peoples. Archaeological motifs such as bird-headed crowns, World-Tree symbolism, sacred weaponry, and decorative ornamentation preserve traces of a shared symbolic vocabulary that transcended ethnic and political boundaries. Through these artifacts, it becomes possible to reconstruct not only patterns of contact, but also deeper processes of mutual cultural formation that connected early Hungarian identity to the broader religious and cosmological traditions of the Eurasian steppe.

The continuity of Hungarian decorative art cannot be fully understood without situating it within the broader cultural sphere of the Eurasian steppe, where material culture functioned not merely as aesthetic expression but as a semiotic system through which communities articulated social hierarchy, ethnic affiliation, and cosmological beliefs. The material and visual culture of the conquering Hungarians emerged as part of this interconnected world of the ninth and tenth centuries, reflecting both shared steppe traditions and distinctive local adaptations. Among the most characteristic features of early Hungarian ornamentation is the palmette motif, which became one of the defining visual markers of Hungarian elite craftsmanship and remains one of the most significant symbols of cultural continuity within Hungarian decorative heritage. Appearing prominently on silver prestige objects, such as sabretache plates and belt mounts, the stylized floral composition, typically consisting of three to five petals interconnected by intricate tendrils and vegetal scrollwork, demonstrates not only technical sophistication but also a highly developed symbolic vocabulary. The densely arranged, geometrically ordered yet dynamically expanding ornamentation suggests a visual representation of vitality, regeneration, and cosmological order, concepts deeply embedded in steppe symbolic thought. Although "palmette" ornamentation was widespread among nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppe, its particular stylistic formulation in the Hungarian archaeological record constitutes a distinctive regional development rather than a mere imitation of external models. Scholars have argued that this uniquely Hungarian visual language may also preserve elements of earlier Carpathian Basin traditions, particularly the late Avar "griffin-and-vine" ornamental culture, in which vegetal motifs and "Tree of Life" imagery had already occupied a central symbolic position (Róna-Tas, 1999; Türk, 2014). The technical mastery demonstrated in Hungarian metalworking further reflects a process of cultural continuity shaped by both inheritance and exchange. Hungarian goldsmiths and silversmiths possessed highly advanced metallurgical knowledge, including casting, engraving, and finishing techniques that were part of a broader shared technological repertoire across the steppe. Yet these artisans incorporated distinctive aesthetic choices that transformed common technological practices into a recognizable Hungarian style. The mobility of craftsmen likely played a crucial role in this process. Some may have migrated with Hungarian communities from earlier eastern settlements, while others were possibly local or foreign specialists who adapted their work to the preferences of Hungarian elites after the conquest of the Carpathian Basin. Artistic influence was not necessarily dependent on large-scale population movement; trade routes, diplomatic gift exchange, and military campaigns also served as important channels through which visual motifs and symbolic objects circulated. This way, decorative art became a dynamic medium through which external influences were selectively appropriated and integrated into an evolving Hungarian cultural identity (Bálint, 2010).

The symbolic continuity of Hungarian decorative traditions is equally evident in the funerary practices preserved in Protestant wooden grave markers, or *kopjafák*, where visual symbolism extended beyond form to include a sophisticated regional color code and a repertoire of vegetal motifs. These grave markers constituted one of the most complex symbolic systems in Hungarian folk culture, functioning as communicative devices through which communities could identify the age, social standing, and circumstances of death of the deceased. The use of color carried significant meaning: younger individuals were often commemorated with brighter tones such as blue or blue-green, while older members of the community were associated with more restrained colors, including white, yellow, or black. Red frequently indicated violent or unexpected death. Although these chromatic conventions were not standardized across the entire Hungarian-speaking world, local communities developed coherent symbolic systems that were readily interpretable by those familiar with their cultural context (Kunt, 1983). The vegetal motifs carved into these grave markers further reinforced their symbolic depth. The tulip, one of the most enduring motifs in Hungarian folk ornamentation, often appeared not only as surface decoration but also as a structural element integrated into the overall form of the grave marker. Its repeated association with life, fertility, and renewal reflects broader Eurasian symbolic traditions. Similarly, the willow tree, frequently associated with mourning and transience, became a prominent funerary motif, visually articulating themes of grief and impermanence. The inclusion of *bilyog*, or ownership marks originally used for identifying livestock, also reveals a practical and symbolic concern with continuity, ensuring the identification of family burial sites in largely illiterate rural communities and maintaining a tangible connection between the living and their ancestors. The religious and symbolic dimensions of Hungarian decorative culture become even more apparent when examined in relation to debates surrounding idols, fetishes, and sacred representations in early Hungarian and steppe belief systems. The question of whether pre-Christian Hungarians practiced forms of idolatry has long occupied historians of religion and cultural historians. Some early scholars, such as Cornides, argued that the ancient Hungarians worshipped a single supreme deity and did not engage in idol worship, interpreting medieval textual references to "immortal gods" as rhetorical conventions rather than literal theological descriptions (Cornides, 1801). Others, including Kállay and Ipolyi, challenged this interpretation, suggesting that the apparent absence of idols in surviving records may reflect deliberate suppression by Christian chroniclers rather than their actual nonexistence (Ipolyi, 1854; Kállay, 1861). Royal decrees and ecclesiastical prohibitions against the destruction of "false gods" and "filthy idols" during the Christianization period strongly imply that sacred objects associated with pre-Christian religious practice were indeed present.

Comparative evidence from Hunnic and Avar contexts further supports this interpretation. Byzantine chroniclers such as Theophanes and Malalas recorded the existence of silver and electrum idols among Hunnic populations, while archaeological and textual evidence indicates that precious-metal sacred objects also played a role in Avar ritual life. These objects were not necessarily "gods" in the strict theological sense but may have functioned as mediating devices between humans and the spiritual realm. Particularly significant are accounts preserved by Pápai-Páriz Ferenc, who described a Hungarian marital custom in which the bride and groom exchanged small silver divine images that they wore throughout their lives as protective objects. Though the historical reliability of these reports has been debated, similar descriptions in ninth-century European sources suggest that such amuletic traditions may indeed preserve fragments of earlier Hungarian religious symbolism (Pápai-Páriz, 1984). These silver figures likely functioned as household guardians or protective spirits, comparable to the metal fetishes used among Siberian and Finno-Ugric peoples. Ethnographic parallels among the Voguls, Ostyaks, and Samoyedic populations offer further insight into the symbolic significance of such metallic sacred objects. Among these groups, copper and bronze anthropomorphic figures were believed to possess protective power, often serving as aids in healing, divination, or ensuring successful hunting. Their durability was thought to enhance their spiritual potency, making metal a preferred medium for sacred representation. Such practices were closely linked to shamanic activity, as shamans frequently created, consecrated, and utilized these objects in ritual contexts (Eliade, 1964). Within Hungarian folk belief, fragmented survivals of this earlier fetishistic worldview can still be detected in narratives surrounding magical beings such as the *lidérc* and the *táltos*, whose powers are often associated with enchanted objects and supernatural mediation. These continuities suggest that Hungarian decorative motifs may preserve not only aesthetic traditions but also traces of an earlier cosmological framework in which objects served as active participants in sacred communication. This interpretation gains further depth when considered alongside the visual expressions of shamanic cosmology preserved in Hungarian ornamental culture. Central to Eurasian shamanic thought is the tripartite model of the universe, heaven, earth, and underworld, linked by a cosmic axis, or axis mundi, which enables passage between ontological realms. Mircea Eliade identified this symbolic center as one of the most universal structures of archaic religious consciousness, manifested in sacred mountains, cosmic pillars, and, most prominently, the World Tree (Eliade, 1958). The World Tree, whose roots descend into the underworld while its branches reach the heavens, functions as both cosmological map and spiritual pathway. In shamanic practice, it is often depicted on drums and ritual garments, where it serves as a visual guide for ecstatic ascent and metaphysical travel.

The Hungarian folkloric motif of the "sky-high tree" (*égig érő fa*) and narratives describing the *táltos* climbing ritual trees strongly suggest the preservation of this archaic symbolic system. Within Hungarian decorative art, particularly in palmette and life-tree motifs, this cosmological symbolism appears to have been translated into ornamental form. Thus, these motifs may be understood not merely as decorative embellishments but as visual expressions of regeneration, sacred order, and the enduring connection between the human and transcendent realms. The recurring image of birds resting upon the branches of the cosmic tree, as well as the eagle or Turul positioned at its summit, reinforces this interpretation. The Turul, in particular, embodies divine authority, ancestral guidance, and the transmission of sacred legitimacy, while the "bird on a pole" motif, also present in Hungarian *táltos* staffs, demonstrates remarkable continuity with shamanic visual traditions, stretching from Paleolithic cave imagery to Siberian ritual artifacts (Hoppál, 2007).

Together, these interconnected strands of ornamental continuity, funerary symbolism, sacred object traditions, and cosmological imagery reveal that Hungarian decorative art cannot be reduced to aesthetic production alone. Rather, it represents the material articulation of a deeply embedded symbolic worldview shaped by centuries of interaction between Finno-Ugric heritage, Turkic influence, and the broader cultural matrix of the Eurasian steppe. The persistence of motifs such as the palmette, the Tree of Life, vegetal grave marker carvings, and protective metallic representations demonstrates how visual culture functioned as a vehicle for preserving collective memory and spiritual identity. Through these symbols, Hungarian communities maintained a sense of continuity with an ancestral cosmology in which art served not only to decorate the visible world but also to render tangible the invisible structures of sacred existence. The symbolic centrality of the *égig érő fa* ("sky-high tree") further deepens the understanding of how Hungarian decorative motifs preserve an archaic cosmological framework inherited through early Turkic–Hungarian and broader Eurasian steppe interactions. Far beyond its later folkloric role as a recurring element in Hungarian folktales, the World Tree constitutes one of the most fundamental structural principles of shamanic cosmology, serving as the axis mundi through which communication between the different ontological levels of existence becomes possible. Within this vertical cosmological model, the universe is divided into three interconnected domains, Heaven, Earth, and the Underworld, whose separation can only be traversed through the mediating presence of a cosmic axis. As Mircea Eliade has demonstrated, this symbolic center represents not merely a mythological abstraction but the essential condition of sacred orientation, enabling ritual passage and ontological transformation (Eliade, 1958). The World Tree, rooted in the depths of the underworld while extending its branches into the highest celestial spheres, embodies this connection in its most developed mythic form and functions simultaneously as a symbol of cosmic order, regeneration, and metaphysical accessibility.

Within shamanic traditions across Inner Asia and Siberia, the World Tree was not only conceptual but actively ritualized as the primary stage of ecstatic ascent. During initiation ceremonies and healing rites, shamans physically climbed the earthly counterpart of the cosmic tree, typically a birch marked with seven or nine carved notches representing successive celestial levels. Each stage of ascent symbolized entry into increasingly elevated spiritual realms, allowing the shaman to communicate with divine beings, retrieve lost souls, or acquire sacred knowledge. Among Altai shamans, this ritual ascent was accompanied by detailed verbal descriptions of each heavenly sphere encountered during the journey, while among Buryat communities the ritual birch erected within the yurt functioned explicitly as a "gatekeeper," providing access to the heavenly domain (Hoppál, 2007). The persistence of related motifs within Hungarian folklore, particularly accounts of the *táltos* leaping onto impossibly slender trees or ascending skyward through arboreal pathways, strongly suggests the survival of this archaic ecstatic symbolism. Therefore, such narratives should be interpreted not as purely imaginative folklore but as cultural residues of an earlier ritual technology rooted in shamanic cosmology. The cosmological significance of the World Tree extends beyond ritual ascent to encompass fundamental beliefs regarding the origin, circulation, and destiny of human souls. Among numerous Siberian and Uralic peoples, including the Yakuts, Nanai, and Dolgans, the branches of the cosmic tree were understood as the resting place of unborn or returning souls, often imagined as small birds waiting to descend into earthly existence. These "soul-birds" occupied nests among the tree's branches until summoned into human life, establishing the World Tree as both a site of spiritual generation and a symbol of genealogical continuity. In shamanic initiation visions, the candidate's soul is frequently brought before the World Tree, where a sacred eagle, often interpreted as an epiphany of the supreme celestial power, guards or incubates the souls of future shamans at the summit of the tree (Eliade, 1964). The shaman's role as psychopomp similarly depends on this cosmological structure, requiring the retrieval of lost souls from the branches of the tree or their guided return from heavenly realms. Such beliefs resonate strongly with Hungarian folkloric and mythological traditions, in which birds, particularly the Turul, occupy central mediating roles between human ancestry and divine authority. Therefore, the repeated depiction of birds perched upon Tree-of-life motifs in Hungarian decorative art may encode far more than aesthetic symbolism; it may preserve a visual memory of a cosmology in which trees and birds together mediated the cyclical movement between life, death, and rebirth. This symbolic complex gains additional significance through its close association with the shamanic drum, itself often understood as a material extension of the World Tree. Ethnographic evidence indicates that shamans frequently regarded their drums not only as ritual instruments but as cosmological devices constructed from branches of the sacred tree itself. Initiatory visions often describe the shaman receiving direct instruction from divine beings to fashion the drum from a specific branch of the cosmic tree, embedding the instrument within the metaphysical geography of the universe (Hoppál, 2007). By beating the drum, the shaman symbolically re-entered the cosmic center and initiated the same transcendent journey that could otherwise be enacted through ritual tree-climbing. The frequent visual pairing of tree imagery with celestial symbols such as the Sun, Moon, and stars on shamanic drum surfaces reinforces this equivalence between instrument and cosmological axis. From this perspective, the ornamental vegetal motifs found in early Hungarian material culture, particularly the Tree-of-Life and palmette designs, may be interpreted not only as symbolic remnants of cosmological thought but also as material analogues of ritual technologies designed to facilitate sacred movement between worlds. The broader vertical cosmology preserved within Hungarian and related Ural-Altaic traditions further illuminates the symbolic framework within which these motifs acquired meaning. This worldview was fundamentally structured around a tripartite universe consisting of the celestial upper world, the terrestrial middle world, and the subterranean realm of the dead. The upper sphere, often identified linguistically with concepts of height and brightness, functioned as the dwelling place of divine powers and blessed souls. Linguistic evidence linking the Hungarian *menny* ("heaven") with cognate terms in Finno-Ugric languages associated with elevation suggests deep historical continuity in this conception of sacred verticality (Róna-Tas, 1999). In contrast, the underworld represented not merely a place of death, but a distinct ontological domain inhabited by ancestral spirits and supernatural entities. Particularly relevant is the possible connection between the Hungarian *manó* and the Finno-Ugric *Mana* or *Manala*, terms associated with underworld deities and the realm of the dead. Therefore, expressions preserved in Hungarian idiomatic language may retain "fossilized" traces of an older cosmological lexicon in which such figures represented powerful chthonic forces rather than the diminutive folkloric beings they later became. The importance of this tripartite cosmology lies not in the strict separation of its domains but in the possibility of movement between them. The *táltos*, as ritual mediator, embodied this permeability by traversing the boundaries between heavenly, earthly, and underworld realms in states of trance or ecstatic concealment. Wells, springs, mountains, and trees were regarded as sacred thresholds precisely because they represented points at which the cosmic layers intersected. The World Tree, as the most complete articulation of this principle, served simultaneously as cosmic pillar, genealogical archive, spiritual pathway, and symbolic guarantee of universal coherence. Therefore, its persistence in Hungarian folktales, visionary traditions, and decorative art reflects the remarkable endurance of a symbolic system in which the cosmos was imagined as a living, vertically integrated organism. In the context of Hungarian decorative art, this cosmological framework offers a critical interpretive lens through which recurring motifs such as the palmette and Tree of Life can be understood. Unlike purely ornamental embellishments, these vegetal forms may represent condensed visual expressions of a sacred worldview centered on renewal, interconnectedness, and transcendence. Their continuity from conquest-period metalwork to later folk art suggests that the symbolic vocabulary of Hungarian ornaments preserved essential elements of an earlier Eurasian spiritual heritage, even as explicit ritual meanings gradually faded. Through these motifs, the ancient logic of vertical cosmology remained materially present, enabling successive generations to engage, perhaps unconsciously, with inherited conceptions of cosmic order and metaphysical passage. Therefore, the *égig érő fa* should be understood not simply as a literary or folkloric motif but as one of the most enduring visual and conceptual bridges connecting Hungarian decorative art to the broader religious imagination of the Eurasian steppe. The symbolic relationship between sacred architecture and cosmological order provides an additional interpretive framework through which early Turkic–Hungarian religious interactions can be understood. Beyond decorative motifs and mythological narratives, the spatial organization of ritual life itself reflects a deeply embedded cosmological logic in which human habitation functioned as a material reproduction of the universe. Within Inner Asian shamanic traditions, the dwelling, particularly the yurt, was not merely a utilitarian shelter but a microcosmic model of the cosmos (*imago mundi*), structured according to the same vertical principles that governed sacred geography and spiritual mobility. This architectural symbolism, preserved across Turkic, Mongolic, and Uralic cultural spheres, reveals another layer of continuity between steppe cosmology and the symbolic foundations of early Hungarian religious imagination (Eliade, 1964). Central to this spatial cosmology was the principle of the axis mundi, the vertical world-axis that connected heaven, earth, and the underworld. In nomadic steppe societies, this cosmic pillar was architecturally embodied either in the central support pole of the dwelling or, in the case of the circular yurt, in the roof aperture through which smoke escaped. This opening, often conceptualized as the "Sky Hole" or celestial gateway, represented the terrestrial counterpart of the cosmic opening in the heavens, frequently associated with the Pole Star. Among Mongolic and Turkic peoples, the Pole Star was understood as the fixed pivot of the celestial tent and was referred to symbolically as the "Golden Pillar," the "Iron Pillar," or the "Nail of the Sky," emphasizing its role as the stabilizing center of the universe (Eliade, 1964). Thus, the yurt's smoke hole functioned not merely as an architectural necessity but as a ritual threshold through which communication between worlds became possible.

Within shamanic practice, this symbolic opening acquired direct ritual significance. During an ecstatic ascent, the shaman symbolically climbed a ritual birch tree erected within the yurt, an earthly manifestation of the World Tree, before passing through the smoke hole into the celestial realms. Among the Buryats, for instance, this ritual tree, known as udesi-burkhan ("the doorkeeper"), was positioned so that its upper branches extended through the roof opening, physically connecting the interior ritual space with the heavens above. This act represented far more than symbolic theater; it enacted the temporary restoration of primordial cosmic permeability, allowing the shaman to re-establish communication between separated ontological domains (Hoppál, 2007). Such ritualized vertical movement parallels the broader cosmological significance of the Hungarian *égig érő fa* ("sky-high tree"), where ascent similarly signifies access to transcendent knowledge and divine authority. The symbolic identification of dwelling and cosmos also reflects a broader ontological principle fundamental to archaic religious consciousness: Sacred space must be constructed through orientation around a fixed center. Eliade (1959) argues that for religious humanity, undifferentiated space remains chaotic and uninhabitable until a hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred, reveals a stable center. Establishing this center effectively creates the world, transforming amorphous territory into an ordered cosmos. In this context, every house becomes a ritualized reconstruction of creation itself, and inhabiting such a space constitutes an ontological act of world-making. Therefore, the central pillar or celestial opening is not simply symbolic but existentially necessary, anchoring human life within a meaningful cosmic framework. This understanding helps illuminate why nomadic architectural symbolism holds such importance for reconstructing early Hungarian religious mentality. Although the original portable structures of pre-conquest Hungarian communities have not survived, linguistic, folkloric, and comparative ethnographic evidence suggests that similar cosmological models informed their perception of sacred space. The recurrent association of elevated points, sacred trees, smoke openings, and vertical passageways in Hungarian folk tradition indicates the persistence of this worldview long after sedentarization and Christianization. The symbolic logic of the yurt likely survived not in literal architectural continuity but through transformed ritual symbols embedded in folklore, domestic customs, and visual culture. The concept of the dwelling as *imago mundi* also finds compelling parallels in broader Eurasian traditions, reinforcing the universality of this symbolic structure while highlighting its local adaptations. Eliade (1964) describes how various indigenous societies conceptualized their homes as miniature universes: The sacred wigwams of North American peoples mirrored cosmic directions; the ritual houses of Southeast Asian communities reproduced mythic creation narratives; and the Dayak house of Borneo symbolically rested upon the back of a primordial water-serpent while incorporating a sacred tree motif into its internal structure. Particularly relevant is the Dayak representation of the World Tree within the domestic sphere, where a ritual parasol symbolizes the cosmic tree connecting terrestrial and divine realms. This demonstrates that the integration of arboreal cosmology and sacred architecture constitutes a widespread archaic pattern, one that also informs the Hungarian symbolic repertoire.

Therefore, within the Hungarian context, the persistence of vertical cosmological symbolism may be interpreted not only through mythological motifs such as the World Tree or Turul, but also through spatial imagination itself. The home, like the decorated object, could function as a mediator between visible and invisible worlds. This perspective broadens the understanding of decorative continuity by situating visual motifs within a larger cosmological system. Thus, the palmette, Tree of Life, and sacred bird motifs discussed previously may be understood as portable expressions of the same worldview materially enacted in the structure of sacred dwellings and ritual movement through vertical space. Ultimately, the symbolism of the "Sky Hole" and the cosmological architecture of the yurt reveals that early Turkic–Hungarian interactions extended beyond shared artistic vocabulary into the realm of lived sacred experience. The continuity between architectural symbolism, shamanic ascent, and decorative motifs suggests the persistence of an integrated cosmological model in which the human world remained structurally connected to transcendent reality. Through the symbolic center, whether embodied in the World Tree, the smoke hole, the sacred pillar, or the decorated artifact, the individual and community could orient themselves within a meaningful universe. This enduring symbolic system helps explain why ancient cosmological concepts continued to resonate in Hungarian folk memory and material culture, even after the original ritual frameworks had faded. In this sense, the Hungarian decorative tradition preserves not only aesthetic heritage but also the residual architecture of an earlier sacred worldview, one profoundly shaped by the cosmological imagination of the Eurasian steppe (Eliade, 1959; Hoppál, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Within the scope of this study, evidence drawn from the fields of linguistics, archeology, mythology, and ethnohistory points to a single and significant finding: Neither early Hungarian history nor Turkish history can be fully understood in isolation. By eliminating the historical academic distinction that has long divided these disciplines, this diachronic analysis reveals a deeply intertwined, multifaceted cultural synthesis. The findings of this article demonstrate that the early Hungarians were not passive recipients of nomadic traditions, nor were the Turkic steppe peoples static actors; rather, their long-term contact revealed a dynamic, multi-ethnic model of mutual cultural formation.

This cultural convergence is clearly evident in the artifacts preserved along the migration route stretching from the Ural Mountains to the Carpathians. In particular, the evolution of horse-riding equipment over time serves as the strongest evidence of this phenomenon. The ancient, heavy, round iron stirrups of the Volga region gradually evolved into the elegant, pear-shaped steel stirrups of the Upper Tisza region. This technological development indicates that we are not dealing with randomly migrating groups, but rather a confederation of tribes with strong logistical capabilities that were highly organized and militarily united. The community's funerary architecture, meanwhile, reveals the simultaneous application of both practical solutions and strict religious rules. Examples of this include the use of waterproof birch bark to protect the graves from moisture, the ritualistic layered burial of only specific parts of the horse, and the unwavering alignment of the graves along a west–east axis. All these shared customs prove that a deep-rooted and mature cultural framework, which took shape in the Eastern steppes, was successfully transmitted, without any alteration, all the way to the Danubian plains.

The evidence spans from Old Turkic loanwords in Hungarian administrative and agricultural vocabularies to the Manichaean iconographic motifs of the Subotsi horizon. When met with the structural parallels of the legend of the Csodaszarvas and archaeogenetic proof of population blending in Conquest-period graves, these records point not to parallel histories, but to a singular, shared history shaped through continuous interaction. The interactions were not one sided. The Hungarians were not merely passive recipients of Turkish cultural influence. Similarly, the Turkic peoples of the steppe did not remain unchanged as a result of their long-term contact with the Finno-Ugric peoples. The interaction was productive for both sides, giving rise to new mythological syntheses, new social structures, new material vocabularies, and, ultimately, new identities. In conclusion, the diachronic analysis approach taken in this article presents this process not as a single moment of cultural transmissions, but as a cumulative and ongoing process. The resulting cultures represent a longstanding, multilayered model of intertwining.

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How did local armies and intelligence practices on the Hungarian frontier shape the course of the Second Siege of Vienna and Ottoman-Habsburg diplomatic relations?

