The Historical Construction of National Consciousness

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“Gentilism”: The Question of Barbarian Ethnic Consciousness

The outline which follows is merely a thesis-style summary of an already completed monograph. It aims, in a highly abridged form, to simply raise some questions, draw up a frame for a methodology, and offer direction for further study. More detailed substantiation of the arguments presented here may be found in the monograph itself.

The subject at hand belongs to a distinct area of study within a considerably broader set of issues under discussion; it is an examination of the emergence of a form of “national consciousness” in the Middle Ages. Conceptual and methodological considerations, previous historiographic efforts, and current perceptions of history have provoked me to focus on this topic.

The opinions of historical scholars are divided as to whether it is legitimate to speak of a medieval “national consciousness” or to designate any phenomena in the Middle Ages as “national.” This lack of consensus is due to theoretical and conceptual disagreement, and has resulted in a clear variance in terminology. Accordingly, the discipline lacks standard conceptual terms.

The theoretical and conceptual groundings and the historical premises behind the topic have been outlined in my essay “‘Nationality’ and ‘National Con-

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* This text, first published in Hungarian in the review Történelmi Szemle 14 (1971): 188–211, is the outline of the main conclusions of the author’s doctoral dissertation titled “Gentilizmus: A barbár etnikai tudat kérdése” [“Gentilism”: The question of barbarian ethnic consciousness] (Budapest, 1970). The dissertation manuscript was planned to be the first part of an eventually unfinished huge monograph on “National Consciousness and Patriotism in the Middle Ages: A Study in the History of Political Thought and Group Consciousness.” The entire text of the dissertation appeared in print finally in 1997 with the title: Jenő Szűcs, A magyar nemzeti tudat kialakulása [The formation of the Hungarian ethnic consciousness: Two studies on its prehistory] (Budapest, 1997). Relying upon this, the editors of the present English translation have added a few basic references to the text in footnotes.
The lack of such a standard may stem from theoretical and methodological disparity, but there is no questioning the fact that terminological difficulties innate to the subject matter also exist. It is worth drawing attention to the fact that, according to modern conceptual norms, the term “nation” primarily corresponds to a set of notions and features which have only existed in European history since the turn of the nineteenth century. So, extending the use of this term to phenomena in a more distant past will surely be misrepresentative of the facts. The modern nation may have evolved from precedents existing many centuries before, but it is not merely an extension of historical circumstances—the aggregate sum or culmination, so to speak—of these events or conditions; over the course of time it has also evolved into a distinctively new kind of historical pattern. The novelty of the nineteenth century resided not only in the fact that earlier coalescent processes began to accelerate under the influence of the bourgeois evolution and produced higher level and more stable constructs. An equally important change was that the phenomenon referred to as the “nation” became the bearer of standardized values. Notionally, it was seen as a new synthesis; and as such, it represented a basic framework—one which was actual or merely longed for—an order within which social, political, and cultural spheres were organized. In consequence, it also became a primary, or at least dominant, object of group loyalty. Like the theory of national sovereignty, the idea of national culture, or the condition of national loyalty, the concept of a “national society” went hand in hand with the modern evolution of the bourgeois society. Among others, these were ingredients indispensable for the formation of a conceptual scheme that we now refer to as “national consciousness,” which had not existed prior to the eighteenth century. All the same, modern nations do have their historical antecedents, while not identical to contemporary ones: throughout an uneven process of several centuries formative and integrative patterns had established themselves since medieval times. These frameworks, existent since the Middle Ages according to source documents, were often referred to as “nation,” or, in the majority of European languages, more archaic equivalents to or derivations of the Latin natio; this is also the case with the Hungarian term nemzet. From relatively early on in history a sensibility also emerged that mirrored these seminal developments and was closely connected with them, though its features differed markedly from its modern equivalent and variations also appeared in earlier centuries. How indeed does one qualify or define such an array of phenomena? Modern transformations of our concep-
tual tools in this branch of study clearly evolved in a manner that was neither sufficiently coherent nor sufficiently radical. As a result, our terminology for the modern nation and its antecedents fails to adequately express the characteristic dichotomy between historical development ("national history") and phenomenological difference. All antecedent phenomena are united conceptually under the rubric of "nation." It is worth noting that efforts have been made in recent Soviet and American research to limit the use of the term "nation" (natsiya) to the modern age, and to refer to the historical models which were being formed from the Middle Ages onwards as "nationality" (narodnost). Still, such a distinction cannot always be demonstrated in every context. If, for example, one wants to treat, within the same generic conceptual framework, the trends and historical events behind the regnum Francorum around 1300 as opposed both to Christian universalism and feudal particularism, the category of "nationality" can be neglected, but the label of "national state" (or monarchy) cannot be helped, even if we mean to convey something different from what this notion has expressed since the nineteenth century. In a certain sense, therefore, we have been using "auxiliary" concepts to carry out our research. With regard to medieval circumstances, one might also contend that the use of the term "national" is an unavoidable conceptual compromise resulting from our poor classification lexis. We have to be aware that we use this classification term for stressing some connections or differences in phenomena far from the modern semantical content of the notion of "nationality," which could still be related to it for some of its conceptual features. Such a concession is defensible, provided that it is clear that, to some extent, we are dealing with auxiliary notions in this kind of research; the smaller the compromise, the more acceptable it is. This is likewise where we stand with the issue of "national consciousness." The scholarly value and the very meaning of this concept will be lost when it is completely abstracted from its historical context and stretched to accommodate phenomena of another era perceived as equal. Attentiveness to "nationality," conceptualized as a form of social psychological "We-consciousness," is quite an old phenomenon. In certain strata of society and in some rudimentary forms its presence in European history can be traced back as far as the ninth to the eleventh centuries. It did not play, however, any significant role in determining group loyalty within social, cultural, intellectual, or political spheres, i.e., precisely in what is understood to be an inherent feature of the concept of "national consciousness." In this respect it was around 1300 that one could perceive some distinct signs of a turning point in medieval European history insofar as "nation" became a well-
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defined concept of social and political theory. In one fell swoop it becomes a social and political aspiration and the object of self-assertion and loyalty. Developing in the late Middle Ages, this awareness was not unrelated to a kind of “national” group consciousness that had existed in an earlier form, yet there is something generally more to it; it possesses a distinctive quality. It is a reflection of the change in political, historical, and social perceptions, which began sometime between 1200–1300. If we look at the matter more closely we see that deeper social, political, cultural, and intellectual transformations have caused a special fusion in mental makeup: the innovative theory of “political society” and the notion of political loyalty became enmeshed with the qualities of nationality, such as its historical origin, prestige, virtue, and indeed, the collective notions associated with its destiny, purpose, and “function.” Now, it seems legitimate to subsume this set of phenomena in the aforementioned sense under the classification of “national consciousness,” since, despite its typical medieval and estate-bound characteristics, the conceptual construct of this fusion is in many ways identical to what would materialize centuries later following the bourgeois transformation (which simultaneously rejected and realized on a higher plane the earlier mergence of the national and the social-political sphere).

