# An Alternative Proposal Explaining the Origin of the Word and Social Group 'Székely'

Tamás Keszi

Intercisa Museum, 4 Városháza tér, 2400 Dunaújváros, Hungary; keszitamas@gmail.com

**Abstract**. The word 'Székely' or 'Szekler' was formed from the Hungarian verb *szökik* (jump, move fast, escape, run away) using the suffix '-l/ly' creating deverbal nouns. The original meaning of the word is fast-moving (person), fugitive, or runaway. The formation of the social group began in the eleventh century. The process was brought about the establishment of the landlord system and frequent wars which led to the escapes and 'wanderings' of slaves and free people coerced into bondage. The refugees mainly settled in the sparsely populated border region, where the institutional vacuum offered them favourable conditions to avoid the control of the feudal state. Here, the groups of different ethnic origins acquired a unified identity. We can understand the process of the formation of the community by using the conceptual frameworks of 'unintended consequences, self-organization, spontaneous order, and exaptation.' The spontaneous process may have been replaced by the conscious organizational efforts of the Hungarian kings only around 1100. This was followed by the first mention of the Székelys in the Battle of Olšava in 1116.

**Keywords**: Székely/Szekler, fugitive, state formation, *üzbég/izbég*, 'wandering,' frontier, institutional vacuum, Cossacks, unintended consequences, self-organization

The origin of the Székely/Szekler[1] name and group represents a more intriguing problem than that of any other Hungarian ethnographic unit. The original explanation maintained that, as suggested by the original sources of the thirteenth century, the Székelys had lived in the Carpathian Basin already at the time of Árpád's Conquest, they were King Attila's people, and the descendants of the Huns. The Székely issue is traditionally closely linked to the origin of the Hungarians and the date/dates of their settlement in the Carpathian Basin, therefore it carries a strong emotional charge. The literature on the topic has recently been reviewed by several researchers.[2]

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1     The German Sekler/Szekler derives from the Hungarian Székely and this form entered the international literature.

2     Kordé, "A székelység;" Benkő, *A középkori Székelyföld*, 12–15.

According to Loránd Benkő and László Klima, the structure of the word refers to Hungarian formation, and this is also my starting point.[3]

## The etymology

The stem of the word Székely is the Hungarian verb *szök(ik)*. Its etymon is the Turkic verb *sek-*.[4] The occurrence of the version *szëk(ik)* is well documented until the nineteenth century; its meaning is 'jumps, dances, escapes, leaves unnoticed, breaks out, or goes out.'[5] Already in Old Hungarian, the stem was supplied with several suffixes.

The deverbal suffix '-l/ly' is connected to *szëk-* with a short, closed *-ë-*.[6] This formative may be added to intransitive verbs, resulting in a nomen agentis: *akadály, apály, aszály, dagály*, etc. In some of the nouns formed in a similar way *(fogoly, fonal, lepel)*, the second vowel retains its brevity, just as in Székely. The word *szëkëly* formed in this way might mean 'fast-moving (person), fugitive, or runaway.'

The verb *csökik* offers us a good analogy: it is also a verb of Turkic origin, also connected with the suffix '-ik', and is similarly intransitive.[7] The original meaning of its derivative *csekély* is a 'river section with shallow water, ford.'[8] So *csekély* can also be considered a *nomen agentis*. Another similarity is that a short '-ë-' was fixed in the first vowel of the suffixed word, while '-ö-' is considered a normative vowel shift in the verb. The place name Szekcső[9] has also preserved the original vowel of the stem *szëk(ik)*.

According to Katalin D. Bartha, the suffix '-l/ly' was no longer used in the Old Hungarian period. The word *csekély* clearly proves that the suffix was still active when at least one group of Turkic loanwords was borrowed. Neither the Turkic *čök-* nor *sek-* bear any Chuvash, Common Turkic, or other phonetic characteristics indicating the date of the reception. The borrowing may go back to the period before the Hungarian Conquest, that is, the late Proto-Hungarian period. Fugitives and fords already existed at the time, and the formation of the word *szëkëly* could precede the birth of the Székely social group by centuries. At the same time, I note that the transition between the Proto-Hungarian and the early Old Hungarian period is no longer considered a rigid boundary.[10]

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3    Klima, "A székelyek."

4    Róna-Tas and Berta, *West Old Turkic*, 815–18.

5    Szarvas and Simonyi, eds, *Nyelvtörténeti szótár*, vol. III, 322–26; Benkő, ed., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 1454.

6    D. Bartha, *Magyar szóképzés*, 73–74.

7    Benkő, ed., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 230; Róna-Tas and Berta, *West Old Turkic*, 261–65.

8    Benkő, ed., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 197.

9    Dunaszekcső (Kiss, *Földrajzi nevek*, 398); Kaposszekcső (Kiss, *Földrajzi nevek*, 684).

10   Ligeti, *A magyar nyelv*, 525; Papp, *Magyar nyelvtörténet*, 16.

The word *Székely* is first encountered as a personal name in the form of *Scichul* in the founding charter of the abbey at Bakonybél.[11] In my view, we are not dealing with a personal name derived from the name of an ethnic group,[12] but with the stigmatizing name of a servant prone to escape. Many examples of similar naming can be cited from the same period: *buta* (stupid),[13] *fattyú* (bastard),[14] *hazug* (liar),[15] *szegény* (poor),[16] *tolvaj* (thief),[17] and *tompa* (dull).[18] Other derivatives of *szökik* were also recorded as personal names (Zecuseu, Zekeu) for the first time.[19] The noun *Csángó*, meaning 'wanderer' or 'vagabond,' also first appears as an element of personal names, and later becomes the name of a Hungarian ethnographic group.[20] The disappearance of the common noun *szëkëly* may have been caused by the fact that the word took on a special meaning from the twelfth century onward. A similar process, therefore, may have taken place, as in the case of Hajdú, whose original meaning (cattle drover)[21] fell out of use after the social group Hajdúk received privileges.