Authors: *Anna Gonda*[3], *Ahmet Şen*[2], *Öykü Demirbaş*[2], *Bence Tachu*[3]
Advisors: *Ela Bozok, PhD*[1], *Lili Gerda Hegyi*[3], *Nimród Kelemen*[3]

[1] *Sabancı University*
[2] *TEV İnanç High School*
[3] *Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC)*

Abstract

This paper examines how local armies and intelligence practices on the Hungarian frontier shaped both the course of the Second Siege of Vienna (1683) and Ottoman–Habsburg diplomatic relations. It argues that early modern intelligence was not a centralized or objective system, but a decentralized and socially embedded process in which knowledge was produced, filtered, and transformed by a wide range of actors, including frontier soldiers, intermediaries, envoys, and local elites. The paper illustrates that borders were dynamic zones of interaction rather than fixed lines. The study also highlights how information circulated through overlapping military, diplomatic, and commercial networks and discusses the effectiveness of rumors.
Focusing on Hungary as a contested frontier, the paper demonstrates that local actors possessed critical situational awareness and shaped intelligence according to their personal, political, and strategic interests. Ottoman reliance on non-local forces and intermediaries, combined with the filtering of reports through administrative hierarchies, produced overly optimistic assessments of Habsburg weakness. Figures such as Imre Thököly and the Kuruc forces further influenced Ottoman expectations by supplying selective intelligence aligned with their own goals. These dynamics contributed to strategic miscalculations during the siege,

including underestimating Vienna's defenses and delaying the response to the Holy League's incoming relief army.

On the Habsburg side, fragmented and often contradictory intelligence complicated decision-making but also sustained resistance by fostering expectations of external support. The study also explores how intelligence practices extended into diplomacy, particularly through embassy networks in Constantinople, where information gathering, translation, and mediation further shaped imperial perceptions.

Ultimately, the paper argues that intelligence during the siege functioned less as a tool for discovering objective reality and more as a mechanism for producing politically useful knowledge. The outcome of the siege reveals the limits of early modern intelligence systems, showing how misinterpretation, selective reporting, and negotiated loyalties could decisively influence both military outcomes and diplomatic relations.

Keywords: Second Siege of Vienna (1683), Early modern intelligence, Hungarian frontier, Ottoman-Habsburg relations, Information networks

INTRODUCTION

In the days before the Ottoman army reached Vienna in 1683, reports arriving from the Hungarian frontier spoke with confidence: Habsburg defenses were weak, their alliances uncertain, and the city would not withstand a prolonged siege. Yet these reports functioned less as objective knowledge and more as part of a broader "culture of security," shaped by distance, translation, and the political expectations of those who transmitted them. Knowledge was produced by actors embedded in a landscape of constant warfare, soldiers, merchants, envoys, and local elites, whose reports reflected both immediate observation and negotiated interests. Therefore, what emerged at the imperial center was not a transparent picture of reality but an interpretation of it, one that would play a decisive role in shaping both the course of the siege and the diplomatic relations associated with it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Regarding intelligence networks in the 17th century, few sources were found due to the fragmented development of spy networks. Not many primary sources were discovered, so the paper mainly relies on secondary sources.

Many of Gábor Ágoston's works were used. Gábor Ágoston's book *Európa és az Oszmán hódítás* [Europe and the Ottoman Conquest]was published in 2022 and summarizes the history of the Ottoman Empire. It reviews the information systems of both the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires and describes how embassies operated in Istanbul during the early modern period. It presents useful information on intelligence networks; thus, it was a significant source for this article.

Zoltán Péter Bagi published an article in the journal Aetas entitled "A 16–17. századi határvidéki és diplomáciai kémkedés magyar nyelvű irodalmának áttekintése" [A Survey of the Hungarian-Language Literature on Frontier and Diplomatic Espionage in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries] It analyzed the works of various Hungarian historians who discussed the spy networks in the frontier era. It is a great summary of all the works on the topic and offers new perspectives.

Peter Burke's work *A social history of knowledge: From Gutenberg to Diderot* provides a macro-level framework for understanding knowledge as a socially embedded process, making it highly relevant to studies of communication, diplomacy, and information networks in early modern Europe. In this paper, it is used to showcase the difference between modern distinctions of information, rumors, reconnaissance, and correspondence as well as the early-modern age's perception of these topics.

Michael Friedrich's *The birth of the archive: A history of knowledge* examines the emergence and development of archives as key institutions in the organization and preservation of knowledge. The work traces how administrative, scholarly, and political needs shaped archival practices across different historical contexts. It is briefly included in the conceptual framework.

A volume, edited by Hellmann and Smith (*Global border making and securitisation in the early modern world*), examines how borders and security practices were constructed in the early modern world through a global and comparative lens. The work highlights how states and empires developed mechanisms of control that extended beyond fixed territorial boundaries. These were useful when borders shifted.

István Hiller's *Titkos Levelezők intézménye*[The Institution of "Secret Correspondence"] was included in a memorial book for the 70th birthday of R. Várkonyi Ágnes. His work focuses on the establishment of embassies in Vienna during the 17th century. It states that Geheime Korrespondenz was vital in the informational chaos of the Habsburg Empire, justifying its significant role in the 17th century.

Zoltán Igor Komjáti's volume *Fulminis instar. The advance and presence of Imre Thököly's troops near the Mining Towns area of Lower Hungary in the autumn of 1678*, which focuses on how Imre Thököly operated during the Kurucian uprising, was included because of its description of Thököly and how it illustrates the desperate attempts of the people who wanted to become independent and escape the absolutism of the Habsburg Empire.

Rhoads Murphey's *Ottoman warfare 1500–1700* focuses on the sustainability of Ottoman warfare. The conclusion is that, even though frontier pressure was immense, the empire was able to rely on its military power for a long time. It argues that the idea that warfare caused a massive agrarian or fiscal collapse in the Ottoman Empire is largely overstated and only partially accurate. The work was selected because of the abundant information it contains on the topic this paper addresses.

The work of Cathal J. Nolan, *Wars of the age of Louis XIV, 1650-1715: An Encyclopedia of global warfare and civilization,* serves as a useful reference for understanding the military and political environment of the late seventeenth century.

Géza Pálffy's work, *Szent István birodalma a Habsburgok közép-európai államában: A Magyar Királyság és a Habsburg Monarchia a 16. században* [The Kingdom of Hungary and the Habsburg Monarchy in the Sixteenth Century], includes a chapter that discusses the structure of the Habsburg Empire as well as its territories. This work proved particularly useful in explaining how the Habsburg Empire functioned, as it provides a comprehensive overview of the role of the Habsburg ruler alongside the various imperial institutions.

Tivadar Petercsák and Berecz Mátyás compiled a scholarly volume containing several articles by prominent authors on information networks. Two chapters were particularly relevant: *Információszerzés és hírközlés a felső-magyarországi városokban*[Information Gathering and Communication in the Towns of Upper Hungary] by István Németh and *Hírszerzés és hírközlés a törökkori Magyarországon* [Intelligence Gathering and Communication in Hungary During the Ottoman

Period] by Géza Pálffy. Both studies provide a thorough insight into the topic and serve as important secondary literature in the development of the section on information networks in Hungary. While Németh focuses on the information networks of the towns in Upper Hungary, Pálffy concentrates on the functioning of frontier fortress networks, drawing on contemporary sources.

Despite the fact that Nicholas Popper's *An information state for Elizabethan England* explores how the Elizabethan state developed increasingly organized systems for collecting, managing, and using information, it could still be used as a reliable source in this paper. It was included in the conceptual framework when the general topic of European information-handling was discussed.

Kahraman Şakul's *İkinci Viyana Kuşatması: Yedi Başlı Ejderin Fendi* [The second siege of Vienna: The ruse of the seven-headed dragon] examines the Second Siege of Vienna within the broader context of Ottoman–European political and military relations. The work reevaluates the campaign by focusing not only on military events but also on diplomacy, strategy, and the internal dynamics of the Ottoman Empire.

Henry Elliot Malden's *Vienna 1683* is not a recent paper (it was written in 1883), and it does not represent the current historiographical approach to the battle. However, it is an important source for earlier accounts and traditions of the siege, particularly regarding the role of messengers and the defenders' morale. It is sometimes cited in modern literature as a background reference.

One such modern work is *The siege of Vienna* by John Stoye, which discusses in detail how the information and misinformation circulating through intelligence networks influenced the commanders, leading to overconfidence on the Ottoman side.

Karl August Schimmer's work *The sieges of Vienna by the Turks: From the German of Karl August Schimmer, and other sources* summarizes the two sieges of Vienna, in 1529 and in 1683. This paper draws on the sections concerning the Second Siege of Vienna, with particular attention to the author's analysis of supply chains and logistical structures. Although written in 1847, it still provides useful information, serving as an early secondary synthesis on the Ottoman sieges of Vienna.

Andrew Wheatcroft's volume about the Second Siege of Vienna, *The enemy at the gate: Habsburgs, Ottomans and the battle for Europe,* offers a broad narrative of the Second Siege of Vienna. The parts on information gathering were useful during the writing process because they described the morale of both sides thoroughly. The work also discusses the different correspondences between the Habsburg and Ottoman armies as well as the individuals involved.

METHODOLOGY

The topic was divided into seven thematic sections. First, a conceptual framework was established to define intelligence in its early modern context. Relevant historiography, including the works of Nicholas Popper, Markus Friedrich, and Peter Burke, was analyzed comparatively, focusing on recurring patterns such as the decentralized and interpretative nature of intelligence. The chapter also draws on the work of Gábor Ágoston, particularly regarding Venetian correspondence.

The second section examines Hungary as a military and intelligence frontier, relying primarily on Hungarian scholarship, including the works of Pál Fodor, Péter Zoltán Bagi, Géza Pálffy, and István Németh. Particular emphasis is placed on Pálffy's analysis of the information networks of frontier fortresses. For a broader context, Rhoads Murphey's work on Ottoman warfare was also consulted.

The third section explores Ottoman frontier forces and intelligence practices, drawing mainly on Ottoman sources compiled by Yücel Sakul in *Yedi Başlı Ejderin Fendi*. The discussion covers both local and non-local military forces.

The fourth section analyses hybrid forces and local intelligence through the example of the Kuruc movement and Imre Thököly. Using Hungarian, Turkish, and English sources, particularly the works of Nolan and Komjáti, it demonstrates how local actors fit into the broader intelligence framework and serves as an introduction to the case study of the Second Siege of Vienna.

The fifth section investigates the role of intelligence during the Second Siege of Vienna, focusing on logistics and correspondence rather than military operations. It draws on the works of Henry Elliot Malden, John Stoye, Karl August Schimmer, Andrew Wheatcroft, and Murphey.

To present both Ottoman and Habsburg perspectives, the paper also examines embassies in Istanbul. This section relies primarily on Ágoston's *Az oszmán hódítás és Európa*, using examples of envoys, dragomans, and informants to illustrate broader structural patterns.

Finally, the Habsburg Monarchy's intelligence networks are analyzed. After outlining the general structure of the monarchy using Pálffy's doctoral dissertation, the study focuses on intelligence cooperation, drawing primarily on the works of Ágoston, Hiller, and Bagi.

DISCUSSION

Military intelligence in the seventeenth century should not be understood through modern categories of surveillance, centralized analysis, or institutionalized secrecy. To do so would impose an anachronistic model of knowledge production that obscures how early modern states perceived, gathered and evaluated information. Intelligence in this period was not a discrete bureaucratic function as it is now, but a contested field of knowledge shaped by social relations, political interests, and spatial proximity.

Nowhere was this more evident than on imperial frontiers in Hungary or the Ottoman Empire, where warfare, diplomacy, and everyday survival were inseparable. Early modern states did not suffer from an absence of information but from an overabundance of fragmented, contradictory, and politically charged knowledge. Borders in this period were not fixed but were self-evident lines separating two clearly bounded political worlds. They were negotiated spaces shaped by war, movement, custom, local knowledge, and overlapping sovereignties. Borders in the early modern world must be treated as processes rather than static geographical facts; indeed, drawing on Tamar Herzog, borders are described as the outcome of "multiple activities by a plethora of agents" (Hellman & Smith, 2021). From this perspective, intelligence was not simply gathered and transmitted; it was produced through interpretation, filtered through hierarchies of authority, and reshaped as it moved from local actors to imperial centers.

For this reason, in seventeenth-century political and military discourse, "intelligence" referred broadly to knowledge about intentions, capabilities, and movements, rather than to a specialized institutional field. There was no clear boundary between intelligence, diplomacy, administration, and commerce. Information circulated through letters, oral testimonies, merchant networks, diplomatic dispatches, and military reports, often simultaneously serving strategic, political, and personal goals. Nicholas Popper's work on the early modern "information state" is useful here because it shows that early modern governments were often less constrained by ignorance than by the burden of handling too much politically consequential information (Popper, 2018). Markus Friedrich similarly demonstrates that archives and written records, rather than preserving objective truth, helped states organize uncertainty and make rule administratively legible (Friedrich, 2018). Therefore, intelligence reports were performative: They justified actions already taken, framed expectations, and signaled loyalty to superiors. This performative dimension meant that intelligence rarely challenged overarching strategic assumptions. Instead, it tended to reinforce prevailing narratives, particularly those circulating at court. Reports that aligned with imperial expectations were more likely to be trusted, copied, and archived, while discordant information could be dismissed as rumor, exaggeration, or local panic.

Modern distinctions between information, rumor, reconnaissance, and correspondence impose analytical clarity on practices that were far more fluid in early modern contexts. Contemporary actors did not treat these categories as separate epistemic forms; instead, they constituted a continuous spectrum of knowledge, differentiated primarily by proximity and credibility rather than by method. Peter Burke argues that the spread of print culture (after Gutenberg) fundamentally transformed access to information, while also highlighting the continued importance of oral communication, manuscript culture, and informal networks. He emphasizes that knowledge was not distributed evenly but structured by social hierarchies, institutions, and professional groups (Burke, 2000).

Early modern intelligence production was fundamentally decentralized and socially embedded. States did not monopolize intelligence gathering; instead, information circulated through overlapping networks that crossed imperial, confessional, and linguistic boundaries. Key intelligence producers included frontier soldiers, military commanders, envoys, and diplomatic intermediaries, merchants, couriers, travelers, translators, dragomans, converts as well as local nobles and town elites. What distinguished these actors was not formal appointment, but situational access. As Gábor Ágoston has shown in his analysis of Ottoman frontier warfare, local actors frequently possessed more reliable operational knowledge than imperial officials because they lived within the contested space of war (Ágoston, 2022).

The social background and nationality of informants shaped both the content and reception of intelligence. Linguistic competence, religious affiliation, and regional familiarity determined who could gather information and whose reports were trusted. Multilingual intermediaries, Hungarian-speaking Ottomans, Transylvanian nobles, and Balkan converts occupied key positions as brokers of frontier knowledge (Ágoston, 2022).

Alongside the frontier information-gathering systems, the central embassies also had great power. The so-called "information revolution" of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries brought significant changes to European diplomatic practice. In terms of intelligence gathering, the Republic of Venice emerged as a model for Europe. During this period, the city-state developed into a diplomatic hub, with intelligence activities centered in the Doge's Palace. The leading role of the Republic of Venice is well illustrated by the fact that it was among the first polities to establish a permanent embassy in Istanbul as early as the fifteenth century. Despite Ottoman suspicions that Venetian envoys were spies, they secured a stable presence in the capital of their principal maritime rival. The head of the Venetian embassy network was the *bailo*, who wielded considerable influence. The selection of ambassadors took into account factors such as linguistic competence, diplomatic reputation, and personal networks. While appointments were not initially restricted to trained professionals, over time, more systematic forms of preparation emerged, including the training of individuals in diplomatic and intelligence-related skills for service to Venice and other European powers (Ágoston, 2022).

Although information flow was significantly slower, the imperial centers were more reliable sources of intelligence than the frontiers. The actors near the borders were even more two-faced than the spies in the capitals. Additionally, frontier intelligence frequently competed with imperial strategic narratives, and its influence depended on timing, credibility, and political usefulness. When local knowledge aligned with imperial goals, it could shape decision-making; when it challenged entrenched assumptions, it was often marginalized.

HUNGARY AS A MILITARY AND INTELLIGENCE FRONTIER

Hungary served as a crucial military and intelligence frontier between the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy during the early modern period, despite its separation into three different parts. Its central position made it a contested borderland, where fortresses, border troops, and intelligence networks were essential for both empires. Information gathering, espionage, and local cooperation were just as important as open warfare in maintaining influence over the region. The late-medieval hunger for information was disrupted with the collapse of the state's spy network under Jagiellonian rule due to financial bankruptcy; as a result, intelligence gathering along the frontier became the responsibility of the fortress captains (Bagi, 2012).

This frontier was defined by permanent warfare and shifting authority. Large areas of Hungary frequently changed hands, and political control was often fragmented between Ottoman, Habsburg, and local powers. This was common, for example, in the era of the fortress wars under Sultan Süleyman. As a result, it can be stated that instability became a constant feature of life, while Hungary's strategic role remained vital in the balance of power between the two empires.

The stabilization of the frontier lines in the seventeenth century divided Hungary into three parts, with the boundary of the Ottoman-controlled territory extending up to the northern areas of the Great Hungarian Plain. As a result, certain towns in Upper Hungary developed a particularly strong capacity for organizing information networks. Especially significant in this regard was the alliance of Kassa, Lőcse, Bártfa, and Eperjes, and from the second half of the seventeenth century onward, also Késmárk, which formed a defensive league with considerable influence due to their economic prominence. Travelers passing along commercial routes were able to provide a vast amount of information. This example clearly illustrates how fragmented the information network was (Németh, 1999).

The Habsburg military leadership relied on the assessments of Hungarian and Croatian frontier officers, who had more practical experience in espionage than the central commanders (Murphey, 1999). However, problems still occurred. Antal Veransics, the Archbishop of Esztergom from 1569 to 1573, discussed these problems. His ideas were presented in Géza Pálffy's work about Ottoman Hungary's informational networks (Pálffy, 1999).

By the 16th century, although a permanent embassy had been established in Istanbul, frontier intelligence gathering continued to face a range of difficulties. While conditions were in some respects more favorable on the Christian side, significant structural problems remained. Archbishop of Esztergom Antal Veransics articulated the limitations of these information networks. According to his assessment, reliable intelligence in the borderlands could hardly be expected from sources such as Ottoman-appointed judges in the occupied territories, Christian captives, or executioners, with the possible exception of the scribes of the pashas' households. This was because these groups primarily obtained information *ex foro et ex vulgo*, or from public rumors and common discourse, and transmitted it without critical evaluation. Moreover, they were not firmly aligned with either side, which further reduced their reliability as sources of consistent or verified intelligence (Pálffy, 1999).

In addition, opportunities for intelligence gathering in the frontier zone appear to have been more limited than in the Ottoman imperial center, particularly as the timely detection of major incursions was often constrained. This was partly related to the limited presence of salaried intelligence agents in Ottoman border fortresses, where espionage does not yet seem to have been fully institutionalized as a distinct profession (Pálffy, 1999).

The Archbishop further associated the inefficiencies of the frontier intelligence system with financial constraints. The recruitment and payment of informants—financed through allocations provided by various chambers—was, following the establishment of the new frontier defense system, delegated to the captains of border fortresses and the generals of frontier districts. Specifically, the commanders of major strongholds received, in addition to their regular salaries, a separate intelligence fund (*pecunia exploratoria*), which amounted to approximately 400–500 Rhenish florins annually in the 1550s but appears to have decreased to around 200 florins per year during periods of peace. Although this sum could cover the occasional expenses of informant missions carried out by local judges, occasional spies, or merchants, the funds were sometimes diverted for other purposes, including the supplementation of commanders' often delayed salaries. The number of permanently employed spies seems to have declined significantly as a consequence (Pálffy, 1999).

This examination is a great example of how fragmented the intelligence network was.

OTTOMAN FRONTIER FORCES AND INTELLIGENCE PRACTICES

The local armies and intelligence practices of the Ottoman Empire along the Hungarian border directly influenced the Second Siege of Vienna, the Ottoman-Habsburg wars, and diplomatic relations. The Ottoman Empire's various border units were not only used for warfare, but also served as agents of the era, providing intelligence.

Within the border army system, units from outside Anatolia, such as the Mamluks and Damascus Mamluks, under the command of Ottoman governors, took on intermediate tasks. Although the Mamluks and Damascus Mamluks were not numerous on the border, their training and reporting practices shaped the flow of information and the strategic decisions to be made (Sakul, 2021). The constant emphasis in these reports on the weakness of the Habsburgs and Hungary convinced the Ottomans to launch another campaign against Hungary.

The non-local structure of the border armies created problems regarding the reliability of intelligence. Non-local soldiers and commanders did not have sufficient knowledge of Hungarian territory, its towers, tactics, local nobility and troops, or the Habsburg alliance, and at times placed excessive trust in intermediaries. Furthermore, information was filtered by border commanders to attract attention to sources, while governors altered it to meet bureaucratic expectations, meaning it was distorted before reaching Istanbul.

The filtering of information and its transmission to Istanbul directly influenced strategic decisions and diplomatic relations. The trust placed in the intelligence received and the structure of the intelligence that glorified the Ottomans caused the Ottomans to become complacent, fail to notice diplomatic signals, and be unable to keep pace with developments in Europe. Therefore, the intelligence practices of non-local armies at the border and the process of information transfer not only affected the military plan of the Second Siege of Vienna but also led to diplomatic problems.

HYBRID FORCES AND LOCAL INTELLIGENCE: KURUC FORCES AND IMRE THÖKÖLY

The Kuruc movement and hybrid forces significantly altered the perceptions of both the Ottomans and the Habsburgs in the years preceding the Second Siege of Vienna. Politically and militarily irregular and unpredictable, the Kuruc forces consisted of dissatisfied Hungarian nobles, soldiers, and peasants. Their structure, which operated with mobility and was not centrally controlled, made them a valuable intelligence resource (Nolan, 2008).

Imre Thököly, who served as commander, diplomatic intermediary, and information broker, was a central figure. In 1682, upon the Ottoman Empire's recognition of him as Prince of Upper Hungary, he began to maintain an institutional vassalage with the Ottomans. Thanks to his access to local communities, elites, and religious figures, as well as his familiarity with the region, he was able to provide the Ottomans with intelligence on the Habsburgs, castles, soldiers, and strategies. However, Imre Thököly also provided these reports with an eye on his own interests, so they were filtered and selective (Komjáti, 2024).

Local actors altered their approaches and signals toward Istanbul and Vienna based on the momentum of the war as well as material and moral advantages; thus, they were known for their shifting loyalties and negotiation-dependent structures. However, if the reports and intelligence provided by local actors matched assumptions about the enemy, states shaped their strategies based on these reports without hesitation. Consequently, Kuruc assurances and the reports provided by Thököly shaped the Ottoman Empire's views on Vienna.

IMPORTANCE OF INTELLIGENCE SERVICES IN THE SECOND SIEGE OF VIENNA

During the Second Siege of Vienna in 1683, military decisions were shaped significantly by the information collected by the intelligence networks. Because loyalties in this region were unstable, intelligence was often selective and sometimes misleading. As information from spies played a major role in shaping Ottoman and Habsburg expectations, it ultimately influenced how the siege unfolded.

Following the unsuccessful Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1529, the Ottomans launched another campaign against the imperial capital in 1683, nearly 150 years later. By the 1670s, after the successes of the Kuruc uprisings and the establishment of the Principality of Upper Hungary under Imre Thököly, Hungary had effectively become divided into four parts. Against this fragmented political landscape, a reformed Ottoman army advanced toward Vienna.

Although the Habsburgs attempted to avoid war by sending an envoy to the Porte in February 1682 to renew the peace treaty of 1664, the diplomatic mission failed. In February 1683, the sultan formally declared war on Emperor Leopold I. The Ottoman campaign was supported by the Crimean Tatars and the Kuruc forces of Imre Thököly, while the Habsburg side received support from the papacy and the Polish king, John Sobieski. Despite the numerical superiority of the Ottoman army led by Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa, the siege ultimately ended in Ottoman defeat: Vienna was successfully defended by the Christian coalition, which subsequently launched the wars that would gradually reconquer Hungary from Ottoman rule (Ágoston, 2022).

From a logistical perspective, the campaign demonstrated both the strengths and limitations of the Ottoman military system. By the seventeenth century, armies had grown to such enormous sizes that supply and transportation became decisive factors in warfare. The outcome of the siege depended not only on battlefield tactics but also on the management of food supplies, communication, transportation routes, and time. The Ottoman army required vast amounts of provisions, ammunition, animals, and manpower, all of which had to be transported across long distances from the Balkans and the Hungarian territories toward Vienna. While the Ottoman Empire possessed an impressive military-administrative structure, the extended supply lines became increasingly vulnerable as the siege continued (Schimmer, 1847).

Another crucial aspect of the campaign was the maintenance of information networks and military morale. The Habsburg commanders, many of whom possessed considerable authority and military prestige, proved significantly more effective at motivating their troops than several Ottoman commanders with less experience and weaker reputations. Although the Ottomans attempted to strengthen morale through symbolic and cultural means, including the use of military music, these efforts achieved only limited success. Christian commanders understood that the defense of Vienna depended largely on convincing the defenders that victory remained possible; therefore, they invested considerable effort into maintaining morale and cohesion. Despite fear and exhaustion, unity among the defenders ultimately contributed to the Habsburg victory. In addition, the Habsburg leadership maintained constant correspondence with King John III Sobieski, which played a crucial role in coordinating the relief army (Wheatcroft, 2008).

On the Ottoman side, Kara Mustafa committed several strategic mistakes regarding intelligence and information gathering. Despite having access to a substantial network of spies and informants, he failed to make effective use of them. During the advance toward Vienna, insufficient attention was paid to obtaining accurate information about enemy troop movements and the organization of potential relief forces. This may partly be explained by the fact that Kara Mustafa had not previously encountered such a large-scale coalition army. Known for his excessive self-confidence and ambition, the grand vizier expected a rapid victory and underestimated the possibility of prolonged resistance. Ottoman spies further reinforced this optimism by reporting that Vienna would likely fall quickly once the outer defensive lines had been breached (Wheatcroft, 2008).