The topic of medieval “national consciousness” is thus clearly a concern of the late Middle Ages and also belongs to the history of political ideas, in which synchronicity among historical events in Europe and interplay were key in addressing questions of social and intellectual history. Nevertheless, this complex possesses its own “historical antecedents” as well. The formation of “nationalities” constituted its historical raw material and served as a cognitive schema to help track historical developments. However, an “asynchronous” quality is also revealed when one considers differences between the older and younger regions within an evolving European history. In Europe’s Mediterranean and Western half, which was more closely connected with antiquity in its beginnings, the pre-feudal and barbarian (Germanic) sociological and ethnographic patterns of the original inhabitants had largely been dissolved during the early medieval period (sixth to ninth centuries), much like Rome itself. After complex processes of disintegration involving intermixing populations and the simultaneous, and, to some extent, parallel process of territorial reduction, it was in the ninth and tenth centuries, the central Middle Ages, that the greater unifying political and cultural-linguistic symbol of “nationality” started to emerge. Before long, the era itself was referring to these with terms like gens and natio. The Western European national frameworks emerged following the breakup of ethnic barbarian
groups in the early Middle Ages, *gentes et nationes* (among them Visigoths and Ostrogoths, Salian and Ripuarian Franks, and Lombards), and the gradual integration of the territorial patterns of the central Middle Ages designated in like manner, the “*nationalités provinciales*” (among them Aquitanians, Burgundians, Champenois, Flemings, Swabians, Bavarians, Saxons). This process lasted many centuries and was only concluded during the modern age. French, Spanish, Italian, German, and English nationalities are sui generis the products of the feudalist system. In contrast, in the Northern and Eastern regions, which only joined the edifice of feudal Christian Europe after the tenth century, the medieval integrative frameworks called * gens or natio*, the nationalities (the Bohemians, Poles, Magyars, along with the Danes, Swedes and Norwegians) arose from more archaic, more “organic” patterns—from the ethnic frameworks of the earlier, pre-feudal barbarian structure. Even if their composition altered significantly over time, these changes were negligible compared with the total discontinuity that occurred in the older regions, whose development was more protracted and more deeply articulated. Insofar as the presence of a sort of sociological “We-consciousness” mirroring an archaic ethnic continuity may be ascertained before the turn of the first millennium among these peoples, the following question necessarily arises: What is the conceptual and historical connection between this cognitive content and the phenomena, which made their appearance as “national consciousness” during the Middle Ages?

Research in recent years on the Germanic peoples who overthrew Rome and appropriated its heritage has produced notable findings on group consciousness and the “early barbarian” worldview, expressly rejecting the adoption of the title “nation,” which would have been anachronistic. First appearing in the early Middle Ages, this consciousness was based on cognitive constructs of long-standing ethnosociological frameworks—when larger population formations (referred to variously as “*Großstämme*,” “*Völkerschaften*,” or *gentes*) had integrated many tribal elements into their pre-feudal barbarian sociopolitical systems and world conceptions, at the very same time when ethnic features began to take shape among them. It is precisely due to these interconnections that one may rightly speak of a distinctive historical type of ethnosociological “We-consciousness” (“gentilism”), which played a special role as a political consciousness (“a self-contained, coherent system of social and political categories”) in the history of the formation of Europe between the fifth and the eighth centuries. After considerable academic treatment of this subject matter (we might highlight inter alia the work of Erich Zöllner, Ernesto Sestan, Heinz
Löwe, Helmut Beumann, and Eugen Ewig), a recent synthesis of the material has appeared in the form of a monograph by Reinhard Wenskus. With respect to the historical typology of ethnic groups, it has also attracted scholarly attention in Soviet historical research. As we have indicated, Western European history has drawn a sharp and clearly identifiable line between these “gentilic” frameworks and the “nationalities” of the Middle Ages; not so in the case of the “later” barbarians, whose developmental period was briefer, more rapid, and less articulated, and where some kind of continuity existed between archaic ethnic frameworks and feudal-era nationalities. Now, it has become increasingly apparent from Western historical literature that the social, political, and even the ethnogenic attributes of groups traditionally labeled as “Germanic” were actually features of a much broader range of “barbarian” social structures (also applicable to Slavic and even Turkic societies). With this consideration in mind, we must ask whether parallels may be drawn between those earlier Northern and Eastern ethnic frameworks and the “gentilic” structures of early medieval Western European history.

Such questions have hitherto not been raised in the field of history in connection with Northern and Eastern Europe. There has been some suggestion—in reference to Scandinavia and Bohemia—that archaic elements of early medieval “nationality”-bound group consciousness may be observed, but since flagging the issue has not resulted in any deeper analysis of the constitution of this phenomenon, addressing sociohistorical relationships or resolving conceptual problems, they have been broadly, tentatively, classed together as “antecedents.” The historical and ethnographic literature have failed to tackle the construct of group consciousness as a separate area of study in connection with the ethnogenesis of the Hungarian people, though some important but limited results have been produced. The only individual who has sought to offer a compre-
hensive, critical assessment based on the sources is József Deér. Deér claimed
that one should not expect the Magyar tribes, which arrived in Hungary during
the ninth century, to possess an “intrinsic sense of community” or group con-
sciousness, because this ethnically heterogeneous society was only formed into a
“people” by Prince Árpád, and felt a sense of unity only through his dynasty.
This narrative should have underpinned a distinct theory on Eastern nomadic
peoples, which, along with “superstratified” autocratic and despotic sociopoliti-
cal structures, would have constituted the “Eastern nomadic” (“pagan”) ingredi-
et in Hungarian history up until the thirteenth century; in opposition to the
“Western Christian” element visible in the “socialization” of subjects. It is to
Deér’s indisputable credit that he not only raised an essential question, but also
attempted to furnish a documented answer. The tendentious nature of his asser-
tions can both elicit criticism and drive further research on these issues. We will
reexamine these issues now within the framework of general history, with a
more complex research methodology and on a broader evidential base.