The Turkic verb 'sek-' has a Turkic derivative recorded only once with a somewhat similar meaning to Székely. The sense of *sekerči* (brigand)[22] is not far from that of a 'fugitive:' a brigand is nothing but a criminal who violates social constraints and norms, and is constantly on the run from the central authority.

The original pronunciation of the word was *szëkël(y)/szëköl(y)*.[23] The stretching of the first vowel occurred after the organization of the administrative units called

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11    Benkő, ed., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 1407. In the Árpád Era, the letters 'i' and 'y' were also used to write the sound 'ë.' (Benkő, *Az Árpád-kor*, 90, 93, 101, 106–7) The letter 'u' might also denote the sound 'ö.' (Benkő, *Az Árpád-kor*, 90, 92–93, 112–16)

12    Benkő, "A székely néprésznév," 258.

13    Benkő, ed., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 150; Fehértói, *Árpád-kori*, 73.

14    Benkő, ed., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 361–62; Fehértói, *Árpád-kori*, 134.

15    Benkő, ed., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 540; Fehértói, *Árpád-kori*, 151–52.

16    Benkő, ed., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 1404; Fehértói, *Árpád-kori*, 383.

17    Benkő, ed., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 1527; Fehértói, *Árpád-kori*, 345.

18    Benkő, ed., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 1528; Fehértói, *Árpád-kori*, 345–46.

19    Benkő, ed., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 1454; Fehértói, *Árpád-kori*, 383–84.

20    Benkő, "A csángók eredete," 275–76.

21    Benkő, ed., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 512–13.

22    Róna-Tas and Berta, *West Old Turkic*, 817.

23    According to Loránd Benkő, the first vowel might have been a long open 'ē,' so he reconstructs the entire word form as *szēkël/szēköl*. (Benkő, "A székely néprésznév," 261–64) The refutation of the hypothesis that assumed a sound 'i' or 'é' in the first syllable played an important role in the formation of his opinion, on the other hand, he did not consider the possibility of a short closed 'ë.' However, the spelling during the period of the house of Árpád and Loránd Benkő's train of thought does not rule out the existence of the form *szëkël/szëköl*. For the vowel of the second syllable: Benkő, "A székely néprésznév," 262–64. The palatalization of '-l' may have taken place from the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries. (Benkő, "A székely néprésznév," 264)

*szék* (Lat. *sedes*, chair). Instances of phonetic interference in folk etimologies are well known in Hungarian, e.g., *gemkapocs/gépkapocs*. The linguistic process could not happen before the consolidation of the *szék*-system, that is, before the four-teenth century.[24] People started looking for the word *szék* in the name Székely from the end of the sixteenth century onwards.[25] Nonetheless, even in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, it was suggested that the noun Székely is related to the verb *szökik*.[26] This may indicate that in the early modern period, the pronunciation of the word fluctuated for a long time between the form *szëkëly* and *székëly*, and the pho-neme 'é' displaced the 'ë' relatively late.

This correlates well with the phonological history of the noun *szék*. It also has a Turkic origin and contained a short open 'e' initially that was elongated and turned into a long open 'ē.'[27] In the majority of Hungarian dialects, 'ē' then became a long close 'é' in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[28] The word *szék* the lengthening of the first, short close vowel of the word *szëkëly* just after this linguistic process was completed.

The thirteenth century narrative of Simon of Kéza fits well into this chronol-ogy. He relates that *after* his defeat in the battle of Krimhild, Csaba flees to Greece with the fifteen thousand Huns who survived the battle: "[…] *exercitus Chabae sic devincitus et prostratur*, quod perpauci filii Ethelae Hunique remanerent. […] Fugiit igitur Chaba cum XV millibus Hunnorum in Graeciam ad Honorium […]."[29]

Completely independent of Csaba's Huns, Simon also mentions three thou-sand Huns who fled *during* the battle: "Remanserant quoque de Hunnis virorum tria millia *ex praelio Crimildino erepti per fugae interfugium*, qui timentes occidentis nationes in campo Chigle usque Arpad permanserunt, qui se ibi non Hunnos, sed Zaculos vocaverunt."[30]

In other words, they 'ran away' *(elszöktek)* from the battle. This is why they do not follow Csaba, and 'in their fear,' they will take on a new name. Although there is no clear indication that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the escape and the new name, it can be inferred from the context. Otherwise, it makes no sense why the author separates the Székelys from the defeated Csaba even before the end of the battle. The context suggests that Simon still understood exactly the original

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24    Györffy, "Székelyek," 48; Kristó, ed., *Korai magyar*, 624.

25    Sebestyén, "A székelyek," 33–35.

26    Sebestyén, "A székelyek," 34. This also suggests that the vowel of the first syllable was originally 'ë' rather than 'ē.'