This overconfidence had real consequences during the siege. Ottoman commanders underestimated both the strength of Vienna's defenses and the likelihood of a coordinated relief effort. Local informants often underestimated the speed at which a Christian coalition could form, leading the Ottomans to delay decisive assaults and rely heavily on siege mining and bombardment (Stoye, 1964). When the relief army finally arrived in September, the Ottomans were strategically unprepared, having misjudged both timing and scale.

On the Habsburg side, Vienna depended on reports from frontier officers, Hungarian nobles loyal to the Habsburgs, refugees, deserters, and messengers who slipped through Ottoman lines. These sources provided detailed but often contradictory information about Ottoman troops, siege progress, and enemy morale (Murphey, 1999). For instance, when Kara Mustafa had reached Székesfehérvár, the imperial leadership still lacked a fully developed strategic plan. Uncertainty remained in Vienna regarding whether the Ottoman campaign was truly directed against the imperial capital (Wheatcroft, 2008). As a result, Habsburg leaders struggled to form a clear picture of the threat they faced.

Despite these difficulties, local intelligence played a crucial role in keeping Vienna in the fight. Information suggesting that a relief army was on the way—most famously carried by messengers such as Jerzy Franciszek Kulczycki—helped maintain morale among defenders and encouraged city leaders to resist surrender (Malden, 1883; Stoye, 1964). Even when such reports were incomplete or too optimistic, they shaped expectations inside the city and influenced key decisions about endurance.

Spying and misinformation also affected the daily conduct of the siege. Both sides relied on informants familiar with Ottoman military practices, local terrain, and siege techniques. Some intelligence accurately revealed mining operations and artillery placements, strengthening the defenders' tactical positions. However, other reports exaggerated successes or failures, creating false impressions that influenced tactical decisions (Murphey, 1999).

Ultimately, the outcome of the siege was shaped by how information influenced expectations on both sides. Ottoman commanders, guided by optimistic frontier intelligence and negotiated loyalties, believed Vienna could be taken before significant outside intervention occurred. The Habsburg defenders, relying on fragmented but hopeful information, held out long enough for allied forces to arrive. When the relief army defeated the Ottomans on 12 September 1683, it exposed the limits of intelligence built on unstable loyalties and incomplete local knowledge (Murphey, 1999).

THE EMBASSIES IN CONSTANTINOPLE

In 15–16th century Europe, neither intelligence networks nor diplomatic systems were as highly developed as they are today. The most stable and sophisticated network of envoys was undoubtedly that of the Venetian Republic. Following the Venetian model, a permanent Venetian diplomatic presence was established in Constantinople after its conquest in 1453, initially along the Golden Horn, and later—with the construction of official buildings—in Pera on the opposite shore. The functioning of these embassies was analyzed by Gábor Ágoston in a chapter of his work *Az oszmán hódítás és Európa* (Ágoston, 2022), which has served as the basis for this account.

The personnel of the various European embassies that emerged were regarded by the Ottomans as spies, although expulsions were rare. One known example is the Venetian envoy Girolamo Marcello, who was expelled due to the intelligence he gathered on the Ottoman fleet and its war plan. Envoys maintained extensive networks of informants drawn from diverse social status and frequently employed coded messages. Numerous envoys from Vienna were present in Constantinople, including what would now be considered intelligence agents. Habsburg envoys were often kept under strict house arrest; nevertheless, they possessed highly effective intelligence channels, with their agents reaching even into the inner circles of the Ottoman court. A notable envoy was Dávid Ungnád, who famously used lemon juice to write important letters or passages, rendering them invisible during inspections by Ottoman officials. In the absence of a Viennese envoy in the Ottoman capital, the Habsburgs obtained information from Spanish representatives. Most covert informants were physicians or merchants, who received payment through written contracts and often operated under aliases, signing their coded correspondence as “confidential” (Ágoston, 2022).

Most European envoys, naturally, did not speak Turkish. Therefore, the Porte assigned them dragomans—linguistic and cultural intermediaries—who were typically Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Jewish subjects of the sultan. These dragomans were generally distrusted by the envoys, as they had the capacity to manipulate information, and their loyalties were often ambiguous. At the same time, the position provided secure livelihood, prestige, and protection. Several dragoman dynasties served European envoys, often interconnected through marriage as well as profession; among them were the Fornetti, Grillo, Navoni, Perani, Tarsia, and Testa families. In response to corruption and abuses, European powers eventually began training their own dragomans, sending young boys with envoys to Constantinople to acquire the language. The Habsburgs relied primarily on Italian and Dalmatian dragomans, such as Cesare Galli, which contributed to Italian becoming the language of diplomacy in Vienna during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Ágoston, 2022).

Ottoman intelligence operated on at least four levels. The innermost circle consisted of the central intelligence apparatus in Constantinople, in which dragomans played a key role. The next level involved intelligence gathering by local Ottoman authorities, followed by information supplied by vassal states. Finally, intelligence and counterintelligence conducted by Ottoman agents and saboteurs abroad provided further insights into the actions of European great powers, particularly the Habsburgs and Venice. Frontier leaders, such as sanjak-beys, furnished valuable reports, and Ottoman governors along the borders also employed spies. Within the territories of the Hungarian Ottoman frontier, Hungarian and Slavic agents (pribeks) frequently operated as double agents (Ágoston, 2022).

THE HABSBURG EMPIRE AND ITS COALITION INTELLIGENCE

The rise of the Habsburg dynasty began in the eleventh century, when it was just a noble family. Over time, it developed into one of the most influential powers in Europe, divided into two major branches, one of which—of particular relevance here—came to dominate the Holy Roman Empire. Together with the territories associated with the imperial title and the dynasty's own hereditary lands, the Habsburgs established a political entity that emerged as one of the most significant empires. In the late 17th century, the Habsburg Empire consisted of the following provinces: the Hereditary Lands of the Habsburgs (basically the parts of present-day Austria), lands of the Bohemian crown, the Kingdom of Hungary (Croatia and Slavonia included), the Duchy of Milan, and the Spanish Netherlands. When the Second Siege of Vienna took place, the ruler of the empire was Leopold the First (Pálffy, 2015).

The Non-Hereditary Lands were governed by their own laws, had their own taxation systems and maintained their own armies. The Habsburg emperor was not an absolute sovereign in these provinces, but "first among equals". In exchange for the lack of an authoritarian power structure, the provinces were obliged to provide soldiers to the imperial army (Reichsarmee). In reality, this was carried out with slow mobilization, and the different states provided more support when it was in their own interest (Pálffy, 2015).

The emperor could not order, he could only correspond, negotiate, or seek compromise. Therefore, the imperial assembly (Reichstag) had to be convened to reach a common decision, but this was a lengthy process, and individual states often had conflicting interests (Pálffy, 2015).

The intelligence service of the Habsburg Empire was headquartered in Vienna, but the organized information network was only established in 1623 as a result of the work of Johann Jacob Kurz von Senftenau, the ambassador to Istanbul. The name of this network was Geheime Korrespondenz (Hiller, 1998). This spy network was often in danger due to the constant threat of the financial bankruptcy of the Habsburgs. Therefore, despite the establishment of a centralized information network with its own messengers, interest groups, and reports, information flowed slowly due to insufficient funding and was also often withheld due to internal conflicting interests. In conclusion, fragmented authority produced fragmented knowledge.

David von Ugnad was one of the most significant intelligence agents in the service of the Habsburgs. As ambassador in Constantinople, he was able to dispatch his correspondence to Vienna within fifteen to twenty days, while remaining informed not only about Ottoman affairs but also about developments concerning Venice, France, Spain, Transylvania, and Hungary. The extent of his effectiveness as a spy is demonstrated by the fact that even the Venetian *bailo* himself was counted among his informants (Ágoston, 2022).

The information-driven network that had emerged in late-medieval Hungary, reflecting a growing demand for political and military intelligence, continued to function—albeit with diminishing effectiveness—during the reign of King Matthias. However, shortly before the Battle of Mohács, this communication network collapsed. From that point onward, it became the responsibility of the frontier captains to acquire as much intelligence as possible from within their respective spheres of influence. They relied on their own agents for this purpose, yet these operatives frequently disseminated misinformation. The system gradually declined and ultimately lost its relevance following the establishment of a permanent Habsburg embassy in Istanbul (Bagi, 2012).

ARMIES, NUMBERS AND STRATEGIC KNOWLEDGE

As discussed, the military reporting and documentation in seventeenth century wars are distorted in various ways, and there are many different sources on the statistical and strategical data of militaries and wars. The main problem of this distortion comes from biases. The commanders and soldiers funded by emperors, kings, and nobles in the era often reported and documented ongoing events in ways that enhanced their reputation and increased their chances of promotion or other rewards. Another reason for this distortion is the lack of objective views, resources, documentation, or processes. The reporter’s location, the intensity of daylight, weather conditions, pressure from high-ranking positions, a lack of definitions, and the issue of differentiating between languages and regions change the processes and the outcomes of reports and documents.

CONCLUSION

Intelligence in the 17th century was not a stable, objective, or centrally controlled system, but a fragmented network, shaped by uncertainty and competing interests. It was not a coherent system; it had different chains of individuals whose access, skills, and loyalties determined both the content and credibility of the information. Also, the authorities interpreted the knowledge given as they preferred, i.e. when they were not fond of the information, they did not acknowledge it. As a result, intelligence was less about discovering objective truth and more about producing preferable knowledge by omitting the truth.

Ultimately, early modern intelligence must be understood in a fundamentally different way than the modern spy networks. It was a process of negotiation between local knowledge and imperial authority. Its effectiveness depended on credibility, timing, and political usefulness. Additionally, authorities believed rumors because they disregarded accuracy. It was also common to exaggerate (about army numbers, for instance), and subjectivity was favored over objectivity. The failure and success of intelligence during the Second Siege of Vienna accurately reveals the limits of knowledge in early modern warfare; therefore, it presents a strong example.

The case of the Hungarian frontier is a great example of how this system functioned. As a contested borderland between the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy, Hungary became a space where warfare, diplomacy, and intelligence were inseparable. Local actors—frontier commanders, intermediaries, and hybrid forces such as those of Imre Thököly— played an important role in shaping the information network. Their proximity to events gave them access to valuable knowledge, but their reports were always filtered through personal, political, and strategic considerations.

The events leading up to and during the Second Siege of Vienna (1683) illustrate the consequences of this intelligence environment. Ottoman decision-making was shaped by overly optimistic and selectively filtered frontier reports, reinforcing expectations of Habsburg weakness and contributing to strategic miscalculations that negatively affected the siege. Concurrently, the Habsburg side struggled with fragmented intelligence, which was in its infancy—given that their intelligence service was only established in 1623—yet managed to sustain resistance with information that maintained morale. In both cases, intelligence did not simply indicate decisions, it actively shaped expectations, perceptions, and outcomes.

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DIALOGUE

The Boundaries of Early Hungarian History Certainty, Reconstruction, and Narrative in the Study of the 9th–10th Centuries?

Barnabás Guitman, PhD
Pázmány Péter Catholic University

Abstract

This study explores the methodological and epistemological challenges of researching early Hungarian history, focusing on the scarcity of contemporary sources and the distortions produced by identity politics and national narratives. It distinguishes three levels of knowledge: well-established facts, logical but unproven reconstructions, and unfounded speculation.

Established facts include the Finno-Ugric linguistic affiliation of Hungarian; the historically and archaeologically verified conquest of the Carpathian Basin at the end of the ninth century; and evidence that the number of conquerors was significantly smaller than the region's contemporary population. While the conquering elite appears culturally predominantly Turkic, by the thirteenth century the population of the Carpathian Basin was overwhelmingly Hungarian speaking.

Debated but plausible reconstructions concern bilingualism among the conquerors, the mechanisms of linguistic assimilation, the geopolitical interpretation of the blood oath, an early Hungarian linguistic presence in the Carpathian Basin, and unresolved historiographical questions such as location of Moravia.

The study also highlights early Hungarian–Turkic interactions, evidenced by Turkic loanwords, structural parallels in nomadic social organization, and archaeogenetic data, all indicating long-term and intensive coexistence.

In conclusion, the paper stresses the scholarly responsibility to communicate uncertainty clearly and to distinguish rigorously between evidence-based reconstruction and national or political mythmaking.

Keywords: early Hungarian history; Finno-Ugric linguistics; Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian Basin; Hungarian–Turkic contacts; linguistic assimilation; national narratives; archaeogenetics

EARLY HUNGARIAN HISTORY AS A SCIENTIFIC AND INTERPRETIVE PROBLEM

Research into early Hungarian history has undergone a profound transformation over the past decades. New results in archaeology and archaeogenetics have overturned many earlier assumptions – particularly regarding the routes of migration, the nature of the Conquest, and the composition of the population (Csáky et al., 2020; Gerber et al., 2024; Türk, 2024). At the same time, however, one fundamental characteristic of the period has remained unchanged: the scarcity of sources, which necessarily limits the degree of certainty in historical reconstructions.

This methodological difficulty is compounded by another factor, less technical yet highly influential. Early Hungarian history is not only a scholarly issue but also a space of identity formation, where interpretations of the past often extend beyond the boundaries of professional discourse. Historical narratives are thus frequently constructed not only from data and conclusions but also from forms of cultural self-understanding. As a result, scholarly and public modes of discourse sometimes become conflated, leading on the one hand to overstated certainties and on the other to unwarranted controversies.

The aim of the present study is, first, to offer an accessible – though not exhaustive – overview of the main directions and results of research on early Hungarian history. The relevant literature, spanning multiple disciplines, is so extensive and diverse that a comprehensive treatment of all aspects lies beyond the scope of this paper. Second, the study seeks to distinguish between different levels of certainty. Its starting point is the recognition that one of the greatest challenges in interpreting this period, alongside the lack of data, is the frequent coexistence – within the same discourse – of statements that should be treated as facts, hypotheses, or speculation, yet appear with equal weight.

Special attention is devoted to the question of contacts between Hungarian and Turkic populations. This problem illustrates particularly well how a real and, in several respects, well-attested historical phenomenon – namely an intensive network of interactions – can give rise to divergent interpretations depending on the methodological framework applied. The aim here, too, is not to establish a single definitive explanation but to demonstrate the kinds of evidence upon which various interpretations are based.

In selecting references, I have consciously aimed to cite sources available in English whenever possible; given the nature of the subject, however, this could not always be achieved.

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS AND INTERPRETIVE PARADIGMS

The study of early Hungarian history has traditionally occupied a position at the intersection of several disciplines, and its interpretation largely depends on how successfully the results of these fields can be integrated into a unified framework. Historiography long relied primarily on written sources, which, however, offer a limited perspective due to the circumstances of their creation. Byzantine, Arabic, and Western chronicles describe the Hungarians as external observers, typically in political and military contexts, and their terminology – such as the designation "Turk" – remains a subject of debate to this day. A volume published in 2022, for example, offers a new interpretation of the sections concerning the Hungarians in Constantine Porphyrogenitus's *De administrando imperio* (Bollók & B. Szabó, 2022).

From the latter half of the twentieth century onward, archaeology has assumed an increasingly prominent role in examining these sources. The cemeteries of the Conquest period, together with earlier archaeological material, have gradually yielded a picture more nuanced than earlier linear models of migration. For a long time, scholarly discourse was shaped by Gyula László's theory of the "double conquest," which posited that significant numbers of Hungarians had already arrived in the Carpathian Basin in the 7th century. Ultimately, however, this theory did not achieve scholarly consensus.

A comprehensive synthesis of academic knowledge – and uncertainties – regarding early Hungarian history was produced by András Róna-Tas, whose work, also available in English, provides a high-level summary of late 20th-century research on the origins of the Hungarians and the Conquest (Róna-Tas, 1999).

It is also important to recall the work of two scholars who passed away in recent years – the archaeologist János Makkay and the Slavic linguist Péter Király – whose academic reception has not yet received the attention it deserves. Drawing on an extensive body of sources, Király argued that the ancestors of the Hungarians may have arrived in the Carpathian Basin as early as the late 6th century, together with the Avars (Király, 2006). Makkay's extensive and difficult-to-access series of more than seventy booklets, *Tractata Minuscula*, constitutes a vast repository of sources, interpretations, and critical observations on early Hungarian history.

More recent research into various archaeological horizons – such as finds associated with Etelköz – supports the theory that Hungarian material culture developed as the result of multiple influences and cannot be assigned to a single, homogeneous cultural tradition. At the same time, the question of Levedia and the nature of Khazar connections has also been reconsidered, prompting a reassessment of earlier models.

One of the most significant developments of recent decades has been the emergence of archaeogenetics. Although such research, due to its methodological limitations, cannot in itself provide historical explanations, it has contributed new types of data to questions of population history. The results both confirm eastern connections – particularly links to the Volga–Ural region – and clearly demonstrate the substantial heterogeneity of the Carpathian Basin population. An especially important implication of these studies is the recognition that the number of conquering Hungarians was likely considerably smaller than that of the local population they encountered, a fact that casts new light on linguistic and cultural processes (Csáky et al., 2020; Gerber et al., 2024; Szeifert et al., 2022). The question remains open as to when speakers of the ancestor of modern Hungarian first arrived in the Carpathian Basin and how its core territory became predominantly Hungarian-speaking.

Within this research environment, historical linguistics represents a relatively stable point. There is broad consensus in the scholarly literature regarding the Finno-Ugric affiliation of the Hungarian language, even if interpretations differ in certain details. The study of loanwords – particularly vocabulary of Turkic origin – clearly shows that the development of Hungarian took place within a context of long-standing and intensive contacts (Collinder, 1965, pp. 22–25; Honti, 2017; Róna-Tas & Berta, 2011). The interpretation of such interactions, however, extends beyond the autonomous framework of linguistics and necessitates the inclusion of archaeological and historical data.

A common feature of recent research directions is an increasing reluctance to view early Hungarian society as a unified, static entity. Instead, a picture emerges of a dynamically changing, multilingual, and culturally complex society whose structure varied over time and across space. Parallel to this shift, the concept of the "Conquest" itself is also undergoing transformation: rather than a single event, it is increasingly seen as a process with a broader temporal span and significant internal differentiation.

It should be noted, however, that the social reception of these scholarly results does not reflect their professional nuance. In public discourse, simpler, one-dimensional explanations tend to persist, either absolutizing linguistic kinship or, conversely, deriving exclusive origin theories from cultural contacts. What these approaches share is a failure to take into account the differing nature of various types of evidence. In many cases, uncertainty is not a shortcoming of research but an inherent feature of historical reconstruction itself. This insight is particularly important in the study of Hungarian–Turkic relations and early presence in the Carpathian Basin, where interpretations often extend beyond what the available data can justify.

LEVELS OF CERTAINTY AND THE METHODOLOGY OF HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION

The study of early Hungarian history constitutes a distinctive field in which the very nature of the available sources defines the limits of possible conclusions. Researchers do not work with a uniform and abundant body of data but with different types of evidence that illuminate the same set of questions from different perspectives. In such a context, methodological discipline – aimed not at artificially resolving discrepancies but at consciously managing them – becomes particularly important.

To this end, I apply an interpretive framework that assigns historical statements to three distinct levels of certainty. According to this approach, it is possible to distinguish between, first, those elements that can be confirmed by multiple, independent types of sources; second, those that logically follow from the available data but are not directly attested; and third, those ideas that operate primarily within an interpretive space shaped by the absence of sources and will likely never reach the level of certainty.

This tripartite division serves both as an organizational tool and as a means of controlling historical argumentation. It helps prevent statements at different levels of certainty from appearing with equal weight – a phenomenon particularly common in the discourse on early Hungarian history. At the same time, the method allows uncertainty to be understood not as a weakness, but as a natural feature of historical inquiry.

Accordingly, the interpretation of sources can only be consistent if each type is treated within its own domain of validity. Archaeology provides a tangible picture of material culture and burial practices but cannot directly reveal linguistic relationships. For example, we possess no certain knowledge – nor are we likely ever to – about the language of the Avar elite or the Avar-period common population. Archaeogenetics makes visible the connections and admixture between populations but cannot, on its own, be interpreted in terms of cultural or identity categories. Historical linguistics, by contrast, reconstructs linguistic relationships with considerable reliability, yet it does not necessarily reflect the complexity of social and political structures. Written sources, meanwhile, represent perspectives conditioned by their specific circumstances of origin.

Only by taking these considerations into account is it possible for different types of evidence not to contradict but to complement one another. The following analysis therefore attempts to provide an overview of the complex questions of early Hungarian history within this methodological framework.

ANALYSIS

FIXED POINTS: THE FOUNDATIONS OF SCHOLARLY CONSENSUS

Despite the uncertainties surrounding early Hungarian history, there exists a foundational layer that is widely accepted by current scholarship and rests on the convergent results of multiple, independent types of evidence. These elements are not beyond dispute in every detail, yet at present there is no alternative explanatory framework of comparable coherence. As such, they provide an appropriate starting point for further interpretation.

Among these stable points, perhaps the most firmly established is the Finno-Ugric affiliation of the Hungarian language. The methods of historical linguistics – regular sound correspondences, shared basic vocabulary, and grammatical structures – yield a coherent system that unequivocally situates Hungarian within this language family. At the same time, even at this point we encounter the duality characteristic of early Hungarian history as a whole. Hungarian did not develop in isolation, but in an environment of sustained and intensive contact with other languages, above all various Turkic languages. Fundamental words connected to everyday life – such as *búza* (wheat), *eke* (plough), or *szőlő* (grape) – remain enduring traces of past economic and cultural interactions (Honti, 2017; Róna-Tas & Berta, 2011).

Similarly well established is the fact of the Hungarian Conquest, supported both by archaeological evidence and written sources. As noted above, the current state of research increasingly rejects interpretations that reduce this process to a single, clearly defined event. Burials reassessed through radiocarbon dating, together with military activity documented from the mid-9th century onward, suggest that Hungarian presence in the Carpathian Basin strengthened gradually. From this perspective, the Conquest is better understood as a series of movements spanning several decades, whose phases differed in character (Dreisziger, 2011; Somogyi & Türk, 2023).

Questions of demographic relations have come into a new light through archaeogenetic research. The results suggest that the number of conquering Hungarians was smaller than that of the population already present in the Carpathian Basin (Gerber et al., 2024). This imbalance becomes particularly significant when approached from the perspective of language and culture. The presence of a minority elite alone does not explain the later dominance of the Hungarian language, indicating that more complex mechanisms must have been at work than those assumed by a simple model of conquest.

Regarding the linguistic conditions of the Carpathian Basin, sources from the 11th to 13th centuries provide a clearer picture. Based on charter evidence and the study of place names, Hungarian appears to have been widely spread across the region during this period. Toponymy is a particularly important indicator, as it presupposes a long-standing and deeply rooted linguistic presence. The fact that Hungarian became so dominant within a relatively short time raises further questions about the dynamics of this process (Kiss, 1997).

The overwhelming majority of the genetic makeup of the modern Hungarian population is not derived from the Migration Period conquerors but from a local European base population that has shown considerable continuity since the Bronze Age. The conquerors, however, provided this community with its defining state-forming and political identity. Researchers generally agree that the nature of the Hungarian Conquest differed fundamentally from that of the Avars. Although the Hungarians arrived with families – including women and children – genetic data show that they began mixing with the local population almost immediately after their arrival, in contrast to the Avar elite, which remained a more closed community for centuries. Ongoing debate concerns the extent of this mixing and the degree to which the late Avar population persisted and was integrated into Hungarian population (Bereczki et al., 2015; Gerber et al., 2024).

At the same time, archaeogenetic studies have unequivocally confirmed eastern connections for part of the conquering population. A significant portion of the 10th-century Hungarian elite can be traced back genetically to the southern Ural region. There is also agreement that an Inner Asian genetic component was present among the conquerors, representing a shared heritage of steppe nomadic peoples.

Archaeological research by Frigyes Szücsi and others suggests that the Avar-period population did not disappear from the Carpathian Basin after the Frankish conquest, but that a substantial population survived into the late 9th century. Material evidence further shows the continuity of certain everyday technologies from the Avar period into the age of the Hungarian Conquest. For example, iron smelting and metalworking display direct continuity, and similar persistence can be observed in pottery, indicating that craft knowledge was transmitted from generation to generation throughout the 9th century (Gallina, 2018; Szenthe & Gáll, 2021; Szücsi, 2025).

A recent interpretation also appears to support the idea of Avar–Hungarian transfer of knowledge and culture. János B. Szabó and Balázs Sudár have reinterpreted the legend of Botond, who broke the gates of a Byzantine city with his mace. They suggest that this story, preserved in Hungarian chronicle tradition, may originally have commemorated the Avar siege of Byzantium in 626. This is supported, in their view, by the Hungarian name of the leader of the siege (Apor), behind which they posit the Avar ethnonym, as well as by the fact that 9th-century Hungarians, unlike the Avars, did not lay siege to Constantinople (B. Szabó & Sudár, 2025).