As a precondition of our research, we must accept that regardless of the dif-
ficulties that might arise with respect to the above, in the interim we should
leave open the question of whether or not a connection or an opposition ex-
ists—in the historical and morphological sense—between a “gentilic” ethnic
awareness and medieval “national” consciousness. Furthermore, given the lack
of preliminary explorations and case studies we have to renounce examining
the issue of “gentilism” in the entire younger region of Europe, that is, with re-
gard to early Slavic and Scandinavian history. Under these circumstances our
research proposal must remain a working hypothesis, much as our conclusions,
in relation to Hungarian history prior to the first millennium, will necessarily
only be of hypothetical value in many respects. Anyway, upon what methodo-
logical basis would it be appropriate to address this “archaeological” layer in
the history of ideas?

If the question is approached purely from the perspective of Hungarian his-
tory, the antithesis that exists in a more or less obscured form within the Latin-
language literature of eleventh to thirteenth century Hungary offers one point
of departure. The texts in question (legends, chronicles or gesta, charters, and
decretals) are derivative of universal Christian culture and the feudal mindset,

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4 József Deér, “Közösségérzés és nemzettudat a XI–XIII. századi Magyarországon” [National consciousness
and the sense of community in Hungary from the eleventh to the thirteenth century], A Gróf Klebelsberg
Kunó MTI Évkönyve 4 (1934): 93–111; Deér József, Pogány magyarság—keresztény magyarság [Pagan
Magyars and Christian Magyars] (Budapest, 1938).
and hence they reflect their contemporary reality according to classifications and ideological assertions of the age; they also reveal a close relationship with contemporaneous Western European texts. On the other hand, occasionally there also appear elements, motifs, and notions that are obviously alien to coeval conceptual constructs. Though mostly incidental, derived on occasion from almost unrecognizably distorted fragments, they are incontestably the relicts of a more archaic worldview and conceptual system. We could observe a similar phenomenon in relation to the concept of “people” and to the related broader notions. It is impossible to construe meaning from written sources alone or to isolate their constituents. In this realm, source criticism and philology might gain insight through evidence offered by linguistic history, archaeology, or historical ethnography, with the field of prehistory offering a possibility of coordinating research efforts. If, when reconstructing the intrinsic logic of historical fragments, we find that they definitely point to the existence of much older conceptual models and a “repertory of ideas” which, on the basis of sociohistorical connections and parallels in other areas of history, are components of a “gentilic” framework also observed elsewhere, then we will have reached the limits of what we may discover in this area. It follows as a matter of course that, given the nature of this research, questions cannot solely be viewed from the standpoint of Hungarian history. In other words, even as seen from a Hungarian perspective, both methodological and historical approaches to the question require that the research framework be extended, on the one hand, to the beginnings of European history (i.e., to the period of the acquisition of the Roman legacy by the Germanic gentes), and on the other, to the Eurasian Steppes (i.e., the historical background of the ethnogenesis of the Hungarian people). The manner in which we have posed the question requires a twofold historical basis: both Western and Eastern. It should envelop, more or less, the second part of the first millennium (the fifth to ninth centuries).

Two arguments offer good reasons for a critical survey of the early medieval development of Western Europe, the theoretical constructs concerning the formation of the Germanic people, and Western historical background conditions. Firstly, this is the historical context out of which earlier research has extracted the concept and typological model of “gentilism” itself (without, however, attempting to reach a level of generalization or trying to situate this notion in the world of early medieval conceptual schemes). On the basis of these research findings, it is above all the following questions that await a response: Is “gentilic” consciousness really identical with barbarian political thought? Was it re-
ally such a closed set of categories that could pervade and become, so to speak, a “foundational principle” of the early medieval conceptual world? Or, on the contrary, were the sixth to eighth centuries, with the general breakdown of ethnosociological structures, also the era in which “gentilism” got dissolved, and a new, specifically medieval schema emerged instead? All this has also a special importance from the point of view of Hungarian history. The texts of early Hungarian Latin literacy often date back to earlier Western European sources, as far back as the seventh to ninth centuries; thus, their interpretation is impossible without considering the transformation of these concepts and more broadly that of European mental schemas.

The extent to which a model extracted from Western history can be applied to the conditions of an Eastern history (i.e., to Magyar origins in the East European Steppe region) largely depends on one basic condition. Beside all the distinguishing, auxiliary, and specific features, one can identify some essential characteristics in their social structures, their political arrangements and their ethnogenesis, which could constitute “common denominators” between these distant pre-feudal barbarian ethnosociological structures, with no direct historical or ethnological links. Such recognition is facilitated when one divests oneself of certain prejudices or erroneous conclusions, which have presented a distorted picture of Hungarian prehistory based on absolutizing, indeed mythologizing, its “Eastern nomadic” characteristics. All this brings up an additional requirement: due attention must be paid to the scholarly literature’s entire frame of reference used to treat the final stage of Hungarian prehistory (the fifth to ninth centuries) since this system determines the context of data and footholds that may be inferred in relation to our more immediate subject.