27    Benkő, ed., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 1406.

28    Benkő, "A székely néprésznév," 261–62.

29    Szentpétery, ed., *Scriptores,* vol. I, 162.

30    Szentpétery, ed., *Scriptores,* vol. I, 162.

meaning of the word Székely, and this resulted in the birth of the aetiological story. His procedure is consistent with the medieval approach, i.e., ethnonyms may refer to certain qualities and actions of people.[31]

Dezső Pais attributed a similar meaning to the word Székely.[32] There are two significant differences between our opinions. On the one hand, according to Pais, the etymon of the word is entirely Turkic: the Turkic suffix '-l' is connected to the Turkic verb *sik-/säk-*. On the other hand, in his view, this Turkic-speaking Sikil/ Säkil ethnic group was identical with the Chun/Hun people of the Avar population who fled from the Franks. The consequence of these two hypotheses is that, according to Dezső Pais, the Székelys were originally a Turkic-speaking ethnic group that joined the Hungarians during the Conquest.

In my view, the origin of the Székelys is to be found in completely different historical circumstances.

## Üzbégs and other runaways

One feature of Hungarian history in the eleventh century is 'wandering' *(kóborlás)*.[33] According to charters and laws, in parallel to the development of the landlord system, masses of people were forced to leave their homes if they wanted to avoid subjugation to the new owners appointed by the king. The path of the groups that wanted to preserve their complete freedom naturally led to the peripheral regions of the country, where the royal power followed them with some delay.[34] The peak of the process can be tied to the second half of the eleventh century.[35]

Chapter 25 of St Stephen's First Book of Laws (BL) already mentions *servi* and *milites* who ran away *(fugerit)* from their masters.[36] Chapter 2 of Saint Ladislaus's Third BL[37] mentions the group of '*wzbegs*'.[38] The word, of Slavic origin means 'runaway or fugitive.' Chapter 13 mentions the *joccedeth*, who collected *res fugitivae*, including *fugitivorum hominum*—without reference to their legal status.[39] Chapter

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31    Barney et al., eds, *Etymologies of Isidore*, 9.2.41–132.

32    Hasan and Pais, "A székely név," 208–9.

33    Kristó, *A magyar* állam, 347–50; Kristó, *Magyarország*, 66, 128–29, 142–43, 156.

34    Kristó, ed., *Korai magyar*, 361; Kristó, *Magyarország*, 151–52.

35    Kristó, *A magyar* állam, 349–50.

36    Závodszky, *Törvények*, 148.

37    Závodszky, *Törvények*, 174.

38    Kristó, ed., *Korai magyar*, 298.

39    Závodszky, *Törvények*, 177.

29 already mentions *servi fugitivi* separately.[40] Chapter 14 of Ladislaus's Second BL deals with thefts by *servi profugi*.[41] In the charter of the Garamszentbenedek Abbey, *omnis vagus et profugus* are mentioned separately.[42] Chapter 19 of Coloman's First BL talks about settlers driven from their land *(veteres coloni eiecti)*,[43] Chapter 39 mentions fugitive castle peoples *(de civibus ad fugam facientem)*,[44] chapters 41–44 use the term 'wanderer' *(vagum [servum])* to denote runaway servants.[45] Thus, it seems that although in some cases legal documents tried to distinguish between 'wanderers' and 'fugitives,' it proved impossible to separate the two groups. One term primarily describes the lifestyle of the group, the other refers to how the community grew. In terms of its composition, we find both free persons and former slaves among them.

According to Attila Zsoldos, in contrast to the traditional view outlined above, 'wandering', at least in the form we all learned about, simply did not exist.[46] He proposes to modify the previous model on four important points. His first comment concerns the social composition of 'wanderers,' because as he argues, we find no trace of free 'wanderers' in the decrees. I would emphasize that the essence of my hypothesis would be unaffected if these certain 'wanderers' were only recruited from servants. Nevertheless, the above-quoted law of St Stephen makes a clear distinction between fugitive *servi* and fugitive *milites* who were free beyond dispute. Chapter 22 of St Stephen's First BL also talks about forcing free people into servitude.[47] If the victim did not want to wait for the end of the legal process, which may have been uncertain in terms of its outcome, he probably chose to escape as an immediate solution. He probably did not have much to lose, because it was not he who received compensation for the illegal restriction of rights, but the king and the *ispán* ('*comes*,' the head of a county).

Another important conclusion drawn by Attila Zsoldos concerns the timeline, since the expulsion of free people persisted in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[48] As a result, he also reckons that from the eleventh century, significant groups of free persons were forced to leave their former residences, although he excludes them from the category of 'wanderers'—unjustifiably, in my opinion. The persistence of

40    Závodszky, *Törvények*, 180.

41    Závodszky, *Törvények*, 170.

42    Györffy, ed., *Diplomata Hungariae*, 218.

43    Závodszky, *Törvények*, 186.

44    Závodszky, *Törvények*, 188.

45    Závodszky, *Törvények*, 189.

46    Zsoldos, "Kóborlás," 227.

47    Závodszky, *Törvények*, 148.

48    Zsoldos, "Kóborlás," 225–26.

the process only means that the possible exogenous growth of the Székely groups did not stop in the late eleventh century. The fact that the Székelys were relocated into Transylvania and their collective privileges were recognized may have put an end to the joining of new 'wanderers.' The resettlement—in addition to populating the eastern areas of the kingdom and protecting the border there—may also have had the positive side effect that the group no longer offered an example to follow[49] for those who tried to remove themselves from the feudal system.

Thirdly, Attila Zsoldos believes that the cause of 'wandering' can be found in the wars of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, rather than the development of a new economic and social structure.[50] As will be discussed later, the state of war also contributed to the formation of similar social groups in other eras and places.[51] The myth of the origin of the Székelys states specifically that they fled from a war. But again, I see no reason why we should not take notice of the documents according to which the people living on the donated land could have been forced to leave even during a peaceful change of ownership. In history, it is rare for a social process to have a single cause, and sometimes it is difficult to decide whether different phenomena have the same ultimate cause.