The cultural character of the conquering elite can be outlined with relative clarity based on available sources. Archaeological finds, burial customs, and personal names all indicate that this elite fits within the broader steppe cultural sphere, and in many respects aligns with Turkic traditions. Contemporary external sources reinforce this picture, frequently referring to the Hungarians as "Turks." At the same time, the use of this term cannot be interpreted as a linguistic identification;

rather, it reflects a political and cultural category meaningful to contemporary observers (Golden, 1992, pp. 258–262).

One of the most important historical testimonies to early eastern connections is the account of Friar Julian, who in the first half of the 13th century reported encountering communities in the region of present-day Bashkiria that were connected to the Hungarians both linguistically and in terms of self-identification. Although the interpretation of this source is not without difficulties, it nevertheless indicates that the process of Hungarian ethnogenesis did not end with settlement in the Carpathian Basin but continued within a network of long-lasting contacts.

Taken together, these various data points produce a picture in which linguistic, cultural, and demographic factors are all simultaneously present and interwoven. At the same time, it is precisely these stable points that reveal the tensions and open questions that come to the fore at the next level – the realm of logical reconstruction.

LOGICAL RECONSTRUCTIONS: THE SCOPE OF HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

One of the most sensitive areas in the interpretation of early Hungarian history comprises those questions for which the available data indicate certain directions but do not lead to a single, exclusive explanation. The most important issue of this kind concerns the linguistic character of the conquering community. Based on historical linguistics, the use of the Hungarian language can be taken as given; at the same time, personal names, titles of rank, and the terminology of external sources suggest that the leading stratum was culturally – and in part presumably linguistically – strongly connected to the Turkic world. This duality is difficult to explain within a single, homogeneous linguistic model. A significant portion of current research therefore treats the possibility of multilingualism as a starting point, even if its concrete form cannot be precisely reconstructed.

In this context, the internal stratification of conquering society takes on particular importance. It is conceivable – and according to several approaches, probable – that language use was socially differentiated: parts of the political and military elite may have followed linguistic and cultural patterns tied to the steppe environment, while other strata of the community were more closely associated with the Hungarian language. This model cannot be regarded as proven, yet it corresponds well to historical parallels observed in other nomadic societies, where the language of political representation and that of everyday communication do not necessarily coincide.

From this problem arises the question of linguistic assimilation, perhaps the most elusive yet unavoidable issue of the entire period. Based on demographic considerations, it is difficult to sustain the simple model according to which a relatively small conquering group would have linguistically unified a much larger local population within a short period of time (Gerber et al., 2024). Although elite dominance is a historically known phenomenon, applying it to this specific case would require a number of additional conditions for which no direct evidence exists.

This recognition has led to more complex models that interpret linguistic change not as a one-directional influence but as a multi-phase interaction. According to this approach, the Conquest did not "bring with it" a fully established linguistic situation but rather created a context in which different linguistic and cultural elements gradually became integrated. This may explain how Hungarian came to dominate without necessarily being the result of a single, rapid, and uni-directional process.

More radical approaches to this issue raise the possibility of an earlier presence in the Carpathian Basin. According to this hypothesis, it cannot be excluded that groups speaking the ancestor of Hungarian had been present in the region for centuries prior to the Conquest, which would significantly facilitate the explanation of later linguistic dominance. It must be stressed, however, that this proposal in its current form cannot be regarded as proven, as neither archaeological nor historical sources provide clear support for it. The question can therefore be posed but cannot be resolved on the basis of current knowledge.

Similarly, the interpretation of the blood oath (*vérszerződés*) requires reconsideration. The event described in the chronicles and localized in the Carpathian Basin likely does not record an internal agreement of the conquering Hungarians – which may have taken place earlier in the East, possibly in connection with the incorporation of the Kabars who had separated from the Khazar state – but rather a pact between local (perhaps Onogur) elites within the Carpathian Basin and the incoming (possibly Turkic) elite. Based on anthropological and historical parallels, it can be assumed that such rituals typically served to formalize agreements between elite groups of different origins. If this interpretation is taken seriously, the blood oath appears not merely as a founding act of a tribal alliance, but as a legitimizing instrument within an already more complex social structure.

Historical geography and the study of place names also allow for cautious conclusions. The toponymic material of the 9th century (for example Brno /Berény/, Villach /Újlak/, Orhei /Várhely/) suggests that early Hungarian settlement areas and zones of influence may have extended beyond the later borders of the medieval Hungarian state, including parts of present-day Czechia, Austria, and Moldova. An unbiased investigation of place-name etymologies – one that does not begin from modern Central European linguistic boundaries or political claims – legitimately raises the question of the spatial extent of early Hungarian language use. At the same time, such conclusions depend heavily on etymological interpretations, which are not always unambiguous; accordingly, cautious formulation is particularly warranted in this field.

In this connection, the chronology and direction of the borrowing of loanwords (Turkic, Iranian, Slavic, etc.) may also require reconsideration. It is not self-evident when the words identified as loanwords entered the ancestor of the Hungarian language, nor can the direction of borrowing be regarded as definitively established. In many cases, the decision has depended less on scientific rigor than on the biases of individual linguists – particularly when one considers how unquestioned assumptions from 19th- and 20th-century scholarship have often been perpetuated without critical reassessment.

A related issue, shaped by national biases, concerns the localization of Great Moravia. Although national historiography in Czechoslovakia uniformly rejected Imre Boba's theory, contemporary sources and geographical descriptions make it plausible that this entity was located significantly south of present-day Moravia, possibly in the region between the Sava and Drava rivers or in the northern Balkans. An examination of contemporary terminology indicates that the term "magna" did not necessarily denote "great" in the modern sense, but rather "old" or "former" (cf. *Magna Hungaria* = the old or former Hungary in the East) (Boba, 1971).

If the 19th-century dogma associated with national narratives – namely the primacy of Slavic presence in the Carpathian Basin – is reconsidered, new and potentially fruitful directions of research may open up. Particularly intriguing is the persistence of Migration Period ethnonyms in the Hungarian language, such as *tót* (Slav) from *teuta* (a Celtic tribal name), *vend* (Slovene) from the Vandals, *német* (German) from *nemetes* (a Germanic tribal name), and *lengyel* (Pole) from the Slavic tribal name *lędjěne*. The adoption of such ethnonyms is not satisfactorily explained by the conventional chronology of Hungarian presence in the Carpathian Basin.

The reconstruction of Hungarian–Turkic relations also falls within this category: while the intensity of the connection is well documented, its precise nature cannot be reconstructed with complete certainty. It remains unclear, for example, whether these interactions developed primarily during the eastern migrations or partly within the Carpathian Basin itself, in a mixed ethnic and cultural environment. These two possibilities are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary, and it is precisely their overlap that makes the dynamics of the process difficult to define.

What these questions have in common is that they are not closed problems but open fields of interpretation. Their significance lies in demonstrating that the narrative of early Hungarian history currently takes the form of a network of interpretations in which different hypotheses do not replace but rather complement one another.

SPECULATION: THE LIMITS OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

Certain questions in early Hungarian history are not merely uncertain, but so lacking in sources that, given our present state of knowledge, they cannot be meaningfully investigated. These are the points at which historical reconstruction would necessarily move beyond the realm of hypotheses into that of speculation, and where scholarly discipline requires restraint above all else. This category includes a considerable body of pseudo-scholarly or overtly unscientific literature, for which public interest provides a reliable market. Rather than promoting such works, I will mention only a few characteristic examples.

Foremost among these issues is the precise linguistic and ethnic identification of the peoples of the Migration Period. Although numerous theories have been proposed regarding the Huns, Scythians, or even the Avars, most of these are based on fragmentary data and indirect inference. Archaeological cultures do not speak, and written sources are terse and often distorted by their external perspective. Consequently, any attempt to assign these populations to a single, clearly defined language or identity inevitably places an excessive burden on the available evidence.

Similarly problematic is the question of large linguistic and ethnic "homelands." Although scholarly research has proposed various models for their localization, these can often be verified only to a limited extent. Recent studies tend to identify the Ural region as a likely starting point, yet the events, conditions, and locations preceding this phase remain uncertain. Moreover, the localization of linguistic homelands (Indo-European, Germanic, Slavic, Finno-Ugric, Turkic) frequently becomes entangled with competing national narratives, rendering their conclusions more speculative than reliable. In the case of Hungarian prehistory, the question of the earliest homeland often acquires a pronounced identity-political dimension.

The precise dating of the Hungarian Conquest is another issue in which conventional answers conceal a greater degree of uncertainty. The date 895–896 is largely the result of historiographical tradition, whereas the evidence discussed above suggests a more protracted process. In this sense, the specific year functions more as a symbolic marker than as a strictly chronological datum.

Radical theories regarding the origin of the Hungarian runic script (*rovásírás*) also belong here, particularly those positing a long, uninterrupted writing tradition or a direct, linear connection to ancient systems. Such ideas typically assume several intermediary steps for which no evidence exists and thus operate more at the level of possibility than probability. Similar attempts have been made to reconstruct an outstanding ancient culture from runic script or other Hungarian traditions. While Hungarian folklore and mythology are indeed rich, their references are too uncertain to support reliable conclusions. We possess, for example, no certain knowledge of pre-Christian Hungarian belief systems.

A defining feature of speculative discourse is that the most categorical assertions often appear precisely in those areas where certainty is lowest. For this reason, one of the most important tasks of a scholarly approach is to indicate clearly where the boundary lies between well-founded reconstruction and conjecture.

HUNGARIAN–TURKIC RELATIONS: CONTACT AND INTERPRETATION

One of the most significant – and at the same time frequently misunderstood – dimensions of early Hungarian history is the relationship with Turkic peoples. The study of this issue provides an excellent example of how an empirically grounded phenomenon can be interpreted in different ways depending on the methodological framework applied.

As noted earlier, linguistic evidence leaves no doubt that the Hungarian language contains a substantial number of words of Turkic origin, primarily connected with economic life, animal husbandry, and social organization. These are not isolated borrowings, but the imprint of intensive and long-lasting contact. It follows that Hungarian-speaking communities lived for extended periods in environments where they maintained close relations with Turkic-speaking groups. Historical and archaeological data reinforce this picture. The social organization, military practices, and material culture of the conquering elite show numerous parallels with the steppe world, including specifically Turkic traditions. The incorporation of the Kabars, who had broken away from Khazar rule, as well as the terminology used in Byzantine sources, further demonstrate that the Hungarian groups of the Conquest were integrated into the political and cultural system of the Eurasian steppe.

In Byzantine sources, the Hungarian conquerors are often referred to as "Turks," while Western authors employed variants derived from the ethnonym *onogur* ("ten tribes"), itself of Turkic origin. The origin of the Hungarian self-designation (*magyar*) also remains uncertain; the linguistic explanation based on Finno-Ugric roots appears somewhat forced to the author of the present work. An alternative derivation from a Turkic tribal name (*madžar*) is not inherently less plausible, though this leads to the further question of what the original self-designation of the population speaking the ancestor of Hungarian might have been (Gulya, 1997; Király, 1997; Sudár, 2023).

As mentioned above, archaeogenetic results also support this general picture by identifying eastern, partly Inner Asian components within the conquering population. At the same time, these data clearly demonstrate the mixed character of the population, ruling out the assumption of a single, homogeneous origin.

The available evidence thus points toward a model in which the relationship between Hungarians and Turkic peoples was intense, multifaceted, and long-lasting. However, this does not automatically imply genetic or linguistic identity. The Finno-Ugric structure of the Hungarian language and the genetic heterogeneity revealed by archaeogenetics both indicate that Turkic influence should be understood as part of a broader Eurasian interaction sphere. The central question of the debate is therefore not whether strong Turkic connections existed – the answer to this is clearly affirmative – but rather what the nature of those connections was. According to the prevailing scholarly view, these influences reflect not primary origin but intensive cultural and linguistic interaction (Csáky et al., 2020; Golden, 1992; Róna-Tas & Berta, 2011). Interpretations that go beyond this point typically cross the boundary of scholarly reasoning when they attempt to derive direct descent from contact phenomena.

In this respect, the study of Hungarian–Turkic relations illustrates particularly well the necessity of the tripartite framework employed in this paper: while the fact of interaction is firmly established, its precise interpretation belongs to the level of reconstruction, and exaggerated conclusions drawn from it fall into the category of speculation.

THE QUESTION OF RUNIC SCRIPT: LITERACY AND CULTURAL INTERACTION

One of the most intriguing – and methodologically most instructive – issues in early Hungarian history concerns the origin and function of the runic script. The particularity of this topic lies in the fact that, while we possess a concrete and reconstructible writing system, its early history is almost entirely based on indirect evidence. As such, runic writing constitutes an exceptional example of how demonstrable phenomena intersect with interpretive necessity.

The chronology of surviving records clearly illustrates the nature of the problem. The earliest unquestionably authentic examples of the runic script suited to recording the sounds of the Hungarian language are known from the late Middle Ages (Benkő et al., 2021; Fehér, 2020). This fact does not in itself exclude an earlier origin, but it clearly limits the possibilities of retrojection. Any claim linking the runic script directly to the period of the Conquest – or to an even earlier era – must necessarily rely on indirect argumentation.

The archaeological record raises more questions than it answers in this regard. Runiform inscriptions appearing on objects from the late Avar and Conquest periods undoubtedly exist, yet their interpretation remains highly contested. It is unclear in which language they were written, and whether they formed part of a single, unified writing tradition or rather indicate the coexistence of multiple parallel systems (Fehér, 2020, pp. 81–166). This uncertainty highlights the complexity of the relationship between writing and language in this period, which was likely far more intricate than suggested by linear models of development.

Particular attention must be paid to the fact that the surviving records of runic writing are predominantly associated with an ecclesiastical environment (Benkő et al., 2021; Fehér, 2020). Inscriptions in churches, runic calendars, and alphabets preserved in codices indicate that the use of writing was not in opposition to the Christian institutional framework. This contradicts the long-standing assumption that runic writing was primarily a pagan tradition suppressed by the Christian kingdom. Instead, the available evidence points to a picture of regionally limited yet integrated usage.

The way Hungarian (Székely) runic writing survived further nuances this picture. The fact that medieval sources consistently refer to it as "Székely script" suggests that its preservation was linked to a specific social group. This raises the possibility that runic writing functioned not as a general system of literacy, but as a tradition associated with particular communities, serving specific purposes.

At the same time, the sophistication of the late medieval alphabet and writing technique – such as in the well-known Constantinople inscription (Fehér, 2020, pp. 320–326) – cannot be overlooked. The fact that the system almost perfectly represents the Hungarian phonological inventory allows for two possible interpretations. According to one, the script is the result of a longer process of development during which an earlier writing tradition – most likely related to Turkic scripts – was gradually adapted to the Hungarian language. The alternative interpretation holds that the system is the product of deliberate design, combining elements from multiple writing traditions. This latter view gains particular plausibility when the broader historical context of the period is taken into account.

The 9th century was a period of intense Christian missionary activity, during which the development of vernacular literacy for newly converted peoples was not uncommon. The passage from the *Life of Constantine (Cyril)* cited below, which mentions numerous peoples possessing their own writing systems, does not prove the early existence of Hungarian runic writing; it does, however, demonstrate that the landscape of literacy in the region may have been far more diverse than later sources suggest:

> *"Does not God send rain equally upon all, and does not the sun shine in the same way upon everyone? Do we not all breathe the same air? Are you not ashamed to recognize only three languages and to wish that all other peoples and nations should be blind and deaf? Do you consider God weak, as if He were unable to grant this, or envious, as if He did not wish to? We know many peoples who are skilled in letters and glorify God, each in their own language. Among them are the Armenians, Persians, Abkhazians, Iberians (Georgians), Sogdians, Goths, Avars, Turks, Khazars, Arabs, Egyptians, Syrians, and many others."* (c. 860) (Havlík & Večerka, 1967, p. 106)

Following the Frankish conquest, the Avar elite responsible for state structures quickly disappeared, yet archaeological evidence confirms the continued existence of the common population. Within the Frankish Empire, the *Awarenmark* (Avar province) existed in the region of present-day western Hungary and eastern Austria. Here, Frankish missionaries carried out significant work among the former Avar populace, whom Cyril may have referred to as Avars in order to distinguish them from the Slavs. According to one hypothesis, these missionaries may have developed the writing used by the Avars, adapting it to the local language to create a liturgical script that aided conversion – a possibility that may be reflected in Cyril's remark.

With regard to the fate of the late Avar population, it is noteworthy that the Székelys were living in Transdanubia during the early Árpád period, later being resettled in Transylvania for border-defense purposes (Jancsó, 2008, p. 33). They carried their runic script with them, as attested by the geographical distribution of surviving inscriptions and by medieval chronicles and the Jagiellonian-era alphabet, which explicitly refer to it as "Székely writing" (Fehér, 2020, pp. 281–285).

From the perspective of Hungarian–Turkic relations, the runic script is thus of particular significance. Its formal and structural parallels clearly link it to steppe writing traditions, yet these connections cannot be interpreted within a single, simple model of origin. Rather, we are dealing with a process of transformation in which various influences – including Turkic, Latin, and Greek elements – interacted and combined into a new system adapted to the needs of the Hungarian language. The history of runic writing, therefore, does not point toward a single answer but instead reveals a complex set of problems. It simultaneously reflects the depth of cultural interactions and the adaptability of literacy, while making clear that many aspects of early Hungarian history can only be approached indirectly.

CONCLUSIONS: HISTORICAL CERTAINTY AND THE LIMITS OF NATIONAL NARRATIVES

The interpretation of early Hungarian history is an area in which scientific inquiry and cultural self-understanding are closely intertwined. The available data make it possible to construct a picture of the period that rests on relatively stable foundations, yet many key questions remain open. Perhaps the greatest challenge, alongside the fluidity of this picture, lies in distinguishing between different levels of certainty.

The tripartite framework employed in this study – the separation of established facts, logical reconstructions, and speculation – rests on the recognition that these levels are often conflated in the discourse on early Hungarian history. This conflation is not merely a methodological issue; it affects historical thinking as a whole: hypotheses may become transformed into certainties, while well-established results may be placed in doubt without sufficient justification.

This phenomenon appears with sensitivity in the context of national narratives. By its very nature, early history is a domain in which the scarcity of sources allows for a variety of interpretations. Under such conditions, historical reconstruction can easily become a tool of identity formation, serving to reinforce contemporary self-images rather than to understand the past. This tendency is not limited to so-called "alternative" theories; to some extent, even classical scholarly narratives may contain such elements.

The question of Hungarian–Turkic relations illustrate this problem well. The fact of an intensive network of contacts is supported by the results of multiple disciplines; yet its interpretation may point in different directions. The task of scholarship is not to minimize or exaggerate the significance of these relations, but to distinguish clearly between empirically grounded statements and the often-exaggerated conclusions drawn from them.

Similarly, the case of runic writing demonstrates how a real phenomenon can become the starting point for broader interpretive debates. While the existence and basic features of this script can be reliably reconstructed, its origins and early history can only be approached hypothetically. Ignoring the distinction between these levels can easily lead to conclusions that go beyond what the available evidence can support.

From this perspective, perhaps the most important conclusion is that methodological awareness cannot be a secondary consideration in the study of early Hungarian history; it is a fundamental precondition for interpretation. The credibility of scholarly discourse depends largely on its ability to clearly indicate its own limits and to distinguish between different levels of certainty.

In this context, the critique of national narratives means ensuring that historical interpretation does not become a mere reflection of present-day expectations. Early Hungarian history is not a single, fully reconstructible story, but a complex process whose understanding can approach reality only if we accept that certain questions currently have no – and perhaps will never have – definitive answers. It is precisely in this that the subject's true scientific value lies. Rather than offering a closed narrative, it continually invites reinterpretation and thus provides important insights not only into the past, but also into the nature of historical thought itself.

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„At Mohács We Shall Triumph”
The Role of the 1526 Battle of Mohács in Hungarian Cultural Memory

Kristóf Szuromi, PhD
Pázmány Péter Catholic University

Abstract

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the battle, which—sometimes still experienced as an unresolved psychological trauma—continues to occupy its place among the defining national tragedies of Hungary.
In this paper, I aim to demonstrate how the Battle of Mohács influenced early modern Hungarian cultural memory, how the battle and its location became a lieu de mémoire as defined by Pierre Nora for both the Hungarian and the Ottoman sides, and what identity-forming role it played in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hungary.
Finally, I attempt to answer whether, in 2026 on the 500th anniversary, Hungarian public discourse treats the battle as a processed trauma, and how this perception either facilitates or complicates historical research.

Keywords: battle of Mohács, cultural memory, lieu de mémoire

INTRODUCTION – „WE NEED MOHÁCS”

In a scene from the highly popular rockopera *István, a király* (Stephen the King), first performed in 1983, the shaman's character envisions an alternative Hungarian history in the event of the victory of chieftain Koppány. In this vision, the following lines—still frequently quoted today—are spoken: "At Mohács we shall triumph, Dózsa will be our king George, a great power for centuries to come." This brief reference alone clearly illustrates how deeply the memory of the Battle of Mohács has become embedded in Hungarian culture.

Moreover, Mohács has transcended the mere memory of the defeat of 1526 and has come to function as both a metaphor and a symbol. One of the most striking examples of this is the poem *Nekünk Mohács kell* ("We Need Mohács") by Endre Ady, published in 1908, in which the poet invokes Mohács as a vehicle for national self-reproach and self-flagellation. Ady suggests that the Hungarian nation requires recurring catastrophes and traumas, for otherwise the allegedly complacent national spirit would prevent it from developing—or even from surviving at all. In contemporary Hungarian cultural memory, Mohács is commonly remembered as a national tragedy: the event that shattered Hungary's effective independence until the twentieth century, marked the end of its medieval great-power status, and vividly demonstrated the self-destructive consequences of internal division and factional strife within the nation.

In the present study, I seek to demonstrate that the cultural memory of the Battle of Mohács has undergone two major transformations since the 16th century. The trauma of 1526 initially functioned as a site of memory for both Hungary and Central Europe during the age of Ottoman expansion, a trauma that was largely resolved through the reconquest of the Kingdom of Hungary at the end of the 17th century. At the same time, the battle became an important element of Habsburg dynastic representation, serving to illustrate how, following the fall of the Jagiellonian dynasty and the heroic death of King Louis II, the Habsburgs assumed the mantle of leadership in the struggle against the Ottomans. By contrast, the nation-building milieu of the nineteenth century revived and fundamentally reinterpreted the battle, transforming it into the decisive defeat and foundational trauma of the Hungarian nation. Since then, successive political regimes and generations have continuously reappropriated the event, transforming it into one of Hungary's most enduring lieux de mémoire.

The concept of the *lieu de mémoire*, as proposed by Pierre Nora, refers to a crystallization point of a given community's identity—whether that community is a nation, a region, or another collective entity. It originates in the group's past, yet gradually becomes detached from history itself. Depending on the circumstances and the needs of a particular era, it acquires additional layers of meaning, is transformed into a symbol, and may become surrounded by commemorative rituals. In this way, the site of memory ensures the continued presence of a historical event within cultural memory (Nora, 1989).

The Battle of Mohács of 1526, for example, was not regarded by contemporaries as a decisive national catastrophe or a tragedy that doomed the nation. Such interpretations emerged only through the political, cultural, and intellectual developments of the 19th and 20th centuries. Without these later processes, Mohács would never have acquired the broader symbolic significance attributed to it in present-day memory culture.

By its very nature, cultural memory can never be entirely objective in the manner expected of historical scholarship. It may become intertwined with other collective traumas, political ideologies, and intellectual currents, while its content, symbolism, and significance remain subject to continual reinterpretation, transformation, or even disappearance (Nora, 1989).

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

By now, the Battle of Mohács has generated an immense body of scholarship, amounting virtually to an entire library. Over the past century, historians have examined the event, its antecedents, and its consequences from a wide range of perspectives, including military and political history, social and economic history, as well as intellectual and art history. To these may be added archaeological investigations, which likewise began to develop in earnest during the twentieth century. The history of the battle's remembrance and memorialization has also attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly over the past few decades.

With the rise of positivist historiography in late nineteenth-century Hungary, the first major synthetic works on Mohács also began to appear. Scholars undertook the systematic examination not only of Hungarian sources, but also of foreign materials, including Ottoman, Venetian, and Vatican records. Vilmos Fraknói's overview of the battle was published as a separate chapter in the fourth volume of the ten-volume series *A magyar nemzet története* ("History of the Hungarian Nation") in 1884, a work intended for a broader reading public. The causes of the defeat at Mohács, including the perceived moral failings of the Hungarian estates, were examined in detail by Tivadar Ortvay in his work published in 1910.

On the four-hundredth anniversary of the battle, in 1926, the most substantial synthesis produced up to that point was published under the editorship of Imre Lukinich under the title *Mohács emlékkönyv* ("Mohács Memorial Volume"). This was complemented in the same year by the volume *Mohács Magyarországa* ("Hungary at the Time of Mohács"), a collection of contemporary sources translated into Hungarian (Bartoniek, 1926). From the perspective of memory studies, it is important to note that publications appearing between the 1920s and the 1940s also carried strong contemporary political overtones, and several enduring narratives became rooted in public discourse during this period. In the aftermath of the Treaty of Trianon, Hungarian public life proved particularly receptive to narratives concerning the "betrayal" of Hungary by the West, as well as to the notion that King Francis I of France had turned Suleiman the Magnificent against Hungary, thereby contributing to the catastrophe at Mohács (Artner, 1926; Bárdossy, 1943).