As regards the reconstruction of what “gentilism” could have been, the conditions and research strategies for making claims about early Hungarian history differ only in a quantitative respect rather than a qualitative one from the relations in Germanic territories. Although contemporaneous Hungarian printed sources and observations from high cultures in close proximity (in this instance, from Byzantium and the Islamic world) are very meager in comparison with sources documenting Rome and the barbarians, other kinds of sources are present in an equal quantity. Fragmentary traces of archaic thought mechanisms and conceptual frameworks or ethnographic material included in early feudal-Christian literacy, archaeological findings and ethnological parallels, and evidence within the Hungarian language itself all possess informational value inasmuch as these sources have separately undergone reliable critical examination.
and cumulatively demonstrate an internal consistency; in this case, they can merge organically with a broader historical framework. This kind of historical reconstruction is not directed at factually based fragments of a former reality, but at fragments of the mental reflection of this reality, gradually assembled from scraps of material. Moreover, the object being recovered is not, primarily, the objective reality but rather a network of elements that once shaped an ideological framework: a model of a system of ideas, concepts, and notional motifs, within which a one-time social consciousness conceived the nature of “people.” Clearly, this type of historical reconstruction may only remain hypothetical, although not more than any research on “prehistory,” or more precisely from an epoch which predates written sources; we cannot expect more from such investigation than the affirmation of a previously existing conceptual model of the sort delineated above, without venturing further and proposing any, even hypothetical, suggestions to additional questions of detail. Working from the perspective of the history of ideas, and, to a considerable degree, within a framework of conceptual history, while methodologically complex (drawing on borrowings from the fields of philology, linguistics, ethnography, or archaeology), may, in the final analysis, offer a basis, or working hypothesis, which could further efforts to trace the development of communal forms of consciousness after the first millennium. The Magyars did not appear in Europe from out of a vacuum. This assertion also applies to categories of social consciousness. Partly through the disintegration and eradication, partly through the transformation of these categories, but in no way independent of them, grew the feudal-Christian ideological structure, with the “national” element of the Middle Ages unfolding from it centuries later as one of its distinctive branches.

The monograph referred to in the introduction, conceived according to the methodology and research approach outlined above, is divided into three parts. The first part summarizes the manner in which the question itself is posed and presents the historical framework behind the topic under study. The second part identifies the fundamental essence, and surveys the evolution and eventual breakdown of the Germanic “gentilism”; that is to say, it offers the Western setting. The final section analyzes the particularities of the Magyar “gentilic” ethnic consciousness as they arrived in their present territory, or in other words presents the Eastern historical background. With respect to my treatment of the Western background, the main conclusions are summarized briefly below.

The tension between a Roman Empire in its decline and the barbarian world gave expression, among other things, to a system of a political categories and a
community consciousness incongruent and previously alien to each other. This is tangibly reflected in sources from late antiquity and also in the conceptual understanding of the term “people” itself. According to the Romans the *populus Romanus* was not an “organic” natural or historical entity (that is, it would not be classified nowadays as either an ethnic group or a nationality), but rather a “political society,” the constitutive elements of which were legal, social, political, and cultural criteria. The category itself, together with its conceptual (and fictional) contents, is an expression of antiquity’s concept of a state and its relationship with society; it is a conceptual distillation of a typical “cosmopolitan” political attitude from the imperial era. The universalism of early Christianity, which set aside traditional, linguistic, and ethnic ties, and the very idea of the *populus Christianus*, was a spiritual variant of this worldview. The Roman conception of things entailed that “natural” affiliation did not signify political ties, nor any kind of wider ethnic framework; this is conveyed in the semantic content of the notions of *natio* and *gens*. If the Romans did nevertheless name group ties, tribes, or the larger ethnic formations of the barbarians using these same concepts (*nationes et gentes*), it was precisely for stressing the contrast that existed between themselves and these barbarians. According to this view, the unity of barbarian societies depended neither on social, legal, or governmental structures, nor on cultural values, i.e., the constituents of *res publica*, but it was defined as a community of descent (*origo*) and other traits deemed to be “natural,” so to speak, and by the welding of language and tradition (*lingua et mores*). This already expressed the qualities associated with the “barbarous,” although the notion of political and legal organization was also latent in the concept of *gens*, in opposition to the term *natio*, which imparted a purely “ethnographic” reality. This conceptual model is, by the way, not so far removed from the notion of barbarian self-awareness, which has, however, opposed emphases. The Gothic *thiuda* or Franconian *theod* (Old German *þeudo*), for instance, express both the notion of “a multitude of identical descent (or blood-community)” and the idea of “a politically organized people.” The characteristic union of “ethnic” and “political” spheres, unknown to the ancient world, typically reflects the barbarian ethnosociological framework.

The Germanic peoples or ethnic formations (*gentes*) which conquered Rome and succeeded it, were not, in reality, organic formations or blood communities. Originally they were the political institutions of tribes and segments of the population which had been assimilated over the course of their migrations (between the third and sixth centuries). However, the stability of the new realm
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(“Heerkönigtum,” or military monarchy) led to the extensive incorporation of diverse ethnic traditions. It also resulted in a new belief in an “organic” foundation—a community of descent—of the people, just as this belief can be detected among the peoples who came to play a significant historical role in this epoch (Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Franks, Alemanni, Burgundians, Lombards, and so forth). Overlapping political and ethnic frameworks embraced the distinctive pre-feudal barbarian social structure, in which the element of the armed yeoman still carried significant weight, in spite of social segmentation and an unusually strong monarchical authority. At the same time an ethnic consciousness experienced by the bulk of society, based on the common descent of the people (*theudo, gens) and the community of tradition, largely coincided with loyalty towards the political rule and the yeomen’s social consciousness of belonging to a unity of title (“common law”). In this case we may justifiably speak of a “gentilic” framework and a “gentilic” consciousness. The dominant “ideological” elements within this treasured abstraction may not have reflected language or culture in their entirety; they were articulated according to wider linguistic and cultural relationships that were fashioned into an organic whole within the frame of a typical “ethnocentric” mode of looking at the world. These elements included homogeneous ancestral traditions (in which rudimentary elements of historical consciousness and an adopted barbarian myth of blood kinship replaced the abstract “society” and was elevated to the sphere of the sacred), common law (which also indicated an “ethnic” bond), general “customs” (established ethical norms) and a body of beliefs (regardless of whether or not the elements had originally been ethnically-specific): all this melted together into an organic totality within the frame of a typically “ethnocentric” worldview. One might count on finding a good deal of variation between different social strata within the same ethnic group relating to the nature, intensity, and function of their worldview. Nevertheless, these were undoubtedly variants of the same ideological system, which might be considered a “political” form of consciousness inasmuch as the notions stemming from ethnic consciousness determined, to a greater or lesser extent, the political and social consciousness and loyalties of group members.