Finally, Attila Zsoldos considers it impossible that 'wandering' should have played a role in populating the border areas, because whoever fled the war, probably ran wherever he could.[52] This is a logical argumentation, against which a similar reason would be sufficient: for those who want to avoid the horrors of war in the long term—especially if there is nowhere to return to—uninhabited or sparsely populated areas provide an ideal destination. The warring parties usually waste less resources on the destruction of such areas: because less loot can be expected there, and it is also more difficult to supply the armies in medieval conditions.[53] Among others, the latter reason contributed to the creation of uninhabited areas between tribes and states (Hung. *gyepűelve*). The next section will discuss the historical examples providing evidence that the frontier may indeed be a target for various refugee groups.

In addition to the Latin terms *vagus, profugus*, we also know the term *üzbég*, which is of Slavic origin. This naming may have been used in territories where a significant Slavic population lived and participated in the 'wanderings.' The settlements whose names can be associated with the phenomenon occur in these areas (Nyitra and Sáros Counties).[54] Although we only know Latin and Slavic terms from

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49    Scott, *The Art*, 6.
50    Zsoldos, "Kóborlás," 227.
51    Kopytoff, "The Internal," 7.
52    Zsoldos, "Kóborlás," 227.
53    Scott, *The Art*, 178–79, 182.
54    Kristó, "Üzbég," 63–64.

written sources, there had to be a Hungarian word to designate 'wanderers,' since the formation of the feudal state primarily affected the Hungarian-speaking population living in the central parts of the Carpathian Basin. I would argue that this term was *székël(y)/széköl(y)*.

Gyula Kristó first discussed the relationship of Székelys and 'wanderers.' He argued that a large number of Hungarians who wanted to preserve their freedom joined the Székelys, who were originally a Turkic people.[55] Elek Benkő rejects this possibility because in his view joining the Székelys could hardly have been a matter of free choice for a large number of non-free masses, neither on the side of the royal power nor on that of the Székelys.[56] His criticism is based on the hypotheses that a) a unified Székely status existed in the eleventh century, b) the royal power and the Székelys themselves wanted to exclude anyone from the opportunity to join them. However, there is no historical, linguistic, or archaeological data to indicate that the Székely status and privileges existed before 1100. Most of our 'knowledge' about the early Székelys is nothing more than a set of hypotheses cemented into a received opinion. Moreover, the anthropological data presented below also support the heterogeneous origin of the late medieval Székelys.

Gábor Vékony considered the Székelys a Hungarian-speaking group that lived within the borders of the Carolingian Empire.[57] The existence of the Székelys in Abaúj and Bihar Counties makes this hypothesis improbable. There is no indication that the Székely people once formed a huge, contiguous bloc in Transdanubia. Their patchy distribution corresponds mainly to the edge of the Hungarian-speaking area in the eleventh century,[58] not the extent of the Carolingian Empire.

Those living in areas adjacent to the border region were more successful in escaping the *joccedeth* than fugitives living in the central area.[59] This is why we find the Székelys mainly around the *gyepűelve* (uninhabited frontier zone),[60] and not because they were settled there by a central authority. Only later did these areas receive landlords; consequently for a while free people could create independent communities and settlements here.

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55   Kristó, *A székelyek*, 149–50.

56   Benkő, *A középkori Székelyföld*, 68.

57   Vékony, "A Kárpát-medence," 1335.

58   Benkő, "A székelység szerepe," 273.

59   Suitable *refugium* and *nonstate space* might be the marshy, forested regions abundantly found in the Carpathian Basin. (Scott, *The Art*, 6, 13, 25–26, 130–32, 182, 190, 261). The appearance of the Székelys in the interior of the country can also be inferred from the founding letter of Garamszentbenedek Abbey quoted above: *vagi* and *profugi* could even settle on church estates (Györffy, ed., *Diplomata Hungariae*, 218).

60   Györffy, "Székelyek," 46.

## The role of the frontier

The institutional vacuum on the uninhabited, sparsely populated frontiers[61] surrounding the territory of settled peoples and states, sometimes created for defensive purposes (Hung. *gyepűelve*), always provided an opportunity for the formation of new ethnic groups.[62] Refugees trying to escape state power may have come from different ethnicities, but their shared fate would forge a new unity amongst them. The best-known examples are perhaps the 'apîrû[63] and the Cossacks,[64] who, like the Székelys, are inseparable from military service. In the case of the Székelys, the reason for this is not that they were an annexed auxiliary people, but that, to preserve their freedom, they moved to a border region where they could only count on the protection provided by themselves. The example of the Cossacks is also perfect because, despite their Slavic language, the group—molded from different ethnic and social elements—formed an independent ethnic identity against the Russians and the Poles who spoke a related language, just as the Székelys did, as linguistically inseparable from the Hungarians. The Cossacks did not perform services for their rulers by being assigned to other military formations, but—like the Székelys—preserved their separate standing as auxiliary troops. On the other hand, there is a clear connection between 'Cossack' and the name Kazakh. One of the possible etymons of the latter is the verb *qaz-*, which means 'to wander.'[65] In other words, the Cossacks were also 'wanderers, fugitives' who, like the Székelys, preserved their freedom. Since they settled on the borderlands of rival kingdoms, it is not surprising that they appear for the first time as border guards in Russian-language sources.[66]

Groups fleeing central power, organizing themselves into communities, and developing an independent ethnic identity were created not only under nomadic conditions. The phenomenon is well documented on almost every continent. The name of the Seminole Indians may come from the Spanish *cimarrón* meaning 'fugitive.' Originally, it was probably used to denote groups of different origins that tried to remove themselves from the authority of the Spanish, British, and American states, and therefore migrated to the sparsely populated Florida.[67] In the same category we

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61  Kopytoff, "The Internal," 25.