By contrast, in his 1936 study, Gyula Szekfű placed far greater emphasis on the responsibility of the Hungarian estates, which, in his interpretation, had morally disintegrated and become "self-devouring" following the death of King Matthias Corvinus (Szekfű, 1936). The "Western betrayal" narrative that gained strength during the 1920s and 1930s was later readily adopted by the state-socialist historiography of the 1950s as well. A notable example is György Székely's 1952 study *A török hódítók elleni védelem ügye a Dózsa-parasztháborútól Mohácsig* ("The Question of Defence against the Turkish Conquerors from the Dózsa Peasant War to Mohács").

The first major and widely debated publication of the recent period was István Nemeskürty's 1966 volume *Önfia vágta sebét* ("Wounded by His Own Son"). In this work, Nemeskürty not only estimated Hungarian losses at Mohács to have been lower than those suffered during the subsequent conflicts, but also emphasized tensions between the social "classes," particularly in the aftermath of the 1514 peasant revolt led by György Dózsa. According to his interpretation, the nobility had alienated the peasantry, thereby depriving itself of valuable resources in the later battle. He also devoted considerable attention to the role of John Szapolyai, arguing that the Transylvanian voivode did not deliberately avoid participation in the battle, although he may nevertheless have welcomed the death of King Louis II of Hungary.

In contrast, historians of the 1970s sought to reinterpret the understanding of Mohács as a purely national tragedy. Ferenc Szakály and András Kubinyi, for example, presented the battle and its outcome as consequences of the broader political and geopolitical transformations taking place in contemporary Europe, while Domokos Kosáry focused on the diplomatic possibilities available to the Hungarian Kingdom (Szakály, 1975; Kubinyi, 1981; Kosáry, 1978). Meanwhile, the military historian Géza Perjés attempted to place relations between the Kingdom of Hungary and the Ottoman Empire into a new interpretative framework by incorporating action-radius theory and the possibility of the alleged Ottoman settlement initiative that later became known as the "Suleiman offer" (Perjés, 1975).

In the years following the political transition in Hungary, greater attention was devoted to studies based on Ottoman sources, most notably the publications of Pál Fodor and Gábor Ágoston, which in several respects challenged or refuted the conclusions of Géza Perjés (Fodor, 1991, Ágoston, 1991). The incorporation of Ottoman perspectives continued into the 2000s as well, culminating in the publication of Mihály Dobrovits's important 2013 study *Nekik Mohács kell. A török Mohács-percepció kérdőjelei* ("They Need Mohács: Question Marks Surrounding the Turkish Perception of Mohács"), which addressed the problem of Ottoman memory and interpretation of the battle.

As the five-hundredth anniversary of the battle approached, the number of monographs, source editions, and scholarly studies devoted to the subject continued to grow. In 2006, János B. Szabó published a volume that, alongside the previously discussed aspects, also examined the cultural memory of the battle. In 2019, the substantial edited volume *Több mint egy csata: Mohács* ("More Than a Battle: Mohács"), edited by Pál Fodor and Szabolcs Varga, appeared as a comprehensive work presenting the latest research results and detailed historiographical background from multiple perspectives. In 2024, the first volume of the special Mohács issue of the journal *Századok* was published, containing current studies on the "first Mohács," that is, the battle of 1526.

In the same year, following the publication of *Mohács Symphony* in 2022, another volume appeared in the book series presenting the latest findings of battlefield archaeology as well as historical and literary scholarship in both Hungarian and English: *Temetetlen Mohács* ("Unburied Mohács") This was followed in 2026 by *Mohács: számvetés* ("Mohács: Taking Stock"), a volume devoted exclusively to research concerning the battle of 1526.

It may therefore be concluded that, over the past fifty years alone, the historiography and archaeology of the Battle of Mohács have undergone substantial changes, generating numerous professional debates and reinterpretations. At the same time, the processing of the battle itself—as an event and as a historical trauma—began almost immediately after 1526 and has continued for five centuries. Over the course of subsequent eras, Mohács became both a formative element of Hungarian national identity and a *lieu de mémoire*, continuously interacting with the prevailing historical consciousness of each age.

MOHÁCS AS TRAUMA IN THE 16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES

The early modern memory of the Battle of Mohács exhibits certain similarities with its modern reception, while at the same time possessing its own interpretative framework and symbolic significance shaped by the conditions of the period. The defeat represented a tragedy for the Kingdom of Hungary on several levels. Its significance was heightened, on the one hand, by the death of King Louis II of Hungary (1516–1526) without an heir, followed by the double royal election of 1527, the ensuing years of civil war, and ultimately the Ottoman occupation of Buda in 1541. On the other hand, the battle also constituted a painful loss for the broader Central European region and for the Christian European narrative that regarded the Ottomans not merely as a political or military adversary, but as a religious, spiritual, and existential threat.

Accounts of the battle itself began to appear within weeks of the event, including in products of the contemporary press such as the illustrated *New Zeitung* pamphlets published within the Holy Roman Empire, whose authors reported on the defeat of the Hungarian army and the death of King Louis (Stöckel, 1526).

Shortly thereafter, in 1527, an account was published in Kraków that remains one of the principal primary sources for the study of the battle to this day. István Brodarics, who had personally participated in the battle as royal chancellor and bishop of Sirmium, composed within a year his *De Conflictu Hungarorum cum Solymano Turcarum Imperatore Ad Mohach Historia Verissima* ("The Most Truthful History of the Conflict of the Hungarians with Suleiman, Emperor of the Turks, at Mohács") (Kasza, 2007). The *Historia Verissima* served both political and personal purposes, as Brodarics was responding to a speech by Johannes Cuspinian, dating from around 1526–1527, in which the Viennese humanist sharply criticized the Hungarians, accusing them of abandoning their king and attributing the defeat against the Ottomans entirely to their own failings. Brodarics therefore sought to refute such claims by providing a detailed account of both the battle and the preceding events, thereby leaving posterity an indispensable historical source (Brodarics, 1983.; Kasza, 2007).

Its influence was already unmistakable during the early modern period. Not only was it utilized by Hungarian authors such as Miklós Istvánffy in their own historical works (Varga, 2022), but it also demonstrably shaped the international image of the Battle of Mohács, as can be seen, for example, in the 1600 chronicle of Martin Fumée.

In the preface to the *Historia Verissima*, István Brodarics formulates a passage that is also highly relevant for the later sections of this study: "Someone may say that many things in this war could have been managed better; yet we reply that there has never existed such a mighty or fortunate king or people whom ill fortune did not at times afflict. We shall furthermore maintain that we acted commendably toward Christendom, if indeed another nation can be found that has defended it against the external enemy for more than five hundred years at the cost of its own blood and resources." (Brodarics, 1983.; Illik, 2023). This passage is particularly significant because it already contains the "what if?" attitude that has remained an almost inseparable element of the social memory of Mohács since 1526, as well as the tradition of *propugnaculum christianitatis*—the idea of Hungary as the "bulwark of Christendom"—which became an important factor in Hungarian collective identity both during the 16th century and, later, following the emergence of modern national consciousness in the 19th century (Szuromi, 2020).

The analysis and interpretation of the battle did not remain confined within the borders of the Kingdom of Hungary. Chronicles originating from other parts of Central Europe during the second half of the sixteenth century likewise attempted to explain the causes of the defeat and identify those responsible for it. In his 1551 work, Marcin Bielski portrayed King Sigismund I the Old in a favourable light, claiming that he had attempted to persuade his nephew, King Louis II, to conclude peace with the Ottomans, whereas the Hungarian ruler, encouraged and financially supported by Republic of Venice and the Holy See, acted irresponsibly in choosing war (Jasiński, 2024). Another Polish source, the work of Stanisław Sarnicki published around 1577, identified not Louis but

Archbishop Pál Tomori as chiefly responsible, arguing that he had underestimated the enemy and rashly accepted battle (Jasiński, 2024). A similar interpretation was advanced by the English author Richard Knolles, who in his 1603 work likewise emphasized Tomori's vanity and arrogance, through which he endangered the young and inexperienced Louis together with his army (Knolles 1603).

By contrast, in his work published in 1608, Jiří Barthold Pontanus z Breitenberka collectively blamed the Hungarian magnates accompanying the king, claiming that they had pressured the young Louis into accepting battle, while the Bohemians had unsuccessfully attempted to counsel caution (Pontanus 1608).

Alongside the interpretation of the battle itself, the memory of King Louis II of Hungary also assumed an important role during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its personal, political, and symbolic dimensions can all be identified within the period. Perhaps the most personal thread is connected to the activities of the king's widow, Mary of Hungary (also known as Mary of Habsburg). One of the most notable results of her commemorative efforts is the stained-glass window of the Cathedral of St. Michael and St. Gudula, created by Bernard van Orley in 1538. The window was commissioned and financed by Mary—by that time governor of the Netherlands—and depicts the deceased Louis kneeling in prayer, while behind him stands his namesake and symbolic predecessor, Louis IX of France, one of the leading figures of the Seventh and Eighth Crusades, during the latter of which he himself died (Bárány, 2020).

The representation is thus simultaneously dynastic, personal, and ideological. Louis is elevated into the company of Europe's crusading kings, presented as a martyr who perished in the struggle against the Ottomans, who by this period were increasingly portrayed as the archenemy of Christendom (Szuromi 2020). At the same time, the image also constitutes the personal act of remembrance of a widow mourning her late husband. The anti-Ottoman representation of Louis continued during the second half of the sixteenth century within the German-speaking lands as well, a tendency clearly illustrated by the 1581–1582 engraving of Johan Nel. In this image, the allegorical female figure of Hungary, oppressed by the Ottomans, is shown on the verge of rescue by armoured cavalrymen symbolizing Germania. Along the right-hand side of the illustration are displayed the fallen martyrs of the anti-Ottoman struggle—including figures such as György Thury, Nikolas IV Zrínyi, and John Hunyadi—culminating with the figure of Louis II sinking into the marsh. The image therefore functions as a powerful form of political representation, or more precisely propaganda: the Holy Roman Empire, embodied by the House of Habsburg, assumes the mantle of the struggle against the great enemy, a struggle in which Hungarian kings and commanders had already sacrificed their lives, and positions itself as the force capable of liberating Hungary (Galavics, 1986).

The multifaceted nature of the sixteenth-century memory of Mohács is further demonstrated by the battle's integration into the poetry of the age. As a consequence of the Ottoman advance and the successive defeats suffered by Christian Europe, there emerged an increasingly strong tendency to interpret these events within a biblical framework and to situate them within an eschatological understanding of history (Szuromi 2020).

Typical poetic genres of the period included the *jeremiads*—laments composed in imitation of the complaints of the Prophet Jeremiah—and the *querelae*, mournful and elegiac poems written in verse form. Both genres flourished during the sixteenth century, particularly within Hungarian and Austrian literature, presenting the Ottoman conquest as a form of divine punishment. The literary historian Mihály Imre carried out especially significant research on this subject. Among the poems he identified, two focus directly on the trauma of the 1526 battle while simultaneously reinforcing the image of Louis II as both a martyr and a tragically youthful, almost childlike ruler (Imre, 1995). In Johannes Langius's 1539 poem *Ad Iesum Christum Dei Filium, pro Christianis contra Turcas*, the following lines appear:

> *"The royal command has come, yet the sluggish people heed it no more,*
> *The king is but a child, scarcely fit for the throne […]*
> *Your army scatters, ill fate! you are left all alone,*
> *And in this dire hour, death found you, our Louis.*
> *Oh poor child, alas, how wretched is your end—*
> *Trouble breaks over you like a flood, and in its tide you are drowned."* (Imre, 1995)

In the 1544 *Pannoniae luctus* we can read, that:

> *"His fame shall grant an everlasting name to our Louis, fallen in youth,*
> *For he died bravely on native soil, for the ancient homeland." (Imre, 1995)*

All of this clearly demonstrates that the defeat of the Christian army at Mohács did not remain merely a Hungarian trauma confined to the territory of the

Kingdom of Hungary. The catastrophe shocked and deeply affected both regional and broader European audiences, while further reinforcing reports concerning the alleged invincibility and unstoppable advance of the Ottomans (Szuromi, 2020). At the same time, Louis II was repeatedly commemorated as a martyr who had accepted battle against the Ottomans—frequently portrayed as the principal enemy of Christendom—and against overwhelming odds, ultimately sacrificing his life, prematurely, in defence of his faith, his people, and his kingdom. References to his personal shortcomings or possible responsibility for the defeat emerged only later, around the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Even then, however, chronicles often identified his own magnates and military commanders—most notably Pál Tomori—as the more immediate causes of the catastrophe.

Another central figure in the cultural memory of the battle was John Szapolyai who did not participate in the battle but was elected and crowned king of Hungary in 1527. The question of his motives has remained a matter of debate to the present day. Accusations that he deliberately withheld his army from the battle out of personal ambition already appeared in the 1527 speech of Caspar Ursinus Velius and later formed part of Habsburg propaganda directed against him (Kasza, 2007). It is important to note, however, that in the principal Hungarian source on the battle, the *Historia Verissima*, István Brodarics does not level such accusations against the then voivode of Transylvania (Brodarics, 1983).

A significant turning point in the memory of the battle came in 1687. In that year, the forces of the Holy League, under the command of Charles V, Duke of Lorraine, Maximilian II Emanuel, and Louis William, Margrave of Baden-Baden, inflicted a major defeat upon the Ottoman army led by Sarı Suleiman Pasha at Battle of Nagyharsány (also referred to in some sources as the Battle of Harsány Hill). This victory strongly captured the imagination of contemporaries and public opinion precisely because it occurred in close proximity to Mohács (Polgár, 2019). Indeed, contemporary as well as eighteenth-century sources frequently referred to the event simply as the "Battle of Mohács," often explicitly noting that it had taken place near the site where King Louis II and his army had suffered defeat at the hands of the Ottomans (Polgár, 2019).

For this reason, contemporaries, short-term collective memory, and imperial propaganda alike interpreted the victory of 1687 as a "revenge" or reversal of the Christian defeat of 1526. The accompanying atmosphere of euphoria perceptibly overwrote the Mohács memory of the 16th century, to the extent that in 18th century sources the term "Battle of Mohács" most commonly referred not to the Ottoman victory of 1526, but to the triumph of the Holy League forces in 1687. In this sense, it may be argued that the trauma suffered by the region in 1526 was symbolically processed and, to some extent, resolved through the victory of 1687 and the subsequent Treaty of Karlowitz of 1699.

FROM PROCESSED TRAUMA TO NATIONAL TRAGEDY: THE IMAGE OF MOHÁCS IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

During the first third of the 19th century, the rise of modern Hungarian national identity and concepts of nationhood also initiated the canonization and reinterpretation of the shared past through a national lens. As a consequence, an increasing number of historical treatises, biographical collections—such as Vince Károly Kölesy's *Nemzeti Plutarkus* ("National Plutarch")—as well as literary, poetic, and visual works created in the spirit of Hungarian Romanticism sought to represent either the glorious or the tragic aspects of the nation's past. Within this context, the Battle of Mohács of 1526 once again came to the forefront. This time, however, it appeared not as a trauma that had seemingly been processed by the eighteenth century, but rather as a decisive turning point in the fate of the Hungarian people: the event through which Hungary lost its effective independence and became subjected to the authority of both the "Turkish emperor" and the Habsburg emperor, caught between the struggles of the two great powers.

One of the earliest and most influential works of this period was the poem by Károly Kisfaludy published in 1825 under the title *Elégia* ("Elegy"), which later entered public consciousness simply as *Mohács*. In the poem, the lyrical speaker contemplates with sorrow and melancholy the "field of mourning reddened by heroic blood," evokes the thousands who perished in the battle and whose names had by then been entirely forgotten, and dwells at length on the figures of Tomori and the dying Louis II. The former is criticized in a manner already familiar from seventeenth-century interpretations, being characterized by arrogance and reckless overconfidence:

"Tomori! Proud commander! Why did you abandon your archiepiscopal seat? The glory and flower of our homeland would not have perished with you.

Inflamed by the fire of battle, you confidently rushed into combat,
And for your sake how many noble men fell as sacrifices!”

In these lines, Kisfaludy reproduces the already well-established image of Tomori as an overconfident and reckless commander whose personal ambition contributed directly to the catastrophe. By contrast, King Louis appears as a tragic and sympathetic figure, whom the poet calls “our king of dreadful fate,” emphasizing both his youth and abandonment at the moment of death in the marshlands:

“With your fall, the sun of the Hungarian sky long descended.
Young you were, and unaware of the abyss, you paid a dreadful price;
May peace hover around your sleeping dust!”

The poem thus reflects the 19th century transformation of Mohács into a national tragedy narrative. The battle no longer appears merely as a military defeat or a dynastic crisis, but as the symbolic collapse of the Hungarian nation itself. At the same time, the contrast between the reckless military leader and the innocent, youthful king contributed significantly to shaping the emotional and moral framework through which Mohács entered modern Hungarian collective memory.

In the poem, the battlefield of Mohács becomes not merely the burial place of Louis II and thousands of anonymous soldiers, but something far greater. Kisfaludy transforms it into the graveyard of Hungarian national greatness itself—the symbolic point of origin to which the hardships and misfortunes of subsequent centuries may be traced back. The poem clearly preserves several topoi inherited from seventeenth-century interpretations: the image of the young and abandoned King Louis II of Hungary, who became the victim not only of the battle but also of aristocratic discord and factional strife, as well as that of the excessively self-confident Tomori, whose actions allegedly contributed to the disastrous outcome of the battle.

At the same time, the poem does not remain confined to mourning the tragedy of Mohács. Rather, it concludes on an optimistic and forward-looking note, emphasizing that the Hungarian nation survived this catastrophe as well and will rise again. This sentiment is clearly expressed in the closing lines:

“The Hungarian yet lives, and Buda still stands! Let the past now serve only as example,
And with hearts aflame for the homeland let our gaze look confidently ahead.

And may you flourish, field of mourning, in the gracious embrace of peace, Mohács, once the grave of our nation's greatness!"

Thus, while Mohács is represented as the symbolic site of national collapse, it simultaneously becomes a place of historical instruction and eventual renewal. The trauma of the battle is transformed into a moral lesson through which the nation may both remember its losses and envision its future regeneration.

In 1826, on the three-hundredth anniversary of the defeat, Ferenc Kölcsey published a prose essay in which he reflected upon the danger that the distant events of a nation's history might gradually fall into oblivion, thereby causing the nation to "murder its own national life." (Kölcsey, 1826). Remembering and commemorating the past thus appeared, in his interpretation, as indispensable elements in the preservation of national identity. This interpretation aligns closely with Nora's argument that memory requires active preservation through commemorative practices, the observance of anniversaries, and the construction of rituals. Without such efforts, memory gradually yields to history, and lived remembrance is ultimately swept away by the passage of time (Nora, 1989).

The long-term consequences of the battle were likewise emphasized by Sándor Petőfi in his 1846 poem *Isten csodája* ("God's Miracle"). In the poem, the great devastations suffered by Hungary—particularly the battles of Battle of Mohi and Mohács—are recalled as centuries-old wounds, the emergence of which was largely caused by the repeatedly invoked problem of internal division and discord. Yet, as a miracle of God, the country nevertheless continued to exist despite these catastrophes. In connection with Mohács, King Louis again appears as a symbolic figure, from whose sword there emerged a "terrible bridle," "from which our mouths still burn and bleed." (Petőfi, 1846).

It is also important to consider the local memory of the battle during this period. In the 1830s, the town of Mohács planned to erect a memorial through public donations, and in 1836 submitted a petition to the county authorities in support of the initiative (Papp, 2023). In the petition, the events of 1526 were described as the greatest loss ever suffered by the entire Hungarian nation, and the proposal attracted considerable attention in the contemporary press. By 1846, plans for the monument had been completed, one of its principal elements being based upon István Dorffmaister's painting depicting the death of Louis II (or upon its 1843 copy). Although the monument was not realized in this form before the Revolution of 1848, it was eventually erected in 1864 through private initiative (Papp, 2023).

An even more significant shift occurred in the period following the suppression of the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–1849, which brought with it military and political reprisals from the Viennese court, the establishment of neo-absolutist rule, and the suspension of the special constitutional status of the Kingdom of Hungary. During this era, the mournful memory of Mohács appears to have intensified considerably (Papp, 2023). It was in this context that Soma Orlai Petrich created his painting *The Discovery of the Body of Louis II* (1851), in which the stripped body of King Louis II of Hungary bears an unmistakable resemblance to the dead Christ taken down from the cross, while the surrounding figures similarly evoke the imagery of a Pietà, thus creating the overall impression of a distinctly "Hungarian Pietà." The king who fell at Mohács becomes almost inseparable from the downfall of the country itself, reflecting the broader public mood prevailing in Hungary at the time of the painting's creation, following the reprisals associated with Julius Jacob von Haynau and during the early years of the Bach era.

Closely connected to this is Bertalan Székely's 1860 painting, perhaps the best-known visual representation of the theme. Here too, the face of Louis II appears uncorrupted and marked by Christ-like features. Both paintings are significant because they consciously build upon the sixteenth-century narrative according to which the king's body, discovered more than a month after the battle, remained clearly identifiable and virtually incorrupt. Within the hagiographical mentality of the period, this carried profound symbolic meaning, reinforcing Louis's status as a martyr and portraying him almost as one of the "saints of God" evoked in the biblical Book of Daniel, a ruler who sacrificed his life in the struggle against the Ottomans. This visual representation thus re-emerged within 19th century Romantic painting, became intertwined with the more recent traumas experienced by the Hungarian nation, and increasingly endowed the memory of Mohács with explicit Christological parallels (Papp, 2023).

It is also important to note that the 19th century witnessed a revival of interest in the Battle of Mohács and in Louis II not only within Hungarian historiography, but also in Austrian and Czech historical writing. These interpretations, however, no longer emphasized the martyrdom and self-sacrifice of the Jagiellonian king; rather, they focused on his youth, inexperience, and political weakness vis-à-vis both the Czech and Hungarian estates. In contemporary Austrian historiography, one encounters above all an imperial rather than a national narrative. In contrast to Louis's perceived helplessness, historians highlighted the decisiveness and competence of his widow, Mary of Hungary, while also emphasizing that with Louis's death the House of Habsburg assumed rule over the two Central European kingdoms—making his death an important dynastic turning point. Contemporary Czech sources, although generally not questioning Louis's courage or intentions, were far more critical of his abilities as a ruler (Schneller, 1833). František Palacký, for example, described the battle of 1526 as the fall of "the empire," meaning the combined political structure of the Czech and Hungarian kingdoms ruled by the Jagiellonian dynasty (Palacký, 1867).

By the 20th century, a far more nuanced and divided image of Mohács had emerged in Hungary. King Louis was no longer regarded merely as personally incapable of confronting the Ottomans or managing the political crisis; rather, he increasingly came to be seen as the product and embodiment of a broader systemic failure. Within Hungarian historical memory, the Czech–Hungarian branch of the Jagiellonian dynasty was collectively characterized as weak and often harmful, especially when contrasted with the reign of Matthias Corvinus, whose positive memory had by then become almost unquestionable (Schneller, 1833; Ortvay, 1910).

For a society deeply marked by the trauma of the Treaty of Trianon of 1920, Mohács represented a new point of historical connection, one that unmistakably shaped the commemorations of the battle's four-hundredth anniversary in 1926. In that year, a large-scale memorial ceremony was organized in Mohács, attended in person by both state and ecclesiastical dignitaries, including the Archbishop of Kalocsa, Miklós Horthy, and the Turkish envoy. Even before the commemorations themselves, the Hungarian press had already begun drawing parallels between Mohács and Trianon, while Kuno Klebelsberg, Minister of Religion and Public Education, emphasized that Hungarians who had lived through the peace settlement of 1920 were far more capable of understanding the tragedy and sacrifice associated with the battlefield of Mohács precisely because of their own recent experiences (Kerepeszki, 2013).

The speeches delivered during the commemorations themselves were likewise structured around this parallelism, presenting Mohács and Trianon as twin national tragedies accompanied by the hope of eventual national resurrection.

Horthy delivered two speeches on the occasion. In the first, he argued that whereas factionalism and internal discord among Hungarians had led to the catastrophe of 1526, the nation was now united precisely through the shared experience of suffering. In his second address, he emphasized that "the flower of the Hungarian nation" had suffered martyrdom in defence of Western civilization against their own kinsmen—the Turks—but that Hungary had eventually risen again from this loss. He then added that former enemies had since become friends and that mutual sympathy now united the Hungarian and Turkish peoples, thereby underscoring the idea of Hungarian–Turkish reconciliation in contrast to the strained relations then prevailing with Kingdom of Yugoslavia: "From that good friend with whom we were once united on our southern frontiers by the vital interest of common defence, we have unfortunately since been separated by profound differences." (Hóvári, 2019; Kerepeszki, 2013).