What helped to preserve “gentilism” during the early Middle Ages was the fact that the separation of elements of Roman and barbarian society was also guaranteed, for a relatively extended period of time, by the new barbarian formations. These included the legal status of individuals, and cultural, religious, settlement, and “constitutional” rights. During the sixth to eighth centuries,
within Christian literacy, which still heavily possessed a “Roman” stamp, denominations related to the “gentilic” mindset also came to the fore, namely, political ethos, the approach to law and history, understanding of ethnicity, and, indeed, exercised some influence on the development of the Christian historical Weltanschauung. The Church did not merely side with barbarian rulers in its practical activities; patristics also incorporated the barbarian world on a theoretical level into its notion of the “Roman,” which was invested with a spiritual meaning. Indeed, even the idea of the “election” of barbarian gentes emerged with Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede, and Paulus Diaconus. From the seventh and eighth centuries characteristic elements of “gentilic” notions of “people,” virtue, and views of history were elevated, in a Christianized form, to the level of high literature (for instance, in the Historia Gothorum, the Chronicle of Fredegar, or the longer preamble to the Lex Sálica). Whether these phenomena were manifestations of something new or, just the opposite, merely the dying remains of something old remains an open question.

In fact, in the very same world of late antiquity, the presumably antithetical phenomena of Roman “cosmopolitanism” and Germanic “gentilism” were present together; in a way they complemented each other, and medieval developments moved beyond them after a two-to-three century period of transition. While these early medieval transformations had involved the assimilation of several elements, they gradually broke up the “gentilic” structures themselves. The pace of this suppression was determined by barbarian kingdoms, which had become “Romanized” early on. They strove to demolish the dualistic Roman and barbarian social elements in a top-down fashion by various means, whereas early feudal relations undermined traditional social and ethnic bonds and frameworks from the bottom up. Over the course of the sixth and seventh centuries, this process asserted itself most swiftly in the Mediterranean region, where ethnic mixing, territorial fragmentation, and rapidly advancing social differentiation essentially broke the “gentilic” bonds along with their accompanying cultural baggage. In addition, “gentilic principles” could not prevail even in the political sphere par excellence, as is evidenced in the developments of the Franks. The regnum Francorum (since the reign of Clovis I) was not a “gentilic” construct; the line adopted by the state ignored ethnic classifications, while the notions of the “people” (populus-leudes) and of political loyalty (fidelitas) were solely aligned with the terms of alliance within a retinue, which was now elevated to a “constitutional” status. The populus Francorum, which shows up in the historical source material from the sixth to the eighth centuries, is basically
identical with the bonds of the ethnically heterogeneous subordinates of the royal retinue, broadly understood, and is far from being coextensive with the ethnic group (gens) which was ex natione Frankish according to descent. The longer prologue to the mid-eighth century Lex Salica cannot be considered to reveal a “gentilic” Frankish consciousness; its content is far more closely bound to the emerging Carolingian state-mysticism, which, by way of an epilogue, so to speak, had assimilated some of the fading and functionally distorted elements of the ancient Frankish ethnic consciousness.

As reflected in the history of ideas, three trends were contending with one another over the course of the sixth to eighth centuries: the remnants of an old “gentilism,” the integrating aspirations of early barbarian kingdoms, and the disintegrating force of territorial fragmentation. It was the latter that emerged as the winner, interring the debris of “gentilic” frameworks and early feudal societal and state structures. By the seventh century the designation of Francus, which originally possessed the ethnic connotation of “Frank,” became, generally speaking, a purely political, or “state,” notion, while in another (social) dimension it became significantly reduced (Franci became a term sometimes used to refer to the elite of the whole empire, at other times it was a collective designation for the body of yeomen, the exercitus Francorum). At the same time, the third trend—“the territorialization of the concept of people” (E. Ewig)—asserted itself more strongly, narrowing the designation still further to the subjects of a smaller dominion (ducatus Franciae). Alongside this, the notions of gens and nation had become radically transformed: the emergence of a feudal territory was replacing the foundering “gentilic” and early feudal state frameworks and the ensemble of its subjects began to be regarded now as one and the same people or a “nationality” (e.g., natio Aquitana). This also applied to less developed areas (gentes ultra Rhenum), where, through the ninth and tenth centuries, the original individual tribal units (i.e., the Swabians, Bavarians, or Saxons) were essentially transformed into territorial configurations, the collectivity of subjects within a tribal duchy ("Stammesherzogtum"). Within this new framework a new tradition arose with dynamics that adjusted to itself the old topoi expressing the concept of “people.” Thus, genus and natio became designations of provincial origin or “domicile,” lingua started to mean regional dialect, mores, consuetudines or leges the territory’s legal customs and customs more generally (coutumes de pays, Landessitten). Meanwhile, the contours of Europe’s great “nations” were only starting to come into view, here and there, without as yet being conscious notions or affecting the allegiances of the population. There was a
long transitional period in Western Europe’s history, roughly between the eighth and the thirteenth centuries, when one can no longer speak about a “gentile” group consciousness, but neither did a “national” one as yet exist: citizens were divided up into hundreds of small provinces (nationalités provinciales), which frequently had no bearing on the relationships of social or political loyalty which linked one person to another.

In the ninth–tenth centuries, at the time of this more profound reorganization of structures and concepts, new “barbarian” peoples become factors in the Eastern part and the Northern perimeter of Europe. Their ethnosophological features and social and political institutions resembled Western European conditions of the fifth–sixth centuries much more closely than did the Europa Occidentis of the age. In the case of the gens Ungarorum, a term which appears in written historical sources, the word gens now signifies something entirely different from what it did in contemporary “old Europe”; its attributes from the viewpoint of the populus Christianus and in historical sources such as annals and chronicles are similar, alluding to a similar organic unity of “barbarian” socio-political and ethnic nature as those of the early barbarians in late antiquity perceived according to the populus Romanus in that period. But did a consciousness of this unity really exist within the society itself?