62  Gerhard, "Frontier"; Kopytoff, "The Internal."

63  Rowton, "Dimorphic Structure"; Bottéro, "Les Habiru"; Rainey, "Unruly Elements"; Na'aman, "Ḫabiru."

64  Scott, *The Art*, 259–61. Lee, *Qazaqlïq* examines the phenomenon of *qazaqlïq* and the ethnogenesis process of Cossacks and Kazakhs in detail.

65  Lee, *Qazaqlïq*, 21–23.

66  Lee, *Qazaqlïq*, 41.

67  Frank, *Seminole*, 15, 31–32, 41–43.

have the 'maroon' communities formed in different parts of the American continent, which were founded by escaped slaves.[68] According to Igor Kopytoff, the majority of today's African societies can be traced back to processes in the frontiers.[69] In Southeast Asia, a separate concept ('Zomia') was created for the geographical area that, due to its difficult access, offered refuge to groups fleeing the territories of neighbouring states during the past millennia.[70]

The reason behind this process is simple: refugees are forced to create communities of a certain minimum size, which can provide security to the residents.[71] We have some decrees from the era of the Árpáds that can also be interpreted as showing that the organization of 'wanderers' into communities had begun also in Hungary. Chapter 19 of St Ladislaus's First BL decrees that the people of villages that have left their churches must be forced to return.[72] Chapter 13 of the synod held during the time of Coloman contains a similar order.[73] Some researchers associate the phenomenon of 'wandering villages' with shifting cultivation,[74] others with nomadic, animal-keeping communities.[75] Gyula Kristó argues that the relocation carried out due to the exhaustion of the soil would not have been restricted by law, since there was a natural and economic constraint behind the phenomenon. His truth is supported by Chapter 11 of St Ladislaus's First BL: if a village was too far from the church, a single person could represent the entire community at Sunday and holiday masses.[76] It seems that the decrees of Ladislaus and Coloman were applied not to communities that changed their location within a closed area, but to those who wanted to leave the surroundings of all churches—and not a particular one.[77] Apart from this, their livelihood could still be based on farming. Examples from Africa, Asia, and America show that slash-and-burn agriculture may be due to a deliberate decision because it is easier to avoid state control, especially taxation, with more mobility, be it a hunter-gatherer, animal breeder, or soil-shifting lifestyle.[78] Recognizing this, central authorities—similarly to the rulers of the era of the Árpáds—always tried to

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68    Kopytoff, *The Internal*, 76; Scott, *The Art*, 25.

69    Kopytoff, *The Internal*, 7; González-Ruibal, *Archaeology of Resistance*.

70    Scott, *The Art*.

71    Scott, *The Art*, 185.

72    Závodszky, *Törvények*, 161.

73    Závodszky, *Törvények*, 208.

74    Szabó, *A középkori*, 58; Kristó, ed., *Korai magyar*, 208.

75    Kristó, *Magyarország*, 158–59; Kristó, *A tizenegyedik század*, 147–48; Kristó, ed., *Korai magyar*, 615, 667.

76    Kristó, *A tizenegyedik század*, 146; Závodszky, *Törvények*, 160.

77    Kristó, *A tizenegyedik század*, 147–48.

78    Scott, *The Art*, 182–207.

force villages to remain in place and coerced their population to switch to farming methods that made control feasible.[79]

Chapter 1 of St Ladislaus' Third BL may deal partly with the inhabitants of these villages: "Post hec inquiratur a cunctis optimatibus et populo, si quam villam sciant furto diffamatam […]."[80] Similarly, Coloman's decree 62 does not speak of individual thieves, but of a village of thieves.[81] Stolen goods were easiest to sell by those groups who lived in the border region, far from state control.[82] Due to the mass occurrence of this delict, it may have been necessary to strictly ban animal trade in the border region.[83] In any case, it is clear from St Ladislaus' above-mentioned decree fourteen that runaway servants were a security problem.

The group identity of the Székelys that emerged from the eleventh century is the explanation for the fact that in medieval sources their name regularly appears in the company of ethnic groups. This is why Gyula Kristó insisted on the 'skl etymon and that the Székelys were originally a Turkic-speaking tribe, rejecting the linguistic opinions.[84] But the case of the Hajdúk shows how easily an independent identity can develop under convenient circumstances: the first appearance of the word can be dated to around 1500;[85] a century later they were already settled down and received privileges. Subsequently, they kept their identity until the modern era; in military campaigns they fought in independent troop—just as the Székelys. Michael B. Rowton proposes the use of the term 'social ethnonym' for such group names (Hebrew, Cossack, etc.).[86]

The formation of the Hajdúk cannot be separated from the wars of the sixteenth century. With reference to the opinion of Attila Zsoldos, I would accept that similar circumstances may have played a major role in the appearance of the Árpád Era 'wanderers.' Although different ethnicities may have participated in the genesis of the Hajdúk, there is no doubt that, from a linguistic point of view, they form one of the ethnographic groups of Hungarians. Gyula Kristó cites László Kósa and Antal Filep,[87] who speak of "real and ostensible ethnographic units explained by regional differences." In their perception, Székelys and the Hajdúk belong to the

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79    Scott, *The Art*, 5, 12, 39, 179–80.