Horthy's speech therefore possessed not only strong symbolic significance but also a clear and substantial foreign-policy dimension. Using the memory of the 1526 battle as a point of reference, contemporary speakers drew explicit parallels to current political realities, particularly with regard to Turkey—which by that time had developed increasingly cordial relations with the Kingdom of Hungary—and Yugoslavia, including Serbia, which belonged to the so-called Little Entente and maintained relatively strained relations with Hungary. Through the lens of Mohács, they offered commentary on contemporary diplomatic and geopolitical developments. Consequently, at the physical site of remembrance itself, the battle was incorporated into a new post-Trianon interpretative framework and served as a backdrop for foreign-policy discourse. In this way, Mohács evolved into an increasingly complex *lieu de mémoire*, capable of accommodating multiple layers of historical, political, and symbolic meaning simultaneously (Nora, 1989).

The participation of the Turkish envoy was itself highly significant. During his speech at the commemoration, he addressed the assembled Hungarian audience as "my brothers," alluding to the perceived kinship between the Turkish and Hungarian peoples, and described his invitation to the ceremony as a historically important act of reconciliation between their nations (Kerepeszki, 2013)

During this century, the significance of the physical site itself—the battlefield of Mohács—also increased considerably, as the first systematic archaeological excavations of the battlefield began. With the discovery of the first mass grave in 1960, the memory of the battle once again acquired an immediate human dimension

(B.Szabó – Papp, 2020). Excavations continued during the state-socialist era, and by 1976—the 450th anniversary of the battle—the Mohács Memorial Site, still visible today, was officially inaugurated. The opening ceremony, however, produced an unexpected result: an enormous commemorative crowd gathered at the site, amounting almost to a mass patriotic gathering. For a state authority still deeply shaped by the memory of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, this alone provided sufficient reason to suspend further excavations under the pretext of "respect for the dead." Through this measure, the regime hoped to prevent Mohács from becoming a politically dangerous site of national unity and collective remembrance (B. Szabó – Papp, 2020; Hóvári, 2019).

And so, we return to the scene from the 1983 rock opera mentioned at the beginning of this study: "At Mohács we shall triumph, Dózsa shall be our king George," sings Torda, the shaman who foresees an alternative future. It is telling that this is also the very first historical event invoked by the character. By this period, "Mohács" had become within Hungarian cultural memory the symbolic point of origin for all subsequent national traumas—an event whose perceived consequences could still be felt by Hungarian society at the end of the twentieth century. In the rock opera itself, the two opposing protagonists—Stephen I. and chieftain Koppány—lend themselves to a variety of interpretations. Their conflict may be understood as one between modernization and tradition, compromise and independence, or Christianity and the pagan past (Sayfo, 2015). Retaining the interpretative framework of the present study, however, it may also be argued that Stephen embodies the historical canon—that is, the course of events as they actually unfolded—while Koppány and his followers represent what might have been: an alternative historical trajectory characterized by unrealized or lost national greatness, the erasure of long-standing grievances and historical tragedies, or even the complete reversal of Hungary's historical fate.

MOHÁCS TODAY – CONCLUSION

Today, in the year marking the five-hundredth anniversary of the battle, we can observe the intertwining of several centuries of commemorative narratives: stories, legends, misunderstandings, and myths that originated in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources, were further elaborated during the nineteenth century, and became fused with the framework of modern national identity. These narratives were subsequently transmitted into the twentieth century, sometimes modified and sometimes refined, while becoming increasingly intertwined with the traumas and social moods of their respective eras. Untangling these accumulated layers in order to reach the historical realities known from written sources and archaeological evidence is by no means an easy task, particularly when public perceptions continue to be shaped by deeply rooted misconceptions and mythologized interpretations.

The qualities and death of King Louis II remain subjects of debate. The image of the "young and inexperienced" ruler—although he was in fact twenty years old in 1526—persists in public memory, as do competing explanations of his death, ranging from the traditional account of drowning in a stream to the story revived by Mór Jókai, according to which he was murdered by György Szapolyai, the brother of the voivode of Transylvania, using a distinctive three-edged dagger (Jókai, 1854). Even more significant controversies surround the reasons for John Szapolyai's delay—or, more precisely, his complete absence from the battlefield—as well as the equally popular counterfactual question of what might have happened had his army participated in the battle, or had the royal court reached an accommodation with Suleiman and merely allowed the Ottoman forces to pass westward.

The aim of the present study has not been to answer, confirm, or refute such questions and claims, since without these subsequent layers of interpretation, Mohács would amount to little more than a historical fact or event. Its character and significance as a *lieu de mémoire* would be substantially diminished, if not entirely lost. Rather, they serve to illustrate the remarkably vivid and diverse image of the Battle of Mohács that continues to exist five centuries later. They also demonstrate how self-critical, romantic-national, state-socialist, and even Habsburg-oriented narratives can coexist simultaneously within collective memory, often overlapping with one another. This diversity further confirms that Mohács functions as a *lieu de mémoire* whose meaning can be shaped from above by contemporary memory politics, yet which also possesses a powerful bottom-up dimension. Embedded deeply within society, it has proven capable of enduring over the long term and, at times, of serving as a force of unity and mobilization even in opposition to the prevailing political authorities.

If we ask whether the cultural memory of Mohács has successfully processed the battle as a historical trauma, the answer is necessarily complex. At one point, it appeared that it had—namely through the successes of the anti-Ottoman reconquest wars at the end of the 17th century. Yet the national consciousness that emerged during the nineteenth century revived the memory of Mohács and situated it within a new interpretative framework: the loss of national independence and greatness. The major traumas of the 19th and 20th centuries—the suppression of the War of Independence, the World Wars, Trianon, and the Revolution of 1956—became symbolically linked to 1526 as the perceived beginning of a long chain of national misfortunes.

Mohács has therefore evolved into far more than a physical location. In the realm of cultural memory, it has become a national field of mourning, a symbolic landscape upon which successive generations have projected their anxieties, losses, and hopes. As such, its significance lies not only in the historical event itself, but also in the enduring and ever-changing meanings that Hungarian society has attached to it over the course of five centuries.

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Official Projection and Reception of the Battle of Mohács by Contemporary Ottomans

N. Zeynep Yelçe, PhD
Sabancı University

Abstract

This paper explores the 1526 campaign of Sultan Süleyman into Hungary, commonly known as the Mohács campaign, by analyzing contemporary victory proclamations, diplomatic correspondence, and Ottoman chronicles. The study examines the campaign through the dual lenses of its official projection and domestic reception. The analysis reveals that the Ottoman state employed a calculated, dual-pronged strategy in disseminating news of the victory. Domestic proclamations framed the conquest as a cosmic struggle between good and evil, heavily steeped in Islamic legitimation to cultivate the Sultan's image. Conversely, outward-facing communications to Venice stripped away religious dichotomies in favor of straightforward military reporting and diplomatic reassurance. Furthermore, the domestic reception was marked by state-mandated festivities, the creation of ceremonial military artifacts, and the composition of epic historical narratives. Ottoman chroniclers deliberately amplified the strength of King Louis II and the Hungarian army to magnify the scale of Süleyman's success. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that the Mohács victory served as a profound exercise in imperial myth-making. By weaving together Islamic piety, Oghuz heritage, and ancient historical analogies, these accounts cemented Süleyman's status as a divinely guided, unparalleled sovereign who surpassed both his formidable predecessors and the legendary rulers of antiquity.

Keywords: Battle of Mohács, Süleyman I, Louis II

INTRODUCTION

In the early sixteenth century, the geopolitical landscape of Europe and the Mediterranean was defined by the escalating rivalry between expanding empires. For the Ottoman Empire, the accession of Sultan Süleyman I in 1520 heralded a period of unprecedented military and ideological projection. While his early victories at Belgrade (1521) and Rhodes (1522) secured vital strategic strongholds, it was his push into Central Europe that would ultimately define his legacy both at home and abroad. At the heart of this westward expansion was the Kingdom of Hungary, a formidable frontier state that had long served as the primary buffer between the Islamic world and Christendom. Understanding the Ottoman incursions into Hungary requires looking beyond mere military logistics; it necessitates an examination of how the Ottomans themselves conceptualized, justified, and celebrated these endeavors.

The 1526 campaign of Sultan Süleyman (d. 1566) into Hungary, widely remembered as the Mohács campaign, remains one of the most heavily debated events in European and Ottoman history. For centuries, historiography has often reduced this complex military endeavor to the two-hour battle that led to the death of King Louis II (d. 1526) and the collapse of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary. Consequently, the campaign has often been weaponized in nationalist histories, framed either as a catastrophic European tragedy or a glorious Ottoman conquest. However, such ideologically loaded, victor-versus-victim dichotomies obscure the historical reality of how the campaign was actually understood in its own time. To move beyond these polarized views, it is essential to examine the contemporary discourse surrounding the event. This paper explores the 1526 campaign through the dual lenses of its official projection and domestic reception. By analyzing victory proclamations, diplomatic correspondence, and contemporary Ottoman chronicles, this analysis reveals how the Ottoman state meticulously crafted a narrative of divine favor and universal sovereignty, transforming a strategic military victory into a monumental ideological triumph.

OFFICIAL PROJECTION

A comprehensive *fetihnâme* (proclamation of victory) for the campaign has not yet been discovered. Neither contemporary Ottoman accounts nor foreign correspondence suggest that such a document ever existed. However, two victory proclamations for the battle itself – an Ottoman text from Feridun Ahmed Beğ's *Münşeat* (pp. 546-51) and a shorter Italian version in Marino Sanuto's *Diarii* (pp. 51-2) – offer valuable insights into how the state justified and framed its military actions. A comparative reading of these two texts reveals how the Ottoman administration strategically tailored its narrative for different audiences, utilizing dynastic precedent and religious rhetoric to legitimize the war and cultivate the Sultan's image.

A compilation of documents, known as *Münşeat*, by Feridun Ahmed Beğ (d. 1583) contains copies of several important documents pertaining to the reign of Sultan Süleyman. Among these are the proclamation of accession, official proclamations of victory, campaign diaries, and various decrees. The structure of the Mohács proclamation closely mirrors that of the 1521 proclamation regarding the conquest of Belgrade. It begins by legitimizing the war through the Quran and dynastic precedent, personalizing Süleyman's motivations, and explaining the selection of Hungary as the target. It then recounts the campaign's main phases, details the Hungarian king's actions, describes the battle, and concludes by ordering public festivities.

The proclamation's opening section focuses heavily on legitimation, beginning with a dynastic message. By stating that "acquiring heavenly reward through ghaza and jihad was the habitual custom of his ancestors to the path of Islam," and referencing Quranic declarations on fighting unbelievers, the text positions Sultan Süleyman within a quasi-sacred, ongoing struggle. It further asserts that God's grace continuously assists Süleyman, intrinsically linking the Sultan's banners to "conquest and victory." These opening lines justify the war while portraying him as an ever-triumphant, pious ruler, covertly alluding to his past victories. This image of piety is reinforced as Süleyman places his trust in God and seeks the Prophet's miracles in his formal pursuit of *ghaza*, expecting to be "worthy in both worlds." Following the pattern of the 1521 and 1522 proclamations, the text justifies targeting Hungary based on its non-Muslim status. The rationale is deepened by the assertion that the Hungarians had rejected the Prophet and were beyond guidance. Additionally, Hungary's adjacency to the Land of Islam was cited as a factor, though the 1521 mention of ongoing rivalry is notably absent.

Conversely, the text recorded in the diaries of the Venetian statesman Marino Sanuto (d. 1536) omits these religious and dynastic justifications entirely. It opens simply with a list of the Sultan's titles. The closest it comes to providing legitimation is noting the dispatch of grand vizier İbrahim Paşa (d. 1536) and the Rumelian army to Hungary "with the help of God, the omnipotent." Assuming the Sanuto text is not merely an abridged version, this discrepancy suggests that religious justifications were deemed irrelevant to a non-Muslim audience, yet remained crucial to cultivating the Sultan's domestic image.

The second part of the Ottoman proclamation details the march, highlighting İbrahim Pasha's leadership under Süleyman's orders. It describes the conquest and subsequent "cleansing" of Petervarad in heroic detail, characterizing the fortress as "a rock on the road of ghaza" and the Hungarian commander Pal Tomori (d. 1526) as a "priest who is a friend of the Devil." The narrative emphasizes a binary opposition between the soldiers of Islam and "rebelling" infidels, stating that God's help secured the fortress. After granting pardons for peaceful surrenders, churches were converted into mosques, and Islamic prayers were established as the surroundings were subdued. The text then recounts the capture of Ilok and twelve other key castles, described as "keys to Hungary" and "refuges of corrupt wicked men," repeating the themes of pardon and religious cleansing. Ultimately, the campaign is framed as a triumphant struggle of good against evil. The Sanuto text lacks these dichotomies and instead briefly summarizes the events leading up to Mohács. It foregrounds İbrahim's early conquests of Petervarad, Ilok, and fifteen other castles before Süleyman formally enters the narrative.

The third section covers the Battle of Mohács, detailing the Hungarian army's preparations. Upon facing the prepared enemy, Süleyman invokes God and the Prophet before advancing. In this epic retelling, İbrahim is praised for valorously repelling a direct attack by Louis II. Ultimately, the King flees, the Hungarian forces scatter, and the defeated soldiers are likened to the "House of the Pharaoh." The campaign concludes with the conventional declaration that the "banners of Islam" were victorious and the "enemies of the Religion" defeated. The text reminds the audience, through the Sultan's mouth, that such "praiseworthy conquests which were not granted to famous rulers and powerful monarchs, or even to the companions of the Prophet, fell to my lot with the help of God."

In the Sanuto account, Süleyman advances against the Hungarian King after the initial castle conquests, mentioning the crossing of the Drava and the destruction of the bridge. The battle itself is succinctly described: "…we combated for two hours, and with the help of God almighty, we broke him [the king] and we sliced his army into pieces." The use of the "royal we" here implies Süleyman's direct presence on the battlefield. Unlike the Ottoman text, which definitively concludes with the victory of Islam, the Sanuto text heralds further action, announcing Süleyman's intent to proceed to Buda.

The proclamation concludes by instructing the recipient to publicly announce the news, organize festivities, and pray for the continuous growth of the Sultan's "eternal state." While seemingly standard formulaic language, this phrasing conveys a powerful message of status: Süleyman's state is not only confirmed but is actively growing stronger, indicating he will become even more powerful and fortunate. The Sanuto text concludes by affirming mutual friendship with Venice and reiterating that the Muslim army was victorious with God's help.

Comparative analysis of these victory proclamations highlights a calculated, dual-pronged strategy in the Ottoman official projection of the 1526 campaign. For the domestic audience, the Ottoman text framed the conquest as a cosmic struggle between good and evil, heavily steeped in Islamic legitimation to elevate Sultan Süleyman as an unparalleled, divinely guided sovereign of a continually expanding state. Conversely, the outward-facing Venetian communication stripped away these religious dichotomies in favor of straightforward military reporting and diplomatic reassurance. Ultimately, these documents demonstrate that the official dissemination of the Mohács victory was not merely about announcing a battlefield triumph but rather a masterful exercise in targeted imperial myth-making.

RECEPTION

Domestically, the immediate reaction to the 1526 victory was a Sultan-mandated period of celebration. Piero Zen (d. 1539), the Venetian ambassador in Constantinople, confirmed in a September 29 letter the victory over the Hungarian King, the destruction of the enemy army, and the subsequent festivities. Zen celebrated by decorating his house with golden cloth and flags, and building a wine fountain, spending 80 ducats in the process. He also noted receiving congratulations from İbrahim Paşa's mother and an invitation from the captain to watch horse races. (Sanuto, p. 150) Zen's account grounds Ottoman contemporary Kemalpaşazade's (d. 1534) seemingly generic descriptions of decorated towns, joyful citizens, and Constantinople resembling a "wedding house" where work was set aside for merrymaking. (pp. 312-13) Another contemporary in Ottoman courtly circles, Salih Çelebi (d. 1565), corroborated this, noting that citizens displayed all their possessions for decorations. (fol. 57a-b)

The victory seems to be commemorated also through the creation of ceremonial military artifacts. A decorated display sword by Ahmed Tekelü (Topkapı Palace Museum 2/3776), dated 1526/7 and featuring mythical creatures, was likely crafted to celebrate the Mohács victory. Similar to a 1514 dagger commemorating Selim I's Persian conquest, these bejeweled weapons probably served to amaze foreign dignitaries during special occasions.

Narrative Ottoman accounts closely reflected the official proclamation's central message of "Islam triumphed, and infidels were defeated," but they provided additional detail and symbolism. Kemalpaşazade, who was appointed Sheikh-ul-Islam right in the beginning of the campaign in May 1526, highlighted specific outcomes early in his account: the devastation of Hungarian territory and its capital, the death of the King, and the expulsion of the enemy. He also noted broader geopolitical impacts, asserting that the victory checked the power of the "lord of Spain" – Charles V – and enabled the captive "lord of France" – Francis I – to regain his freedom and his army, allowing him to rise to the top once again. (p. 222)

Ottoman narratives frequently framed Mohács as a cosmic battle between good and evil, reinforcing Süleyman's role as a defender of religion and righteousness. A poem in Ottoman statesman Lütfi Pasha's (d. 1563) account starkly contrasts the two armies in spiritual terms: one is the "ocean of darkness" and the "army of the Devil," condemned by God and lost in sin, while the other is the "ocean of faith" and the "army of the All-Compassionate," praising God and achieving victory as righteous *ghazis*. (p. 262) Similarly, an esteemed Ottoman warrior, Nasuh Matraki (d. 1564), equated the drowning of Louis II's forces with the defeat of the Pharaoh, cementing the Ottomans as "good" in opposition to the "evil" Hungarians. (p. 131)

In contrast to many European sources, Ottoman chroniclers emphasized the strength and valor of King Louis II and his army, describing him as one of the greatest Christian kings and a leading warrior. Portraying the rival as deeply formidable served to magnify Süleyman's ultimate achievement. Kemalpaşazade referred to Louis as "the damned evil-doing king" and "the much-hated ancient enemy" (p. 210), while Salih Çelebi stressed the historical invincibility of the Hungarian army, describing them as "the strong wall of unbelief" (fol. 7b). Lütfi Pasha reversed this narrative of hatred, framing the conflict as Louis II seeking the "nine-hundred-year-old revenge of the Christian people." In this narrative, King Louis deliberately targets the Sultan as soon as he leaves Istanbul, rallying *Frenk* (European) lords who name Louis the "hope of Christendom" and the "lock of the realm of unbelief." King Louis firmly intends to fight Süleyman to the death. (pp. 258-59) By directing this centuries-old Christian revenge specifically at Süleyman, Lütfi Pasha forces the Sultan to bear the entire historical weight of the Islam-Christianity conflict. Consequently, Ottoman viziers similarly declare Süleyman the "hope of the Muslims." With each ruler serving as the sole hope for their community, the battle becomes a decisive clash between the two faiths, culminating in an Islamic triumph.

References to this ancient enmity aggrandized Süleyman's mission and covertly asserted his superiority over his predecessors. Both Salih Çelebi and Kemalpaşazade prefaced their campaign accounts with historical summaries of the struggles of previous Ottoman sultans against Hungary. Salih Çelebi recounted the efforts of Murad II (d. 1451) and Mehmed II (d. 1481), as well as the obstacles faced by Bayezid II (d. 1512) and Selim I (d. 1520). (fol. 8a-10b) Kemalpaşazade notably highlighted Mehmed II's lifelong yet ultimately unsuccessful attempt to subdue Hungary because of its powerful king at the time, Matthias Corvinus (d. 1490). Consequently, Süleyman is depicted as finishing the uncompleted work of his forebears. (pp. 203-9) While the authors avoid directly criticizing past rulers by offering excuses for their failures, the underlying message is clear: Süleyman achieved what legendary figures such as Mehmed II and Selim I could not. This rhetorical strategy, previously observed after the campaigns of 1521 and 1522, portrays this victory as the culmination of an idealized dynastic continuity and a furtherance of Süleyman's personal accomplishments. It echoes his earlier victories, such as the destruction of Slankamen and the conquest of Belgrade.

The theme of surpassing Mehmed II is subtly woven throughout the narratives. Kemalpaşazade recounts the legend of Mehmed II trying to conquer Belgrade by his sword alone, disregarding God's help. He contrasts Mehmed II's behavior by reporting a personal conversation where Süleyman agreed that his 1526 victory was achieved solely through God's help and power. (pp. 319-20) Considered alongside Süleyman's pre-departure tomb visits and prayers, this reflects a duality in his rule: he is both an earthly bestower of rewards and a humble receiver of divine favor. Because this favor comes directly from the celestial rather than the worldly, it elevates his sovereign status. This dual notion of divine protection and earthly power is evident in imperial artifacts. A gold-inlaid sword and scabbard made for Süleyman bear inscriptions entrusting the weapon to God's will and the Prophet's guidance for the Sultan's protection. Similar Quranic verses appear on a sword from 1531/2, and a Persian-inscribed set (Topkapı Palace Museum 1/294) invokes divine guardianship, underscoring the seriousness of these concepts. Belief in physical divine protection extended to talismanic shirts. Hurrem Sultan even sent Süleyman a shirt woven with sacred names – reportedly commanded by the Prophet in a dream – requesting that he wear it to deflect bullets in battle. (Uluçay, 2001, pp. 45-47)

Ottoman chroniclers frequently drew on ancient, dynastic, and personal histories to contextualize the campaign. Kemalpaşazade described early campaign stops through a historical lens, calling Edirne the "capital of Bulgaria," linking Plovdiv to Alexander the Great's family, and noting Sofia as a famous *Lâz* city. (pp. 230-31)) Analogies to Alexander the Great, such as Lütfi Paşa comparing the Battle of Mohács to the clash between Alexander and Darius, were common. (p. 257) Furthermore, references to the Turkic past and Oghuz heritage were notably more prominent than in other campaign accounts. Celâlzâde Mustafa (d. 1567), chancellor at the time, recounted soldiers sharing tales of Oghuz *ghazis* the night before the battle and uniquely titled Süleyman as "kâân" alongside standard imperial titles. (fol. 144a) Kemalpaşazade often referred to Rumelian troops simply as “Turks” (p. 231), while Salih Çelebi explicitly likened “fearless” Anatolian troops to Oghuz warriors. (fol. 27b) These historical connections expanded Süleyman’s claim to dynastic continuity into a much broader, universal heritage.

At the end of his account, Salih Çelebi praises Süleyman, stating that his victory was so remarkable that it “effaced and embarrassed the glories of past sultans and the legends of former pillars of state.” He asserts that Süleyman’s achievements far surpassed those of the Roman Caesars, the Persian Chosroes, the Buyid dynasty, the Sassanid kings, the Himyarite kings of Arabia, and the Hindu Rajahs. (fol. 70b) Salih Çelebi’s concluding evaluation effectively summarizes the immense significance attributed to the 1526 campaign and how it helped shape the image of Süleyman as the ideal, all-powerful sovereign.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the 1526 Mohács campaign was far more than a territorial or military achievement; it was a profound exercise in imperial myth-making. Through its official projections, the Ottoman state skillfully tailored its narrative, using religious justifications and themes of cosmic justice to bolster the Sultan’s image domestically, while presenting a more pragmatic, power-centric message to foreign entities such as Venice. Domestically, the reception of the victory was marked by state-mandated festivities, the crafting of opulent ceremonial weapons, and the composition of epic historical narratives. Ottoman chroniclers strategically amplified the strength of King Louis II and the Hungarian army to magnify the scale of Süleyman’s success. By weaving together Islamic piety, Oghuz heritage, and ancient historical analogies, these accounts did more than just celebrate a military win. They served to elevate Sultan Süleyman above his formidable predecessors – most notably Mehmed II and Selim I – and placed him on a pedestal above the legendary rulers of antiquity. In the eyes of his contemporaries, the victory at Mohács unequivocally cemented Süleyman’s status as a divinely guided, ever-triumphant sovereign possessing unparalleled universal heritage.

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The Battle of Mohács in Popular Memory

Ela Bozok, PhD
Sabanci University

Abstract

This article examines the persistence and reinterpretation of the Battle of Mohács (1526) in Turkish popular memory and contemporary media. Drawing on collaborative research conducted by Sabancı University students as part of the "Memory of Battle of Mohács in Popular Culture and Mainstream Media" project, the study analyses representations of Mohács across political speeches, national newspapers, social media platforms, state-sponsored documentaries, YouTube videos, and television dramas. The findings reveal that the Battle of Mohács functions as a powerful and flexible cultural symbol, frequently invoked to reinforce national pride, legitimise political arguments, and frame contemporary events. Media representations tend to simplify or dramatize historical complexities, often privileging narratives that serve current societal and political agendas. Furthermore, everyday usage of Mohács in social media and colloquial language demonstrates its deep integration into Turkish cultural discourse, extending beyond formal historical contexts. The article concludes that the enduring presence and adaptive reinterpretation of Mohács highlight the significant role of media in shaping collective memory and national identity in modern Turkey.

Keywords: The Battle of Mohács, collective memory, historical representation, media studies

INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

The Battle of Mohács, fought between the Kingdom of Hungary and the Ottoman Empire on 29 August 1526, represented a pivotal event in the Ottoman military campaign in Hungary. This campaign began with Süleyman I's departure from Istanbul on 23 April 1526. The Ottoman army advanced into Hungarian territory and captured key fortresses, including Petrovaradin, on 27 July. After these victories, Süleyman I declared his intention to conquer Buda. In response, the Hungarian council designated the field of Mohács, situated between the Ottoman forces and Buda, as the site for resistance to the Ottoman advance (Yelçe, 2009). The subsequent battle lasted approximately two hours, resulting in a decisive Ottoman victory and the death of King Louis II. This outcome had profound consequences for the Kingdom of Hungary in the following decades.