The crystallizing nucleus of ethnic consciousness (as we have seen, this was the main instrument for capturing conceptually the organic nature of “society” under barbarian conditions) was the belief in a community of descent. Critical examination of historical sources and ethnological findings have now established that the legend of Hunor-Magyar, which survived in Hungarian chronicles, is indeed a genuine folk legend (vis-à-vis the majority of its motifs and structure). It is a typical variety of ethnogenetic legend of the people of the steppes which personify legends of kindred or historically connected peoples (in this particular case, probably the Onogur and the Magyar) with siblings-cum-ancestors. These are combined with other motifs and help to preserve dimming historical memories (for instance, Belar, Dula princeps Alanorum). The latter indicate that the final adaptation of the legend may have occurred between the sixth and ninth centuries as the myth of a community called the Magyars (Megyeri), presumably in reference to the name itself devolving on the ethnic formation. Both in structure and in its system of motifs, the legend radically contradicts the Christian-feudal notion of the origo gentis which was taking shape in the eleventh–thirteenth centuries; it could only have been recorded at all when, under the influence of a thirteenth-century European trend, naïve folk elements
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got incorporated in theories of ethnogenesis. It is thus incorrect to claim (as does Deér) that the Magyar people had no consciousness of their origins that was independent of their ruling dynasty. Indeed, this legend and its relationship to the myth of the ruling clan’s progenitors (the Turul legend) together suggest that the popular tradition of origin was not only independent of the latter but also conceived a good deal earlier than the assumption of power by the Árpád clan. The need to consider that an intrinsic collective consciousness existed well before an “organized people” appeared at the end of the ninth century is corroborated by a tradition kept alive until the thirteenth century by the Bashkir ethnic group, which remained in the Volga region. According to the tradition, when the antecedents of the future Magyar broke off (probably centuries before the ninth century) not only was the nascent ethnic group’s principal objective touchstone, its language, present, so too was the principal subjective criterion of ethnic collectivity: group consciousness maintained through a line of common descent. From another point of view, the fact that the notion of a traditional connection to the ethnic group known as the Savirs (or Savartoi) in the Caucasus was still alive among the Magyar people even as late as around 950 confirms that a form of collective consciousness had already emerged by the time of their separation (before 750), which had survived the rupture of their geographical and political connections. All this suggests that we could expect that the tradition of descent must have been assimilated well before the ninth century. As to how that might have happened, the modern ethnogenesis of nomadic people of the steppes (e.g., the Kazakh Kirghiz, Kara–Kirghiz, and Uzbeks) may offer an analogy. Among the steppe peoples, who experience continual ethnic fluctuation, the coalescence and stability of political institutions facilitate integration of tradition. This is mainly demonstrated by the fact that the majority of the population accept identical origin myths. Looked at in respect of the thought process, this is none other than the transposition of a model of a symbolic (hypothetical) community of blood, manifested in making sense of the organic cohesion of tighter (face-to-face) groups, primarily clans, to a broader (secondary) group, the people. As the model itself—this way of perceiving the “people”—is far removed from feudal thought processes, its basis is to be sought in previous structures. The question is whether there are other signs, which would support the former existence of such an archetype in Hungarian antiquity.

The nature of the idea of the “people,” along with the notion of descent, may be found in early literacy, albeit quite inconspicuously. This distinguishes it fundamentally from Christian and feudal notions. Around 1100 one can infer that
A genus Hungarorum is determined by notions of language and origins or descent (lingua et natio), independent from territorial factors, terms of subordination, or social and legal conditions. Regardless of which segment is considered, the archaic framework of this notion differs from the prevailing categories in which “people” (populus, gens) is perceived at the time. The equivalent of genus in ancient Hungarian is the word fajzat or nemzet. The latter (the root nem is most likely of Iranian origin) had probably already appeared in most ancient Hungarian as nem-zet, with an original meaning of “breeding” or “product of breeding.” In ancient Hungarian it is only one of the terms that indicate affinity; the notion of a “kinship group” or clan was conveyed through terms like genus, stirps, or progenies, and native or offspring, spawn and scion, were szülött, ivadék, and sarf. During this era the word also acquired the broader connotation of “people” (nation or gens). This was used more specifically as an alternate to “nemzetség,” or nationality, which had a distinctly different shade of meaning from that of the much vaguer nép. Such links, which can be found in the earliest surviving linguistic records of Hungarian, are only explicable by positing the existence of even more archaic conceptual formulations. In contrast with feudal conceptions, “nemzetség” and “nép” were understood to be intrinsically connected. At this time, a concept corresponding to nemzetség (nationality) was fashioned; this group designation engendered the notion of a broader ethnic bond of a “nép,” or “people.” Authoritative ethnogenetic studies have, of course, demonstrated that the historical process was more likely to have been the reverse: artificial (political) assimilation preceded the evolution of the naïve “organic” paradigm. But is there any evidence for this, and which period may decisively be considered to be the final one in Hungarian prehistory (the sixth to ninth centuries)?