80    Závodszky, *Törvények*, 173.

81    Závodszky, *Törvények*, 191.

82    For the perks of settling in the border region, see González-Ruibal, *Archaeology of Resistance*, 83–85.

83    Závodszky, *Törvények*, 170–71.

84    Kristó, *A székelyek*, 11–23.

85    Benkő, ed., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 512.

86    Rowton, "Dimorphic Structure," 15–20.

87    Kristó, *Tájszemlélet*, 6.

same category. In the case of the Székelys, it is therefore not necessary to assume that they were joined auxiliary people with an independent tribal organization before the eleventh century.

László Révész drew attention to the fact that among the presumed early Székely settlement areas in Western Hungary, only the area around Lake Fertő contains archaeological finds dated to the first half of the tenth century. Because in the Őrség, Őrvidék, and Göcsej, the finds related to Hungarians appear in the second half of the tenth century, it may be ruled out that the ancestors of the Székelys living in Transylvania[88] were resettled at this time or during the time of our first kings from here. Instead, we have to take into account the survival of the ninth-century population, who may have played a role in the ethnogenesis of the Székely people. Hungarian cultural influences can already be detected at the foot of the Alps in the eleventh century.[89] This also suggests that the genesis of the Székelys is inseparable from the eleventh century and the 'wanderings.'

During the research of the early 'Székely' anthropological material from Székelyföld (Ţinutul Secuiesc), "a strikingly wide circle of similarities has emerged."[90] Based on physical anthropological data, the population of the Petőfalva (Peteni) and Zabola (Zăbala) cemeteries in Háromszék (Trei Scaune) was not formed during the time of the Conquest but is related to the population of the preceding Carolingian period. The anthropological material from Udvarhelyszék is different: those buried in the Szentábrahám (Avrămeşti) cemetery show a connection to the anthropological material from cemeteries of the ninth–tenth centuries of Transdanubia. The anthropological material of the Basins of Csík (Depresiunea Ciucului) and Gyergyó (Depresiunea Giurgeului) shows a closer resemblance to the Udvarhelyszék (Scaunul Odorhei) than to the Háromszék material. A similar picture emerges based on the genetic analysis of today's Székely population.[91] From an anthropological point of view, the Székelys of Transylvania are not a uniform population. Naturally, it is debatable whether the integration of the pre-Conquest population into the Székelys took place exclusively under peaceful conditions. During the campaigns of the thirteenth century, the Székelys regularly picked slaves from both Eastern and Western Europe.[92] It cannot be ruled out that the Székelys of the eleventh century in Western Hungary acted similarly, taking advantage of the conflicts of the time, and this also increased the significance of the autochthonous elements in their ethnogenesis.

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88    Révész, *A 10–11. századi temetők*, 97–99; Langó, "Bestimmung."

89    Révész, *A 10–11. századi temetők*, 98–99.

90    Benkő, *A középkori Székelyföld*, 65–67; Fóthi et al., "Embertani leletek," 543–52.

91    Borbély et al., "High Coverage."

92    Kristó, *A székelyek*, 64.

This is consistent with linguistic data: the early Székelys lived in different areas of the Carpathian Basin, and their dialects developed after the Conquest. Some of the dialects of Székelyföld can be related to the Hungarian groups around Őrség, Őrvidék, and Pozsony (Bratislava), and others to the Hungarians of Baranya and Valkó Counties.[93] The place names also indicate that the Székelys came from different parts of the Hungarian-speaking area—in addition to the above, from Bihar—and that they 'brought along' some of the place names used in their old homelands.[94] The territorial division of the eleventh–twelfth century Székelys documented in historical sources was therefore not preceded by a unified settlement area and central (princely or royal) resettlement.[95] In the latter case, we should encounter a uniform dialect in these areas inhabited by the Székelys and—after the repeated resettlement to Transylvania—in today's Székelyföld. Instead, even after 800 years the latter preserves its various dialects. In essence, Székely clan names suggest the same:[96] the integration of the Székelys was preceded by the disintegration of the Hungarian tribes, which unfolded during the tenth–eleventh centuries and the organization of the feudal state.[97]

After the Conquest, the anthropological and dialectal characteristics of medieval Székelys developed independently in different areas of the country. The tenth–eleventh century non-Hungarian groups in the Western frontiers, whose ancestors lived in the Carolingian Empire, also played a role in the ethnogenesis of the Székelys. It may have been this group that originally used the so-called Székely script. In this writing system, the signs of the Eastern European runic script were supplemented with the letters of Glagolitic and Cyrillic.[98] Even Simon of Kéza, who created the Hunnic–Hungarian linkage in his work, thought that the Székely script was not Hungarian, but originated from a foreign group living with the Székelys.[99] The term *Blackis* mentioned by Kéza[100] is usually thought to be referring to Transylvanian

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93    Benkő, "Nyelvészeti adalékok."

94    Benkő, "Megjegyzések a víznevekről."

95    Benkő, "A székelység szerepe," 272–73.

96    Györffy, "Székelyek," 50–58. There are personal names of different (Hungarian, German, and Slavic) origins, ethnonyms (Besenyő), and tribal/settlement (Kürt, Jenő) names amongst them. Regarding personal names, György Györffy drew attention to the fact that they are typically Christian. (Györffy, *Székelyek*, 54) This too infirms the hypothesis that the organization of Székelys took place before the foundation of the Christian kingdom.

97    On the process of 'tribal disintegration – reintegration,' 'detribalization – retribalization' in the Middle East: Rowton, "Dimorphic Structure."