The campaign and the Battle of Mohács have remained prominent topics within scholarly discourse. Since the 1970s, researchers have systematically examined the motives underlying the campaign, the conditions of the armies, and the resulting consequences and interpretations. (Gökbilgin, 1970) (Alföldi, 1982) (Fodor & David, 2000) (Emecen, 2007) (Pap, 2024) (Baş & Fodor, 2025) Building on this scholarly foundation, this study investigates the persistence and reinterpretation of the Battle of Mohacs in Turkish popular memory. The analysis utilizes data from reports prepared by Sabancı University students during the 2025-2026 academic year for the project "Memory of Battle of Mohács in Popular Culture and Mainstream Media," conducted as part of the compulsory university course PROJ 201. This course provides students with opportunities to collaborate with faculty from various disciplines, develop foundational research skills, and gain practical experience in project management. Twenty-five students engaged with diverse media forms to examine how the Battle of Mohács continues to serve as a dynamic cultural reference, subject to reuse, reinterpretation, and adaptation across different social contexts.[1] In the first term, five groups participated: two groups analysed national newspapers (Cumhuriyet and Hürriyet), one group

[1] The author acknowledges the contributions of the following students to this project: Gizem Defne Altay, Elanur Öz, Elif Eylül Polatkan, Hayrettin Can Akgül, Fatih Enes Devlet, Muhammed Mustafa Güneş, Mahir İnan, Kamil Al, Yunus Yavuz Sarıkaya, Eray Arda Çıkmaz, Süleyman Emre Sarılı, Ömer Şahin, Baturay Kılıç, Selin Nazlıoğlu, Elifnaz Düzenli, Duru Selin Alış, Naz Civelek, Arca Tuna Karamuk, Sarp Bıçakcı, Talha Çiçek, İlayda Güneş, Kerem Mızraklı, Yeliz Azra Yıldırım, Alanur Çakmakçı, Mustafa Utku Kılıç.

examined speeches in the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (TBMM) to highlight political uses of the battle, and the remaining two groups investigated social media platforms, including YouTube short videos and X, focusing on the battle's presence in daily interactions such as sports and colloquial language. In the second term, three groups participated: one analysed documentaries produced by TRT, a national television channel; another examined unofficial documentaries on YouTube; and the last group studied battle scenes depicted in the popular TV series Magnificent Century (2011-2014). These three groups also examined the visual data and compared them with historical sources selected by the supervisors to evaluate historical accuracy, consistency, and potential bias. The findings showed that the data were compiled into three overlapping categories: political, cultural, and everyday usage. The findings reveal that the Battle of Mohács is most often framed not merely as a historical event, but as a symbolic tool reinforcing national pride, collective memory, and simplified narratives of victory.

POLITICAL USAGE

Historical events have frequently been utilized in contemporary politics, ranging from daily rhetoric to long-term national identity formation. The selection of these events often depended on the political party in power. In the Turkish political context, the Ottoman past has been a sensitive subject. During the early decades of the Turkish Republic, nation-building efforts emphasized a Turkish identity rooted in a mythical Central Asian past and the pre-Islamic Turks. In this context, the Ottoman past was considered problematic due to its association with religion and ethnic diversity, which contrasted with the racial homogeneity promoted by republican elites (Ersanlı, 2002). Consequently, the Ottoman Empire was often portrayed as an era of decline. This perspective shifted significantly in the 1990s with the rise of right-wing Islamist parties, such as the Welfare Party (RP) and Virtue Party (FP), which advanced the Neo-Ottomanism ideology. This ideology defined the Turkish nation based on its Ottoman heritage, achievements, and adherence to Islam (Özyürek, 2007). The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which assumed power in 2002, further expanded the Neo-Ottomanist agenda in both domestic and foreign policy. Domestically, the AKP promoted cultural initiatives that celebrated the Ottoman past, including commemorations of the conquest of Istanbul and the establishment of Ottoman-themed museums, such as the 1453 Panorama Museum (Ergin & Karakaya, 2017).

Within this context, the most prominent unit of analysis was the speeches delivered by representatives in the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (TBMM). The group found that representatives, regardless of political ideology, used the Battle of Mohács to advance current political agendas rather than to promote long-term national identity-building. The battle was invoked symbolically, either to criticise government policies or to emphasise national unity. The findings indicated that right-wing parties, such as the ruling AKP and its ally, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), referenced the battle in their speeches four times more frequently than leftist parties, such as the Republican People's Party (CHP). Most references depicted the battle within a series of victories symbolising the glory of the Turkish state as the successor to the Ottoman Empire. The most common among them were the Battle of Manzikert (1071) between Seljuk Empire and Byzantine Empire which paved way for the Turks to enter Anatolia. The other battles mentioned were more recent victories such as the Battle of Sakarya (1922) which enabled the foundation of the Republic. (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, 2006) (TBMM, 2016) However, both left and right-wing parties used the battle to criticise government policies. For instance, in a 2016 speech, Sırrı Süreyya Önder, a member of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which advocates Kurdish rights, stated that while the Ottoman Army, with 200,000 soldiers, marched toward Mohács, it did not pillage any villages, demonstrating the army's discipline. He compared this to the government's bombing of "Kurdish cities," concluding that while Ottoman Turks did not harm their people's property, the current Turkish government destroyed its own people and cities through air strikes (TBMM, 2016). This analogy is notable when compared to historical facts. The Ottoman army was indeed prevented from pillaging when towns and the surrounding countryside surrendered, a policy intended to present the Ottomans as acceptable rulers and to protect a potential agrarian tax base (Yelçe, 2009). However, Önder's figure for the army's size is greatly exaggerated; historical sources suggest 100,000 soldiers, half the number he claimed (Ertaş, 2025). This exaggeration may have been intended to highlight the Ottoman army's restraint in protecting its "new citizens," in contrast to the contemporary army's actions. Overall, this example demonstrates how historical events can be used to support political agendas, even when the connection is indirect.

Similarly, in the newspapers Hürriyet and Cumhuriyet, students frequently identified political uses of the battle. In both newspapers, students analysed news reports and opinion columns. Both groups anticipated that the battle would be commemorated on National Victory Day (30 August), given the proximity of the dates, yet such mentions were rare. Instead, the battle was most often referenced in political and popular cultural contexts, with the latter being the most prevalent. In Cumhuriyet, one of the oldest and most widely circulated newspapers with a left-leaning stance, students analysed 45 articles published between 1994 and 2021. They found that political references to the battle were much more common in articles published between 1994 and 2003. For example, in an opinion column from April 1998, the author Ergun criticised the media as exaggerators who likened the capture of an important PKK militant, Şemdin Sakık, to the Battle of Manzikert (1071) and the Battle of Mohács. (Balcı, 1998) Other articles from this period that mentioned the battle focused on international relations between Hungary and Turkey. In another opinion column dated 30 June 1998, the visit of the head of Hungarian intelligence, Lieutenant General László Botz, to Turkey was described. During this visit, Botz was taken to Göreme, a popular tourist destination in central Anatolia, where a local asked him why the Hungarian army had lost at the Battle of Mohács. Botz explained that the loss resulted from a more effective Ottoman military strategy that took the Hungarian army by surprise. He further likened the loss to a lack of proper intelligence, concluding the conversation with the statement, "I was not the head of Hungarian intelligence at that time," thereby attesting to his own success as an intelligence officer and showcasing an example of furthering personal political agenda. (Acar, 1998). In Hürriyet, a newspaper with more liberal central lean, students identified 171 articles mentioning the battle between 2001-2025, a way higher number than those in Cumhuriyet. Thirty seven of these articles mention the Battle of Mohács within a political context that ranged from the inter-party altercations to comments on contemporary issues such as president Erdoğan's statements on terrorism and actions of opposition parties HDP and CHP concluding that "they were unaware of the glorious past of Turks which did not start with the foundation of the Republic, but goes back at least 2000 years which included glorious victories such as Manzikert, The conquest of Istanbul and Mohács". (Hürriyet, 2019). These examples showed that the Battle of Mohács was already among certain battles that had ingrained in popular memory and were used in statements that reflect contemporary issues.

POPULAR CULTURE

The battle was also referenced within a popular cultural context largely due to the Magnificent Century—a Turkish historical drama series aired between 2011 and 2014 that depicted the reign of Sultan Süleyman I which reinforced the image of the Battle of Mohács in popular memory. The series, which achieved significant popularity both domestically and internationally, has been analysed by scholars from various academic disciplines seeking to explain its widespread appeal and societal impact. In one article, two sociologists examined the show's popularity through the concept of Ottomania, defined as a cultural fascination with the Ottoman past, in relation to the ideology of Neo-Ottomanism (Ergin & Karakaya, 2017). Ottomania also signifies popular culture's movement beyond the boundaries established by state-controlled cultural projects, indicating a complex relationship in which Ottomania sometimes reinforces and at other times challenges Neo-Ottomanism. For instance, The Magnificent Century was cited as a production that challenges the ideals of the AKP's Neo-Ottomanism project through its portrayal of the Sultan and his family, and it was heavily criticized by the government (Carney, 2019). In summary, Ottomania represents the commercialization of the Ottoman past, resulting in the reinterpretation of "history" and raising questions about the notion of "proper history."

The TRT group exemplified the state-sponsored cultural project, with TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (Türkiye Radyo Televizyon Kurumu) serving as Turkey's national public broadcaster. Analysis of three documentaries revealed that TRT productions transformed the complex nature of the Hungarian campaign and battle into simplified, emotionally charged narratives designed to foster national pride. For instance, in Savaşın Efsaneleri: Deliler, the Hungarian army was reported as numbering 80,000, a significant exaggeration compared to the actual figure of 29,000 to 32,000 according to Hungarian sources (Ertaş, 2025). Ottoman historians historically inflated such numbers for military propaganda, suggesting that documentary producers adopted similar methods (Ertaş, 2025). Another example is the omission of the Voivode of Transylvania, Janos Zapolya, a key figure in early sixteenth-century Hungarian politics who became King of Hungary after the 1526 campaign, from all three documentaries. Instead, these productions attribute victory solely to Ottoman tactics and numerical superiority. By omitting the possibility of internal betrayal by Zapolya, TRT maintains a straightforward narrative. These documentaries function as cultural propaganda rather than objective historical accounts, reshaping the narrative to construct a specific national identity rooted in a state-sponsored interpretation of the Ottoman past.

The YouTube documentary group analyzed nine documentaries produced by both Turkish and foreign historical channels. These popular history videos generally present the basic historical framework of the battle accurately, including army numbers. However, they often simplify complex military, political, and environmental factors to produce more dramatic and visually engaging narratives, mirroring the approach of TRT documentaries. For example, whereas historical accounts provide detailed descriptions of the physical terrain, the videos typically depict the battlefield as flat and uniform, with minimal attention to geographical specifics (Ertaş, 2025).

Although both Turkish and foreign productions tend to simplify the complexity of the battle, their focal points differ. Turkish channels such as Harp Tarihi, Timeline HT, and Yusuf Kayaalp emphasize Ottoman military prowess, strategic intelligence, discipline, and swift victory. In these videos, Sultan Süleyman I is frequently portrayed as a highly capable leader who commands the battlefield with confidence. The Ottoman victory is typically attributed to superior strategy and military expertise. These themes align closely with TRT productions, suggesting a consistent approach to reinterpreting historical events for popular consumption within the Turkish audience.

In contrast, foreign channels such as Dark History Class and Kings and Generals concentrate on the dramatic collapse of Hungary, the tragedy of King Louis II, and the catastrophic consequences of the battle for Central Europe. While Turkish videos reinforce the image of Ottoman success and power, foreign productions often depict Mohács as a disastrous turning point for Christian Europe. This shift in narrative focus does not necessarily reflect a more accurate historical account; rather, it demonstrates that differing audience expectations shape the presentation of history. Despite these distinctions, both Turkish and foreign productions frequently simplify the historical complexity of the battle to create more emotionally compelling narratives.

The group analysing the battle scenes in The Magnificent Century observed that the series accurately reflected certain military aspects of the Ottoman army, particularly in its portrayal of strategy and battlefield organization. However, the series also reinterpreted historical figures and dramatized events to enhance audience engagement. For example, Sultan Süleyman I was depicted as central to every military decision, delivering dramatic lines such as: "At this stage, there is no turning back, only death." ("Bu menzilde ölmek var, dönmek yok"), despite the lack of historical evidence for such statements. The portrayal of the Sultan as the sole decision-maker and idealized ruler was consistent across all three groups. Historically, Ibrahim Pasha, the grand vizier and close confidant of Süleyman I, was a highly active commander who was largely responsible for the conquest of Petrovaradin (Yelçe, 2009). In contrast, the series significantly altered the depiction of Hungarian King Louis II, presenting him as a middle-aged, experienced, and haughty leader who did not heed any advice. However, Louis II was approximately twenty years old at the time of the Battle of Mohács, inexperienced, and, more importantly, remained torn between a highly divided Hungarian nobility, which made organizing against the Ottoman army even more difficult (Yelçe, 2009). This depiction removes the possibility of audience sympathy, as an older king would carry the full moral weight of his defeat, whereas a twenty-year-old dying in his first battle might have elicited pity.

In conclusion, the reinterpretation of the Battle of Mohács across media platforms, from state-sponsored documentaries to YouTube videos and television dramas, reflects a broader trend of shaping historical memory to serve contemporary cultural, political, and societal narratives. While these representations often simplify or dramatize complex historical realities, they also demonstrate the enduring power of Mohács as a symbol, adaptable to various audiences and agendas. Ultimately, these evolving portrayals highlight both the flexibility of historical interpretation and the significant role of media in shaping collective understandings of the past.

EVERYDAY USAGE

The previous sections demonstrated that the Battle of Mohács is an active symbol used beyond its historical context. While the political and cultural categories showed how the battle was reinterpreted and presented to the public, this section examines how the public itself uses the battle in everyday language and how it is perceived by the general populace.

Two groups contributed to this section. One focused on short videos, up to one minute long, created and shared on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. Most of these videos provided brief introductory information about the battle due to their short duration. Many used AI-based voiceovers, visual effects, and animated images to make the content more appealing, but often included incorrect depictions of uniforms, weapons, or army sizes. For example, a YouTube short showed the Hungarian army in Napoleonic-style uniforms and gave an incorrect Ottoman army size of 60,000. An Instagram video with AI-generated images described the battle as the one that "destroyed the Kingdom of Hungary" and listed the Hungarian army at 50,000, both historically inaccurate. Such inaccuracies appeared in other videos as well. As a result, these visually engaging videos often contained significant errors that could influence how the general public perceives and reinterprets the battle.

The other group analysed 62 tweets on X (formerly Twitter) that mentioned the Battle of Mohács. Many tweets discussed the historical and military significance of the Ottoman victory, especially during the anniversary in August. Others placed the battle within broader historical narratives or national commemorations, highlighting its symbolic importance alongside other key events in Turkish history. A significant number of tweets referenced the Battle of Mohács in informal or everyday contexts, using it metaphorically or humorously to describe football, daily life, or as a symbol of intensity or power. For example, tweets compared the battle to a person's state of mind ("inside of my head is like the Battle of Mohacs"), a send-off party for a soldier ("For the past five hours, they've been holding a send-off party for a soldier in the neighbourhood, blasting music at full volume. Just as I was thinking, "Look at this guy acting like he's off to the War of Independence, a massive brawl broke out—it turned into the Battle of Mohács. There's no telling who's beating up whom."), football games ("the last ten minutes of Liverpool-Arsenal game is like Battle of Mohács," "every match of Fenerbahçe is like Battle of Mohács"), and the short duration of the battle ("me studying math is like Battle of Mohács, short and direct"). These examples show that the event has moved beyond formal historical discussion and now serves as a flexible cultural symbol adapted for various communicative purposes.

CONCLUSION

These findings showed that the Battle of Mohács remains a living cultural reference, capable of being re-used, re-interpreted, and adapted across different social contexts. Mohacs is often used as a rhetorical tool to strengthen arguments, legitimize opinions, or draw symbolic parallels between past victories and contemporary events. It appears in sports journalism to describe decisive victories, in political discourse to frame contemporary power struggles, and in cultural discussions to highlight elements of national character. These varied uses demonstrate that Mohács has moved beyond its original historical context and has become embedded in everyday media language, especially in Turkish context.

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Parallel Perspectives on History Education A Comparative Analysis of History Teaching and Representations of the Battle of Mohács in Türkiye and Hungary

Richárd Fodor, PhD[1,3]; Áron Fekete, PhD[1]; Ahmet Cem Durak[2]; Benedek Alpár[1]

[1] MCC Learning Institute
[2] TEV İnanç High School
[3]Pázmány Péter Catholic University

Abstract

The study compares the representation of the Battle of Mohács in contemporary Turkish and Hungarian secondary school history textbooks. Before analysing the textbooks themselves, it situates both national narratives within the broader context of history education, curriculum regulation, textbook production, and assessment systems in Türkiye and Hungary. The comparison shows that both countries operate highly centralised history education systems in which history plays an important role in national identity formation. However, the institutional position and pedagogical treatment of the subject differ considerably. In the Turkish textbook, Mohács is presented mainly within the framework of Ottoman western policy, Habsburg–Ottoman rivalry, and imperial expansion, relying primarily on secondary academic interpretations. Hungarian textbooks, by contrast, frame the battle as a major turning point in national history while offering more detailed discussion of internal causes, source analysis, visual interpretation, and multiperspective tasks. The study argues that Mohács provides a valuable case for examining how shared historical events are shaped by different national-historical logics and didactical traditions.

Keywords: history didactics, history textbooks, comparative education, battle of Mohács

The comparative study of history education has deep roots in Europe, stretching back to the nineteenth century. Following the First World War, the International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation – the predecessor of UNESCO – began promoting international collaboration and research in the field of history education. Throughout the turbulent twentieth century, organisations such as UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and the Georg Eckert Institute played a significant role in advancing these initiatives. Comparative perspectives continue to shape European history didactics today, as demonstrated by influential scholarly networks (Erdmann & Hasberg, 2011) and ongoing international collaborative projects (Observatory on History Teaching in Europe, 2023; Fodor et al., 2026).

AIM OF THE RESEARCH

Although studies have examined the portrayal of Hungarians in Turkish textbooks (Purtczl, 2024) and the changing representations of Mohács in Hungarian textbooks (Varga & Macar, 2022; Molnár-Kovács, 2023), no analysis has yet directly compared the narratives of the two countries within the context of their history education systems and available textbooks. Therefore, this study aims to compare how the Battle of Mohács is represented in contemporary Turkish and Hungarian secondary school history textbooks and how these representations reflect the broader educational, curricular, and historiographical contexts of the two countries.

The research is guided by the following three questions:

- How is the Battle of Mohács represented in contemporary Turkish and Hungarian secondary school history textbooks?
- What explanatory frameworks do these textbooks use to interpret the battle's causes and consequences?
- What types of sources, visual materials, and didactic tasks are used to support students' historical understanding of Mohács?

Before turning to the textbook representations of the battle of Mohács, it is necessary to examine the broader contexts in which these narratives are produced and taught. Textbooks do not present historical events in isolation, their interpretations are shaped by national curricula, the structure and aims of history education, and the historiographical traditions of each country. The following sections therefore outline the main characteristics of history education in Türkiye and Hungary, providing the contextual foundation for the subsequent comparative textbook analysis.

TURKISH SYSTEM OF HISTORY EDUCATION

History occupies a central place in Turkish education, and the Ottoman Empire constitutes one of the largest components of the national history curriculum. Consequently, the history of Hungary is also included in Turkish history education as part of the Ottoman past.

In Turkish secondary education, both public and private, follow the national curriculum established by the Ministry of National Education. In middle schools, history is taught as part of the Social Studies curriculum (Ministry of National Education, 2018), while high schools offer dedicated History courses (Ministry of National Education, 2023). Textbooks are centrally produced, approved by the Ministry, and used nationwide. Alongside the national curriculum, a limited number of accredited high schools offer international programs such as the College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) Program and the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme, which offer "AP World History" lessons and "IB DP History" lessons respectively. These curricula present a broader and more comparative approach to history. For example, the AP World History curriculum examines the Ottoman Empire within the broader context of "land-based empires," emphasizing global interactions rather than national achievements (College Board, 2026).

Within the national curriculum, textbooks frequently emphasize military victories, celebrated sultans, and the continuity of the Turkish state. During the past two decades, Ottoman history has gained even greater prominence in educational materials, often highlighting the empire's political power, military successes, and cultural legacy. Since the Ministry of Education is the producer of course textbooks, the content of the textbooks also changes over time. A comprehensive comparative analysis of history education in Türkiye can be found in *Compass to History and Civic Education: Comparing History Education in 16 European and Asian Countries* (Fodor et al., 2026). In summary, Turkish education is compulsory for the first 12 years (k12) for all Turkish citizens. There are two big national exams. One is held at the end of year 8 and named "LGS - Liselere Geçiş Sınavı" (High School Entrance Exam) and conducted by the Ministry of Education. The other one is the entrance examination for universities' bachelor degrees which is conducted by the Assessment, Selection and Placement Center **(**ÖSYM).

History education during the late Ottoman period has also attracted scholarly attention. One master's thesis (Aşık, K., 2022) examines history education during the Second Constitutional Era (1908–1922), including an analysis of the 1915 textbook Osmanlı Tarihi Çocuklara Mahsus (Ottoman History for Children). The book presents the Battle of Mohács (1526) through a heroic narrative centered on Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent. According to the text, Francis I of France appealed to Süleyman for assistance after being captured by Charles V, prompting the Ottoman sultan to launch a campaign against his European rivals. The narrative portrays Süleyman as the decisive actor in European politics, emphasizing Ottoman military superiority and depicting the conquest of Hungary as a direct consequence of his intervention. Such accounts illustrate how history textbooks have traditionally framed the Ottoman past through narratives of strength, leadership, and military triumph.

Academic historiography, however, follows a different approach. Rather than focusing primarily on national achievements, historians seek to situate Ottoman history within broader global and comparative contexts. Academic research relies extensively on primary sources, critical source analysis, and historiographical debate. For the reign of Sultan Süleyman, scholars examine contemporary Ottoman works such as Mahremî's Mohaç Fetihnamesi, Celâlzade Salih Çelebi's Tarih-i Sultan Süleyman, Kemalpaşazade's Mohaçname, and other texts produced under imperial patronage. While these sources provide invaluable historical evidence, historians also recognize that many were written to celebrate the ruler and legitimize Ottoman authority. Consequently, academic historiography evaluates such works critically and compares them with sources originating from different regions and political perspectives.

The contrast between secondary school history education and academic education reflects their distinct purposes. The Ministry of Education's textbooks generally aim to construct a coherent national narrative and strengthen students' historical consciousness and national identity. Summary of the approach can be found online (Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2025). Especially these sentences summarizes the ministry's approach: "In line with our principle of "From Our Roots to the Future," students are expected to: -learn and embrace our national culture and national values in an accurate and meaningful way; -recognize the importance of building strong ties with our heartland—the cultural and historical legacy entrusted to us by our ancestors."

Furthermore, approaches to Ottoman history are not uniform even within academia. Universities differ in their historiographical traditions, methodological preferences, and ideological orientations. Universities in Türkiye and especially in North America also have conflicting views on approaches towards the Suleymanic era. Individual historians within the same institution may also interpret the Ottoman past differently depending on their theoretical framework, research interests, and source criticism. Prof. Dr. Cemal Kafadar's *Süleymân the Second and His Time* (İnalcık & Kafadar, 1993) represents a new approach towards academic history by Turkish historians. There is the Ottoman History Podcast initiated by Turkish and Turkophone academics living abroad representing pioneer approaches towards history both in Turkish and English podcast recordings. As a result, academic historiography in Türkiye encompasses a wide range of perspectives rather than a single dominant narrative.

In conclusion, history education in Türkiye exists at the intersection of nation-building and academic scholarship. While secondary school curricula often emphasize national identity and collective memory, academic historiography seeks a more critical, comparative, and evidence-based understanding of the past. The dynamic relationship between these two approaches continues to shape how Turkish society understands both Ottoman history and its place in the wider world.

HUNGARIAN SYSTEM OF HISTORY EDUCATION

Hungary's history education system reflects broader Central European traditions while also displaying several distinctive national characteristics shaped by post-socialist educational reforms and recent centralisation processes. The current regulatory framework combines strong national identity formation with an increasing emphasis on competency-based historical thinking, source analysis, and interpretive skills. As a result, Hungarian history education today represents a hybrid model in which traditional content-oriented approaches coexist with more modern pedagogical and assessment practices.

The Hungarian educational system is regulated through a highly centralised structure based on the National Core Curriculum (NCC), first introduced in 1995 and most recently revised in 2020 (Hungarian Government, 2020). The NCC defines the overarching aims of education as well as subject-specific objectives, while more detailed Framework Curricula determine the precise historical content, concepts, dates, and topographical knowledge to be taught. In recent years, a growing degree of state involvement and centralisation in curriculum regulation, textbook validation, school maintenance, and pedagogical supervision can be observed. This tendency has significantly shaped the current landscape of history education in Hungary. Compared to several European states, the Hungarian curricular position of history education is evidently strong (Fodor et al., 2026).