The idea that the Hungarian people appeared out of an ethnic conglomeration by means of a late ninth-century Turkic-style “organization of the people” stems largely from a particular interpretation of events in Chapter 38 of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus's De Administrando Imperio, which projected its narrative to the final decades of the ninth century. This would, however, contradict the circumstances described in the earliest group of Muslim sources (c. 870) and it would also be in opposition to the insights obtained through evidence from the field of archaeology and historical linguistics. The archaeological legacy of the Magyars, who occupied the territory of modern-day Hungary, reveals the impact of relative homogeneity that traverses all societal divisions, be they horizontal (tribal, clan) or vertical (social), which testifies that their organic com-
nity of common ethnic traditions had been existing for quite some time. Moreover, the fact that the Magyar people linguistically assimilated the indigenous population of the Carpathian Basin fairly rapidly (over the course of two or three centuries) can only be explained by accepting the presumption that the region was settled by an already stratified society, relatively homogeneous both in terms of language and general traditions. These contradictions have been resolved now that more recent research completed by Károly Czeglédy has found the key to Constantine’s interpretation. Inasmuch as the motifs in question (attack by the Kangars, breakaway of the Savirs) do not relate to more recent developments but older (sixth to eighth centuries?) historical memories, while the whole account is viewed after making allowance partly for the condensed nature of a legend of naïve historical memory (József Deér), partly for tenth-century distortions with dynastic pretensions (György Györffy), it is possible to discern in these motifs the heterogeneous relics of a longer period of time (the Khazar era of the Magyar people), and the need to postulate a one-off “organization of the people” may be cast aside. A deeper familiarity with the background and nature of the Magyar institute of dual kingship (itself of Turkic-Khazar origin) will reinforce the probability that a uniform ethnic entity called the Magyeri—as it appears in written sources from c. 870 onwards (Al Džaihānī’s Book of Roads and Kingdoms)—had already organized itself into a fairly distinct and well-defined formation both geographically and politically during the period of Khazar sovereignty (seventh and eighth centuries). Furthermore, secession from the Khazar Kaganate may well not have been a discrete incident (c. 830) but quite a prolonged process, only the final chapter of which is known with any reliability. The idea that the Hungarian people matured under a “Turkic” political framework does not refute, in fact it supports, the postulate of a relative separation and secession of their ruling organization during the Khazar era, which may have been the political condition for an integration of ethnic traditions over several centuries.

There is no foundation to Deér’s thesis that there existed a distinct “Eastern nomadic perception of people,” which, under the magic spell of a nomad despot, forged an “amorphous human mass” into a unity of allegiance but that still remained devoid of the intrinsic quality of ethnic group consciousness. This can be refuted with an analysis of precisely those early Turkic Orkhon inscriptions (from c. 720, 732, and 734) that were invoked to support the theory. In the conceptual system of these runes, the categories of *il*—“empire,” or its semi-abstract variant (“the *khagan*’s authority”)—and that of *bodun*—“people”—are clearly differentiated. The latter is also a noun and collective designation for various groups and phenomena, ranging in meaning from a vague “multitude, crowd, persons” to a more broadly understood notion of the “sum total of subjects within the Turkic dominion”: that of mythical Turkic ancestors and that of present-day Turks (in this instance the meaning is ambiguous). Apart from this, it is also used for any ethnic group that is designated with a concrete term within and beyond the Turkic sphere of authority and for any conquered tribal group or individual tribe, and finally even for various cross sections of the “common people” in general, as opposed to the men of rank. There is no question here of some one-dimensional perception of people. Equally, a certain consistency can be discerned within this broad semantic sphere. The inscriptions also distinguish between a distinctive array of notions in a political sense. There are two kinds of people: one having its own *khagan* and ruling organization (*il*) and another which lacks them. The meaning of conquest according to the Turkic conceptual view is that it is synonymous with the murder of the *khagan* and the “seizure of the *il*.” The more specific connotation of this common expression is readily demonstrable in the texts: extermination of the people’s ruling class and retinue (*buyruq*) and its supplanting by a new Turkic governor and group of warriors. According to this view, the subjugated ethnic group itself (for example, a tribal alliance) was included among the “people” (*bodun*) within the power structure of the empire; more specifically, they kept their own established bonds, referred to occasionally with the term “beys and people” (*bäglär bodun*). The Turkic “organization of the people” always linked the people to the *khagan*’s authority through a thin ruling class, leaving—both de facto and subjectively—their “organic” (clan or tribal) structure intact. From another angle, which is to say, not from the authoritative viewpoint of the *khagan* but from that of the individual, this has also been confirmed by inscriptions found in the Yenisei re-

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9 Deér, “Közösségérzés és nemzettsadat,” 93–111.
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gion, in which the term “my people” (bodunim) always occurs together with kin, fellow warriors, and the bey, or in other words, in a number of primary “We” groups (sociologically this might be, for instance, a tribe or tribal group). The meanings of these terms are clearly divorced from terms of loyalty towards a political structure or empire (älä, il) or ruler (qan). Whether a steppe people existing within a Turkic political structure (boden) was necessarily an ethnic unit is another matter, as, to a significant degree, this was a function of the stability of the framework of the people in question. There is every reason to believe that the progenitors of the Magyar people came under Turkic-Khazar subjection in a similar manner as the “organization of people” is described in the Orkhon inscriptions. Originally the kündü and a Turkic-Khazar retinue were responsible for the “management” of the ethnic group connected with the Megyer-Megyère tribe within the framework of the Khazar Khagan’s empire (il); this subordination had no impact on the internal cohesiveness of the society, which possessed tribal and clannish bonds (“beys and people”). Neither the tribal names nor the Magyar tribal arrangements themselves indicate any connection with Khazar power. Likewise, precisely the names of those two dignitaries (the gyula and the bő or “clan chief”) who were connected with internal legal and military organization and clanship organization cannot be derived from common Turkic, which reflected Khazar influence. When the Hungarian dual kingship seceded in the early ninth century it was not an “amorphous human mass” (Deér) that received a substantially new framework for its political organization, but a people that had been pursuing a relatively independent life for a prolonged period of time and became—in the expression of the Orkhon classification scheme—“a people possessing power and a ruler” (ellîq qayantîq bodun).