98    Vékony, "A Kárpát-medence," 1332–34; Róna-Tas, *Hungarians*, 440–41; Sándor, *Székely írás*, 123–46.

99    Benkő, *A középkori Székelyföld*, 53.

100   Szentpétery, ed., *Scriptores,* vol. I, 162–63.

Vlachs, since at Kéza's time the Székely people were already living in their current homeland. But the term 'Vlach' generally means a Romanized population, regardless of geographical location. Transdanubia also had a Romanized population[101] and a runic writing system in the Avar Age.[102]

Simon himself uses the term Black/Vlach for the trans-Danubian Romanized population: "Pannoniae, Panfiliae, Macedoniae, Dalmatiae et Frigiae civitates […] natali solo derelicto in Apuliam per mare Adriaticum […] Blackis, qui ipsorum fuere pastores et coloni, remanentibus sponte in Pannonia."[103] Based on the context, the term Pannonia in this case refers to the territory of the former Roman province, not to the whole of Hungary.

The unequal distribution of the runic inscriptions in Székelyföld may be connected to the different prehistory of individual Székely groups.[104] Most and earliest inscriptions are from Udvarhelyszék, whose population shows similarities with the Carolingian population of Transdanubia from an anthropological point of view.[105] The Székely script used for limited purposes may have been suitable as a means of dissimilation[106] emphasizing the elite status of the Székely people.[107] At the same time, its system, language, and scope of use are radically different from the Latin script serving the kingdom. That is the reason why it survived only in a group that came into existence against the state and successfully preserved its autonomy throughout the Middle Ages.

## The beginning of royal intervention

The self-organizing process of the eleventh century outlined above was followed by a different royal policy in the twelfth century. From the point of view of the establishment of the kingdom, the first hundred years were defined by trying to provide defense against the dangers posed by 'wanderers' (theft, smuggling, and further escapes). In some areas of the sparsely populated country, autonomous communities may have been formed, whose mere existence meant a threat to a central power that wanted to regulate the lives of all the people living in its territory.[108] Around the turn of the century, the leaders of the kingdom recognized the potential

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101　Deletant, "Ethnos and Mythos," 67–85; Vida, "Conflict."

102　Fehér, *Kárpát-medencei*.

103　Szentpétery, ed., *Scriptores,* vol. I, 156–55.

104　Benkő, *A középkori Székelyföld*, 54, 56.

105　Fóthi et al., "Embertani leletek," 545.

106　Scott, *The Art*, 173–74.

107　Scott, *The Art*, 32, 225; Sándor, *Székely írás*, 258; Révai, "Magyar literatura," 60.

108　Kopytoff, "The Internal," 30.

opportunities inherent in the Székelys and began to use them to serve their own goals. The outcome of various measures, the organization of the Székelys into a unified group spanned roughly a century.

It seems that Coloman was the first ruler to take steps to reintegrate the group, which was becoming an independent entity, into the system of the kingdom. The problem primarily affected the peripheral areas of the country, and we know that Coloman dealt with affairs of the border region in several of his decrees (First BL 36, 76, 82). The settling of the case of the Székelys living there may also be related to the clarification of the conditions of the frontiers. Chapter 45, which regulates the uniform taxation of free people, directly follows Chapters 41–44 concerning 'wanderers' of slave origin. It lists several groups classified as free. First of all, Coloman abolished the eight denarii tax that every free person had had to pay before. Subsequently, the decree notes the people of the castle *(várnép)* who perform a weekly service (Group 1) and other free persons independent from the former (Group 2), who still have to pay eight denarii. Finally, there are two sentences: "Si autem liberi, qui regi per fines eorum transmigra(n)ti equos, currus subductorios et servicia stipend(i)aria suppeditabant, IIII denarios persolvant. Et similiter liberos, qui cum eis cohabitare consenserint, aut exeant."[109] (Groups 3–4)

In the last sentence, the law notes a fourth group of free people who live with the third group. The former are obliged to leave if they refuse to pay the tax that others do. Since the tax of four denarii replaces the eight denarii one, it may be deduced that the members of the fourth group did not experience the new regulation as a tax reduction, but as an increase, and therefore the law expects that there will be people who would rather leave than pay. The logic of the text suggests that this is a group of free people to whom the king is now extending the obligations that have been imposed on others for a long time. These could have been the 'wandering' Székelys who had moved to the frontiers to preserve their freedom and independence and, thus, successfully avoided taxation, until around 1100 they were finally overtaken by the royal power.

Ten years after the birth of these decrees, the first reference to the Székelys, mentioned as a group separate from the Pechenegs and the Hungarians, is contained in the description of the 1116 Battle of Olšava.[110] According to Elek Benkő, they were distinguished from others by their freedom created on the model of collective, ethnic privileges.[111] This was rooted in the eleventh-century history of the Székelys, which ran independently of the free subjects of the kingdom until around 1100. It

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109    Závodszky, *Törvények*, 189.