History is a compulsory subject throughout upper primary and secondary education (Grades 5–12) and remains one of the few subjects that is obligatorily included in the school-leaving examination system (Abitur or Matura type). Approximately 80,000 students take the history matura examination annually, either at intermediate or advanced level. The examination structure itself is particularly important because it strongly influences classroom teaching practices and textbook development. Since the major reform of the matura examination in 2005, Hungarian history education has increasingly incorporated competency-oriented assessment elements, including source analysis, essay writing, interpretation of historical problems, and the application of historical knowledge rather than simple memorisation alone. However, the presence of truly higher-level historical thinking tasks is debated (Tóth, 2023)

The curriculum remains heavily content-driven. The Framework Curriculum prescribes an extensive body of factual knowledge, including more than 400 historical concepts and nearly 500 dates, historical figures, and geographical items that students are expected to master (Hungarian Education Authority, 2020). The organisation of historical content follows a predominantly chronological structure, covering world and Hungarian history from antiquity to the present day. However, Hungarian national history occupies approximately half of the curriculum, reflecting the curriculum's explicit nation-building and identity-forming objectives.

The central role of national identity is addressed in curriculum documents. According to the Framework Curriculum, students should become familiar with historical narratives, events, and actors that are considered foundational by both historical scholarship and national tradition. The curriculum explicitly aims to strengthen students' sense of national belonging, patriotism, and attachment to Hungarian cultural values. Special attention is given to the history of Hungarians living beyond Hungary's present-day borders, reflecting the broader historical and political significance of the Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries after the Treaty of Trianon.

At the same time, Hungarian curriculum documents also emphasise the development of historical thinking and transferable competencies. The Framework Curriculum highlights abilities such as source criticism, interpretation of historical causation, comparison of historical situations, recognition of continuity and change, and the understanding of connections between past and present. Students are expected not only to acquire historical knowledge but also to organise information in a problem-centred way, formulate hypotheses about historical actors and institutions, and evaluate differing historical interpretations.

While the curriculum prioritises Hungarian national history, it also attempts to situate national developments within broader European and global contexts. World history topics are present throughout the curriculum, especially in relation to European civilisation, Christianity, major political transformations, and twentieth-century global conflicts. However, non-European histories generally receive less attention unless they intersect directly with European expansion or Hungarian historical developments.

The textbook system also reflects the centralized nature of Hungarian education. Three state-approved textbook series are available, and two of these are developed and provided free of charge to students by the Education Authority. The last series was developed by the Catholic Pedagogy Institute. All books must closely conform to the prescribed curriculum and examination requirements. Textbook validation is controlled by the Education Authority, and digital versions are publicly accessible online, including editions in minority languages recognized in Hungary. However, due to the election results, this could change easily because the new government declared that it would liberalize the textbook market in Hungary.

The online editions of the textbooks were developed by the Institute for Educational Research and Development between 2014 and 2018 and became particularly significant after the introduction of distance education in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic (Engel & Fekete, 2023). These editions are commonly referred to as 'smart books', a term that highlights the inclusion of adaptable didactic tasks alongside the digitized PDF versions of the textbooks. During the COVID period, the portal was continuously expanded and supplemented with additional content. The chapter on the Battle of Mohács in these so-called 'smart books' contains numerous tasks; however, these cannot always be completed online. Nevertheless, the sets of exercises available on the National Public Education Portal can also be completed online.

Overall, Hungarian history education can be characterised as a system balancing multiple aims. On the one hand, it seeks to preserve national historical consciousness, cultural continuity, and patriotic education. On the other hand, it increasingly incorporates modern didactical approaches centred on competencies, source work, interpretation, and historical reasoning. This coexistence of traditional nation-oriented content and competency-based pedagogy makes Hungary a particularly interesting case within comparative European history education research.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN REGULATION OF HISTORY EDUCATION

History education occupies a strong position in both Türkiye and Hungary, but this situation is embedded in somewhat different institutional and pedagogical structures. In both cases, history education is closely connected to national identity formation, collective memory, and the transmission of culturally significant historical narratives. At the same time, both systems are highly centralised: curricula, textbook approval, and assessment structures are determined by the state. Historical content is present across ISCED levels 2 and 3 in both countries, but while Türkiye distributes historical learning across *Social Studies*, *History of the Turkish Revolution and Kemalism*, and upper-secondary *History*, Hungary provides simpler model in which History is taught as a compulsory subject from grades 5 to 12.

The two systems also differ in the way they connect history education to assessment. In Türkiye, history is present in central entrance examinations, the subject plays a significant role in selection processes through multiple-choice testing in the grade 8 high-school entrance examination and the grade 12 university entrance examination conducted by the Assessment, Selection and Placement Center (ÖSYM) (Avaroğullari et al., 2026). In Hungary, *history* is one of the compulsory Matura subjects at the end of secondary education, and it can also be taken at advanced level as well similarly to the English, Irish and Scottish models (Fodor, 2026; Tóth, 2026a, 2026b). This gives the subject a particularly strong institutional status and contributes to the importance of written and oral performance, source analysis, essay writing, and historical explanation in classroom practice.

Beyond structural differences, the two national systems have a deeper similarity: both systems seek to balance traditional national narratives with the language of modern historical thinking. In Türkiye, Ottoman history, military success, state continuity, and the legacy of the Turkish Republic remain central, while academic historiography offers more critical, comparative, and source-based interpretations of the Ottoman past. In Hungary, the curriculum is also prescriptive, with detailed description of the content, but the Matura reform of 2005 and the curriculum regulations have introduced competence-oriented elements such as source criticism, causation, comparison, and interpretation. This duality of identity formation and historical thinking is therefore present in both countries, although it appears through different emphases. For the analysis of Mohács, this context is crucial: the same event may be framed within different national-historical logics, shaped by each country's curriculum, textbook system, and assessment culture.

Aspects	Türkiye	Hungary
Length of compulsory history education (ISCED levels and grades, including lessons/week)	As part of Social Studies in grades 4–7, *Turkish Revolution and Kemalism* in grade 8, with 2 lessons/week. In upper secondary education, *History* as a separate subject is compulsory in grades 9–11, generally with 2 lessons/week, followed by Turkish Revolution and Kemalism in grade 12, also with 2 lessons/week. (ISCED 2–3)	Compulsory from grades 5–12. aught in 2 lessons/week in grades 5–10 and 3 lessons/week in grades 11–12. *History* is part of the *History and Civic Studies curricular learning area including Local and Folk Culture* subject as well. (ISCED 2–3)
Compulsory school leaving exam	Grade 8 high-school entrance exam and in grade 12 during university entrance exams. Both include multiple-choice historical questions.	Part of compulsory Matura subjects at the end of secondary education (grade 12), alongside Hungarian, Mathematics, a foreign language, and one elective subject. The examination includes written and oral components.
Optional advanced level of school leaving exam	No	Yes, both written and oral, taken in a different school.

Table 1 Turkish and Hungarian Systems of History Education

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TURKISH-HUNGARIAN POINTS OF CONNECTION IN NATIONAL TEXTBOOKS

TURKISH HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

Battle of Mohács is a part of the "mandatory" history lesson which is written by the Ministry of Education Committees for grade 10 students and it is a part of unit 3 whose title is: "Universal State: Ottomans (1453-1683)" (Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2025b).

This textbook presents the Battle of Mohács primarily within the context of the dynastic struggle between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans. It explains that Sultan Süleyman's principal objective was to break Habsburg dominance in Europe, while his alliance with France formed part of this broader strategy. Hungary, as the Ottoman Empire's immediate western neighbor, had to be defeated before the Ottomans could directly confront the Habsburgs. This interpretation is reinforced in a later chapter of the textbook, where the world-renowned historian Halil İnalcık is quoted on the capitulations.The descriptive narrative is supported throughout by excerpts from Turkish academic historians.

The coursebook also uses secondary academic resources with an objective tone. This is a quotation from Prof. Dr. Feridun Emecen: *""The battle, in a sense, marked the beginning of the end of the Kingdom of Hungary. Although the Ottomans recognized Szapolyai's kingdom, centered in Buda, as long as it remained under Ottoman suzerainty, this arrangement was only temporary. The death of Louis II enabled Archduke Ferdinand, the brother of Charles V and ruler of the Austrian and Bohemian lands, to claim the Hungarian throne through dynastic succession and establish his authority over part of Hungary. As a result, the territories of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary were divided into three parts. This partition marked the beginning of a 150-year struggle between the Ottomans and the Habsburgs over Hungarian lands. At the same time, this victory ushered in a new era in European politics, during which the Ottomans emerged as a major power on the continental stage."* (Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2025b).

The coursebook for grade 10 students does not mention any primary source either from Ottoman Turkish or Hungarian. On the other hand, the book draws on secondary sources from Turkish academics. One of which is a world famous academic Prof. Dr. Halil İnalcık. Here the book quotes from İnalcık: *"Collaboration with France against the Habsburgs formed the foundation of Suleiman the Magnificent's western* *policy."* There is no mention of the interior factors of the defeat of Hungary but the coursebook reads: *"After the Battle of Mohács, the Hungarian nobles elected John Zápolya as King of Hungary. However, his claim to the throne was not recognized by Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, or by Charles's brother, Archduke Ferdinand of Austria. Ferdinand maintained that the Kingdom of Hungary rightfully belonged to him by hereditary succession and that he, therefore, was the legitimate king."*

Academics prioritize evidence-based inquiry, methodological rigor, and the inclusion of multiple perspectives which AP and IB try to fit in the curriculum for high school students. This distinction explains why the same historical event, such as the Battle of Mohács, may be presented as a heroic national achievement in school textbooks while being analyzed as a complex political, diplomatic, and military event in scholarly research.

HUNGARIAN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

The following section focuses on one of the most significant turning points in Hungarian historical memory: the Battle of Mohács (1526), the Ottoman conquest of central Hungary, and the subsequent dual royal election. In the Hungarian secondary school curriculum, the topic appears within the thematic unit The Period of Ottoman Rule in Hungary. The analysed textbooks approach the topic not only as a military defeat, but also as a political, cultural, and symbolic turning point in Hungarian history.

The analysis compares three currently used tenth-grade textbooks: (1) the Educational Authority A series (Borhegyi & Nánay, 2021), (2) the Educational Authority B series (Száray, 2021) and (3) the Saint Emeric Catholic textbook series (Kovács, 2022).

Although all three textbooks follow the same national curriculum framework, they differ considerably in narrative emphasis, source usage, didactical structure, and treatment of controversial historical questions.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

All three Hungarian textbooks present the battle of Mohács (1526) within a broader European and Ottoman context rather than as an isolated national tragedy. They emphasise the asymmetry between the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary, discuss internal political divisions within Hungary, and situate the events within wider Habsburg–Ottoman rivalries.

The textbooks also share several recurring narrative elements: as the weakening of royal authority after Matthias Hunyadi, the political ambitions of János Szapolyai (Jan Zápolya in international and Ottoman sources), the military and financial weaknesses of the Hungarian Kingdom, the missed opportunity to stop the Ottoman army during the river crossings, and the symbolic importance of King Louis II's death.

At the same time, the three books differ in how they interpret responsibility, historical agency, and the significance of the defeat.

THE EDUCATIONAL AUTHORITY A SERIES (BORHEGYI & NÁNAY, 2021)

The A series Hungarian textbook written by Péter Borhegyi approaches the Battle of Mohács primarily through general analysis. The chapter begins with the well-known Hungarian saying "More was lost at Mohács," as an inquiry question asking students what exactly was lost in 1526. This framing already signals that the textbook aims to move beyond a simplistic national tragedy narrative.

The chapter devotes significant attention to background factors. Comparative tables present the demographic, territorial, and economic differences between the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary, encouraging students to interpret the defeat within a broader geopolitical framework. Internal Hungarian divisions, aristocratic rivalries, financial shortages, and the Habsburg–French conflict are also highlighted.

The textbook presents the dual royal election through the competing legal and political claims of János Szapolyai and Ferdinand Habsburg. It introduces the Rákos decree advocating a "national king" while also presenting the Habsburg–Jagiellonian marriage agreements that legitimised Ferdinand's claim.

The military events of the Mohács battle are described relatively briefly. The lesson emphasises the failed attempt to prevent the Ottoman crossing and the initial success of Archbishop Pál Tomori's cavalry attack before the Hungarian forces were overwhelmed by Ottoman artillery and janissaries.

The controversial issue of Janos Szapolyai's delayed arrival is handled according to the current Hungarian scholarly consensus: geographical distance prevented the Transylvanian army from arriving in time. However, the textbook does not present alternative interpretations or earlier historical myths regarding deliberate delay.

Figure 1. Bertalan Székely, The Discovery of the Corpse of King Louis II, 1860

The visual narrative plays a central role in the chapter. Maps, battlefield sketches, and conceptual diagrams dominate the pages. Particularly important is Bertalan Székely's famous nineteenth-century painting depicting the discovery of King Louis II's body (Borhegyi & Nánay, 2020, 37). The artwork functions not only as historical illustration but also as part of Hungarian collective memory. The image symbolises both the death of the young king and the collapse of the medieval Hungarian kingdom.

THE EDUCATIONAL AUTHORITY B SERIES (SZÁRAY, 2021)

The B series Hungarian textbook written by Miklós Száray adopts a broader geopolitical perspective. Unlike the A series, it begins not with Hungary but with Ottoman expansion in Europe. Large maps and background readings introduce the military campaigns, economic foundations, and strategic logic of Ottoman expansion.

The textbook strongly emphasises spatial orientation and contextualisation. Altogether six maps are used to support students' understanding of the military and political processes surrounding Mohács and the division of Hungary.

Száray presents multiple causes behind the Hungarian defeat: the peasant uprising of 1514, financial weakness, defensive failures, the Franco–Ottoman alliance, and diplomatic mistakes such as the imprisonment of Ottoman envoys. The appointment of Archbishop Pál Tomori is described as the government's "only good decision."

Compared to the other textbooks, this chapter is more openly critical toward János Szapolyai. Although his role during the battle itself is not discussed in detail, the textbook notes that the Transylvanian army later avoided attacking the retreating Ottoman forces. Szapolyai's later alliance with Sultan Suleiman is interpreted critically as it was the first time in Hungarian history that one side in an internal political conflict turned to the Ottomans for support.

An interesting feature of the chapter is the inclusion of short historiographical discussions. For example, students encounter different scholarly explanations regarding why Suleiman waited until 1541 to occupy Buda permanently. Concepts such as supply lines and the "radius-of-power theory" are introduced in simplified form.

The B series textbook contains the highest number of sources overall, but many of them remain primarily illustrative, as no tasks are connected to them. Compared to the other two books, fewer tasks require active source analysis or interpretation.

THE SAINT EMERIC CATHOLIC TEXTBOOK SERIES (KOVÁCS, 2022)

The Catholic textbook written by Örs Kovács places the strongest emphasis on the Battle of Mohács itself. While shorter in length than the Educational Authority textbooks, it provides the most detailed narrative reconstruction of the battle.

The lesson explicitly challenges deterministic interpretations of the period. Rather than portraying Mohács as an unavoidable catastrophe, Kovács highlights the uncertainty experienced by contemporaries. Students are reminded that in 1526, it was not even clear which frontier region would become the target of the Ottoman campaign (e.g. Transylvania or Croatia).

The textbook pays considerable attention to practical military and logistical issues, including harvest delays, difficulties of mobilisation, the strategic importance of river crossings, and the speed of Ottoman troop movements. Unlike the other textbooks, it also mentions György Szapolyai, brother of János Szapolyai, among the Hungarian military commanders as György was the second in command next to Archbishop Pál Tomori.

The battle narrative itself is the most detailed among the analysed textbooks. Kovács describes the attempted assault against the sultan and characterises the battle as a heroic struggle. Recent historical and archaeological research is also integrated into the lesson, including updated interpretations of the battlefield and the location of King Louis II's death.

The strongest aspect of the Catholic textbook is its didactical structure. Entire pages are devoted to source analysis and historical interpretation. Students work with Ottoman and Hungarian textual sources simultaneously, including excerpts from Ottoman historians as Kjátim Mohammed, Kemálpasazádé, Sultan Suleiman's diary, and the Hungarian chronicler Miklós Istvánffy.

These sources present strikingly different perspectives on the same events. Ottoman accounts emphasise divine support, janissary discipline, and the heroism of the sultan's guard, while Hungarian narratives stress the success of the Hungarian cavalry assault and the confusion within Ottoman lines.

The accompanying tasks rarely focus on simple factual recall. Instead, students are asked to compare sources, identify contradictions, interpret authorial bias, and evaluate historical reliability. Particularly valuable is a task comparing Ottoman and Hungarian descriptions of the same phase of the battle.

Another noteworthy element is a separate "historian's dilemma" section discussing the long-debated question of whether János Szapolyai intentionally delayed his arrival. Using a contemporary source by István Brodarics, the textbook argues against the myth of deliberate betrayal while also demonstrating how political propaganda shaped later interpretations.

The lesson concludes with a counterfactual task in which students consider how the battle might have unfolded differently if Szapolyai's army had also taken part. Although tasks related to unrealized events, also known as counterfactual historical tasks, are not widespread, we argue that their use may offer several benefits in history education. One such benefit is the development of prediction, or the ability to anticipate possible outcomes, which may become a particularly important competence for students in the age of AI (Gloviczki, 2024). In addition, analyzing counterfactual events may stimulate students' imagination, support the recognition and interpretation of causal relationships, foster multiperspective and critical thinking (Pelegrín, C. 2014), and—through a deeper understanding of the historical context—contribute to the development of historical empathy.

SUMMARY

The three analysed textbooks present different but complementary interpretations of Mohács and the Ottoman conquest period.

Despite their differences, all three textbooks move beyond older purely nationalistic narratives and attempt to situate Mohács within broader regional and imperial contexts. The analysed chapters demonstrate that contemporary Hungarian history education increasingly seeks to balance national historical memory with competency-based historical thinking, source criticism, and multiperspective interpretation.

Previous Hungarian textbook series analysed by Zsófia Molnár-Kovács show that Hungarian textbook narratives about Mohács are typically organised around themes such as military conflict, historical loss, and symbolic turning points. Her analysis also highlights how textbook language, visual sources, and narrative emphasis shape students' historical interpretation of the battle (Molnár-Kovács, 2025).

Aspects	Turkish textbook	Hungarian A series	Hungarian B series	Hungarian Catholic textbook
Main explanation of the battle	Habsburg-Ottoman rivalry, wider geopolitical struggle in Europe	Demographic, economic, and military asymmetry	Ottoman expansion, Hungary's financial and military weakness, the consequences of the 1514 peasant uprising.	Contingency; Military logistics; Strategic factors; Ottoman mobility; Szapolyai's absence
Didactical focus	The didactical focus is mainly explanatory and narrative.	The main didactical focus is contextualisation.	The focus is on spatial orientation, geopolitical interpretation, and the understanding of long-term processes.	The strongest didactical focus is source analysis and historical interpretation.
Multiperspectivity	Limited multiperspectivity; Turkish interpretations; European context; Hungarian perspectives absent; Alternative views absent	Moderate multiperspectivity; Post-Mohács politics; Competing claims; Szapolyai–Ferdinand; Source limitations	Moderate multiperspectivity; Explanatory frameworks; Historiographical discussion; Buda occupation; Limited source-based tasks	Strong multiperspectivity; Contrasting accounts; Szapolyai dilemma; Historical interpretation; Critical evaluation
Sources to analyze for students	Secondary scholarship; Turkish historians; İnalcık–Emecen; Limited primary sources	Comparative tables; Visual sources; Maps; Battlefield sketches; Conceptual diagrams	Extensive sources; Multiple maps; Spatial orientation; Geopolitical context; Illustrative materials; Limited task integration	Systematic source use; Primary sources; Ottoman–Hungarian comparison; Parallel accounts; Interpretive tasks

Table 2 Comparative Findings

CONCLUSION

The comparison of Turkish and Hungarian textbooks reveals a clear pattern of structural convergence and pedagogical divergence. Both Türkiye and Hungary operate within highly centralized education systems where the state tightly regulates curricula and textbook production. However, this structural similarity leads to different educational outcomes. The Turkish curriculum focuses primarily on building a cohesive national identity through a narrative of military triumph, continuity, and imperial strength. In this framework, the Battle of Mohács is presented mainly as a tactical step in Sultan Süleyman's broader western policy to counter Habsburg hegemony in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Hungarian curriculum, by contrast, represents a hybrid model that balances nation-building and patriotic education with strong, competency-based examination requirements. Hungarian textbooks still preserve several long-standing elements of the Mohács narrative, which has changed relatively little since the political transition of 1989–1990, but they also place greater emphasis on internal political causes, source work, visual interpretation, and didactical innovation. The divergence is especially visible in the use of sources. The Turkish textbook relies almost entirely on secondary academic texts and lacks primary sources, which may hinder the development of students' critical thinking. Hungarian textbooks, particularly the Catholic textbook, make greater use of primary sources, multiperspective, and counterfactual "what if" tasks.

In the 2020's, this difference has broader educational significance. The inclusion of advanced pedagogical tools shows that secondary history education can foster deeper historical empathy, critical reasoning, and even foresight. In an age increasingly dominated by AI, history education moves away from simple factual memorization toward multi-perspective source analysis, bias recognition, and predictive thinking. Shared historical events such as the battle of Mohács offer a valuable matrix for developing these vital, higher-order cognitive competencies.

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Authors
Students Authors

Rüya Atalağ: Student of TEV İnanç High School, author of the Mohacs 500 Dialogue volume

Arda Turgut Çapraz: Student of TEV İnanç High School, author of the Mohacs 500 Dialogue volume

László Péter Csoma: Student of Mathias Corvinus Collegium, author of the Mohacs 500 Dialogue volume

Márk Csurgai: Student of Mathias Corvinus Collegium, author of the Mohacs 500 Dialogue volume

Öykü Demirbaş: Student of TEV İnanç High School, author of the Mohacs 500 Dialogue volume

Anna Gonda: Student of Mathias Corvinus Collegium, author of the Mohacs 500 Dialogue volume

Zalán Hajdu: Student of Mathias Corvinus Collegium, author of the Mohacs 500 Dialogue volume

Karin Anett Imre: Student of Mathias Corvinus Collegium, author of the Mohacs 500 Dialogue volume

Defne Karaman: Student of TEV İnanç High School, author of the Mohacs 500 Dialogue volume

Ömer Kısacık: Student of TEV İnanç High School, author of the Mohacs 500 Dialogue volume

Júlia Nagy: Student of Mathias Corvinus Collegium, author of the Mohacs 500 Dialogue volume

Ecrin Özyiğit: Student of TEV İnanç High School, author of the Mohacs 500 Dialogue volume

Ahmet Şen: Student of TEV İnanç High School, author of the Mohacs 500 Dialogue volume

Bence Tachu: Student of Mathias Corvinus Collegium, author of the Mohacs 500 Dialogue volume

Egemen Onur Unan: Student of TEV İnanç High School, author of the Mohacs 500 Dialogue volume

Zsófia Vaszi: Student of Mathias Corvinus Collegium, author of the Mohacs 500 Dialogue volume

ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTORS

Benedek Alpár: MCC Learning Institute, Junior Researcher; Mohacs 500 Dialogue Twinning project, national project coordinator (alpar.benedek@mcc.hu)

Ela Bozok, PhD: Sabancı University, Istanbul, Lecturer Mohacs 500 Dialogue Twinning project, expert (elab@sabanciuniv.edu)

Ahmet Cem Durak, M.A. : TEV İnanç High School, Türkiye, Teacher; Mohacs 500 Dialogue Twinning project, national project coordinator (acdurak@tevinanc.k12.tr)

Áron Fekete, PhD: MCC Learning Institute, Budapest, Researcher; Mohacs 500 Dialogue Twinning project, national project coordinator, (fekete.aron@mcc.hu)

Richárd Fodor, PhD: MCC Learning Institute, Budapest, Head of Research; Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Lecturer; Mohacs 500 Dialogue Twinning project, national project coordinator, (Fodor.Richard@mcc.hu)

Barnabás Guitman, PhD, habil.: Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, Lecturer; Mohacs 500 Dialogue Twinning project, expert (szuromi.kristof@btk.ppke.hu)

Kristóf Szuromi, PhD: Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, Lecturer; Mohacs 500 Dialogue Twinning project, expert (guitman.barnabas@btk.ppke.hu)

N. Zeynep Yelçe, PhD: Sabancı University, Istanbul, Lecturer; Mohacs 500 Dialogue Twinning project, expert (zeynep.yelce@sabanciuniv.edu)

MENTOR COLLEAGUES SUPPORTING THE WORK OF THE TEAMS:

Péter Korpai (MCC High School Program), Lili Gerda Hegyi (MCC University Program), Nimród Kelemen (MCC University Program), Mehmet Ali Neyzi PhD (TEV Trustee), Zeynep Nevin Yelçe PhD (Sabancı University), Ela Bozok PhD (Sabancı University), Prof. Müge Kanuni Er (TEV İnanç High School)

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