All these aspects throw light on the formation of the Hungarian people with regard to the chronological, geographical, and political conditions of this decisive period (the sixth to ninth centuries), this mysterious black box of early Hungarian history, the details of which are little-known, though an aggregate of recent research offers (or would allow us to provide) new avenues of explanation for the development of an ethnic community of tradition. The political and power spheres are merely a frame and condition for ethnic processes, however, not direct agents. Where then is one to seek the social sphere par excellence which, in this very period, has ethnically assimilated a substantial number of associating foreign elements? The ethnogenesis of the nomadic people of Central Asia in modern times shows that the clan was the social unit which, when receiving newcomers, whether individual or group, into a community of tradi-
tions (inter alia the fictive blood community), also assimilated them in a broader sense into a fabric of bonds uniting the people. The organic connection between the notions of “nemzetség” (“clan”) and “nép” (“people”) in Hungarian antiquity likewise point in this direction. The Magyar clan of this era was not, of course, a primitive group defined by consanguinity but rather, like nomadic structures at much the same stage in history, was a multifaceted and, with regard to its beginnings, “inorganic” social unit, in which the image of a symbolic (hypothetical) blood relationship, embedded in the wider entity of a cultic community of tradition, had, in fact, the purpose of expressing the “corporate” nature of the group. In contrast with what has been speculated, it is most likely that the name of this clan during this period is one that has survived in the regions that have preserved the most archaic traditions and can be verified in ancient Hungarian: nemzet. It is more than likely that this term supplanted the earlier Ugrian-era names (cf. had and szer) due precisely to the fundamental reorganization of the clan structure. This organism in particular should be regarded as a principal instrument of ethnic integration, as with other nomadic peoples. Due to its considerable flexibility and versatility (for instance, in its exclusion of impoverished members or acceptance of wealthy newcomers) this kind of group can also become an important agent of assimilation: a newcomer symbolically becomes part of the blood community (cf. acceptance of confraternity, atyafiúvá fogadás, and blood brotherhood, vérint való testvéréség) and the clan’s community of tradition, the mediator of which is language. In proportion to the extent that the political bonds which tied the clans together were durable, and were tradition-generating elements in themselves, the clan became the mediator of a broader ethnic tradition. This is the probable explanation for the emergence of the notion of nemzet(ség) among the ancient Hungarian people: by extending the attributes of the narrower (primary) “We” group, the notion of a wider (secondary) “We” group was created and perceived as a bond of identical quality. That this was also accompanied by a degree of transference of group loyalty does not stand in need of special justification.

The name hétnagyar (“Seven Magyars”) borne by the Magyar people prior to their arrival in the territory of modern Hungary and the designation of the ethnic framework as nemzet(ség) signal a two-pronged ethnic development: on the one hand, there was political integration, a procedure in which the tribes were linked together into a more robust ruling institution, and on the other, there was integration of ethnic traditions, the internal catalysts of which were the clans. The union of these two provisos is made manifest in the probable fact
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that consciousness of the people’s kinship was sanctioned by a broad acceptance of the traditions (including the recognition of common descent) of the politically dominant *Magyar* tribe. Thus, through political factors, a model of “social sensibility” rooted in a well-defined myth of consanguinity thereby penetrated “historical” (and equally non-historical) contexts. Conjectures may also be formed about further integral organic elements of this model, as with similar “gentilic” frameworks. As the traditions documented by Constantine Porphyrogenitus and by Anonymus two and a half centuries later both testify, a naïve historical consciousness (keeping track of the people’s “historical existence”) beyond the tradition of common descent crystallized around the wars and heroic deeds of ancestors (*fortia facta et bella*). Heroic cantos (*cantilenas*) and legends (*fabulae*) were not merely parts of the legacy of clan and tribal subgroups, but also conveyed to the entire people the awareness of their common historical destiny. The epic material was preserved at times merely in traces, at times in an already significantly modified form. It indicates, even in its fragmented condition, how this naïve historical consciousness was partly rooted in the symbolism of the steppe nomads, reflecting the way of life and mode of production of the entire clan establishment (e.g., the legend of the white horse), and partly in the pagan body of beliefs (e.g., the legend of Lél) and in the notion of the people’s cohesion and related political ethos (e.g., the legend of Botond); in other words, it was derived from the relationships defining the ideological character of “gentilism.” What may be regarded as the original version of the legend of the white horse shows quite tangibly the extent to which the symbols of a well-defined system of social values were elements of a sacred and political sphere, and suggests the degree to which, together, they constituted an ethnic bond. Of course, such interrelationships had already largely broken down by the time these myths got reformulated in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries; their significance had faded, the addition of foreign elements had increased, and with a socially diminished status they became part of the mentality of the common people, the *rustici*. And yet the form this consciousness took may still be deciphered in a more or less intact form by considering the mental constructs behind the so-called pagan uprisings in 1046 and 1060–61. These events may be considered the last overt, albeit distorted, historical manifestations of “gentilism.” The rebels’ goals and aspirations were shaped, in part, by a cognitive model that was still wholly derived from a pre-millennium-era schema. This was characterized by an archaic ethnosociological “We-consciousness” entrenched in a cohesion of traditions and accentuated by expressive outward trappings. It centered on “ideolog-
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ical” elements of the pagan body of beliefs and the legal system of the barbarian legal framework. We may infer from written sources that these elements found a conceptual casing for this comprehensive whole in the broad and undifferentiated category of the law (“an ethically sanctioned, socially normative tradition”). The notion of the old law (like that of the refrain of a well-known Hungarian minstrel song), which played a central role in the “ideology” of the uprisings and took on the function of a political slogan, as it were, by the middle of the eleventh century, was the retrograde expression of a distorted and weathered store of ideas. However, originally—before the millennium—it served as an essential component of a “social sensibility” of a more coherent cognitive framework, according to which the symbolic community of descent referred to Magyar (magyeri) was a nemzet (ség), a legal community with one and the same law. That is to say, it was a uniform “society” (and from the individual’s point of view the widest circle of the “We” category), which kept track of its own continuity through inherent notions of tradition and customs. In the wake of the post-millennial reorganization, this “gentilic” outlook on life and cognitive framework breaks down, first losing its former cohesion, then, having deteriorated, sinking in the social sense, until finally, after the thirteenth century, even its traces have been swallowed up.

The Christian-feudal cognitive world which arose in the eleventh century possessed a completely different ideological character and classification system. Yet, at one and the same time, out of the remnants of a “gentilic” ethnic consciousness—radically transformed with regard to its social and ideological function—a distinctively “national” medieval cognitive world is constructed on the basis of thirteenth-century social and intellectual transformations. As to how this could occur under these conditions—that is a subject for separate inquiry.10

Translated by Tim Wilkinson

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10 On this, see “Theoretical Elements in Master Simon of Kéza’s Gesta Hungarorum (1282–1285),” in this volume.