110    Szentpétery, ed., *Scriptores,* vol. I, 436.

111    Benkő, *A középkori Székelyföld*, 18.

may have facilitated the reintegration of similar groups in other areas and eras as well if the central power managed to use them as military elements.[112]

It transpires from the narrative sources that the formation of the independent ethnic consciousness of the Székelys began during this century-long period. Anonymus already calls them the people of King Attila, which only means that the Székelys and Hungarians are related,[113] and they are distinguished by their different historical fate. It is difficult to say whether the Székelys of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries thought that they were earlier inhabitants of their country than the Hungarians, and the medieval writers merely supplemented this with the story of the Hunnic origin, or we owe the entire construction to chroniclers. If it is a Székely tradition, there are two possible explanations. On the one hand, the autochthonous population that merged into the Székelys might not only have contributed to the formation of the Székelys' hybrid identity with their writing system and genetic heritage as well as with the real tradition that their ancestors had lived in the Carpathian Basin before the Hungarians. But it is also conceivable that the 'we-were-here-first' self-consciousness of the Székelys was born out of defiance against the royal power: when the tax collectors appeared, they already considered themselves indigenous to the frontiers.[114] The possibility that they might be descendants of an earlier wave of immigration in the given area has arisen for other groups forced to the periphery, but genetic tests contradict these assumptions[115]—just as in the Székelys' case. It might be worth considering the possibility that the historical tradition of the Székelys influenced thirteenth-century historians. Is it not possible that Anonymus and Simon of Kéza connected Árpád and the Hungarians to the Huns because this was a response to the Székely historical tradition stating that they had descended from the Huns?

The next step in the formation of the Székelys was their resettlement in Transylvania. Certain long-preserved phenomena (land ownership based on clans, social structure, etc.)[116] can be easily explained by the fact that for a long time their 'wandering' ancestors successfully avoided the institutions of the kingdom, although it is debatable to what extent these phenomena represent ancient traditions[117] traceable back to the time of the Conquest or are the results of the conscious economic and social policy against the institutions and property relations of the kingdom.[118]

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112    Na'aman, "Ḫabiru," 262.

113    Benkő, *A középkori Székelyföld*, 19.

114    Kopytoff, "The Internal," 22, 52–61.

115    Scott, *The Art*, 25, 183.

116    Györffy, "Székelyek," 47; Kristó, *A székelyek*, 86–96.

117    Kopytoff, "The Internal," 3, 33–39.

118    Lee, *Qazaqlïq*, 49; Scott, *The Art*, x, 8, 24, 29–30, 185, 188, 208–16, 259–70, 274–82.

Gyula Kristó raised the possibility that the Székelys of Transylvania migrated from the western border to their new homeland as part of a spontaneous movement.[119] It is not impossible that in the eleventh century smaller or larger groups of 'wanderers' appeared in Transylvania as well, but only from the neighbouring lowland areas, for example, following the course of the River Maros.[120] However, it seems very unlikely that in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, without local knowledge, i.e., without a precise goal, masses of people from different areas of the country would have set out on the journey of up to 500 or 600 kilometres, driven by their ideas, to find the area where, from the thirteenth century onwards, the Hungarian kings created the Székely seats. The central power must have played the main role in the settlement of the Székelys in Transylvania.

Not all Székelys undertook—and probably not all of their groups were offered— the move of hundreds of kilometers, lasting several months, to unknown eastern territories. Those who stayed,[121] even if they were able to keep their freedom for a while, sooner or later merged into one of the larger social groups. Their different fate could also be related to their number. Even after the Mongol invasion, the Székelys of Váty lived in Baranya County, and only received the right from King Béla IV to go to war individually.[122] In 1272, Stephen V raised some of them to the status of servientes, while the rest merged into serfdom. The Székelys of Tolna[123] and Szabolcs[124] Counties might have suffered a similar fate: only the lucky few were able to preserve their freedom.[125] There is no sign that the Székelys living in the Bega and Temes regions ever provided military service.[126] In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the counties of Zemplén[127] and Abaúj, forest rangers were called Székely; in the Abaúj village of Regéc this meaning of the word was recorded as late as the early eighteenth century.[128] We see something similar in the case of the Cossacks, whose

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119    Kristó, *A székelyek*, 119, 151.

120    Kristó, *A székelyek*, 132; Benkő, "A székely néprésznév," 263–64; Benkő, "A székelység szerepe," 272. Using archaeological methods, this presumed west–east migration cannot be demonstrated with complete certainty (Gáll and Hőgyes, "11. századi migrációk").

121    Györffy, "Székelyek," 46–47; Kristó, *A székelyek*, 77–79; Benkő, *A középkori Székelyföld*, 68.

122    Benkő, *A középkori Székelyföld*, 34–35.

123    Benkő, "A székelység szerepe," 272; Benkő, *A középkori Székelyföld*, 36.

124    Benkő, "A székelység szerepe," 272; Benkő, *A középkori Székelyföld*, 41–42.

125    Benkő, *A középkori Székelyföld*, 43, 45–46.

126    Benkő, "A székelység szerepe," 272.

127    Kristó, *A székelyek*, 13–14.

128    Sebestyén, "A székelyek," 34; Benkő, "A székely néprésznév," 263; Benkő, "A székelység szerepe," 272; Benkő, *A középkori Székelyföld*, 41.

fate was significantly influenced by their status: whether they entered the service of the state or private landlords, or preserved their independence.[129]

## Unintended consequences, self-organization, and exaptation

The terms 'joined tribe' and 'tribe organized for border protection' are certainly the most frequently used conceptual frameworks in the debate about the origin of the Székelys. The former includes the assumption that their origin is not a research topic of Hungarian social history, while the latter sees its birth as the consequence of 'intelligent design.' Instead of these theories, I recommend conceptual frameworks used in other social sciences that provide a theoretical background for the linguistic and historical hypothesis outlined above.

One of these frameworks is the concept of 'unintended/unanticipated consequences/results.'[130] Its essence is that since no single decision-maker has all the necessary information, even the best-intentioned measures have unforeseen consequences that may trigger long-term processes.

The next concept to take into account is 'self-organization.' Self-organization is a general phenomenon that can be observed everywhere, from the inanimate environment to biological and cultural processes.[131] 'Spontaneous order' is also not an unfamiliar concept to practitioners of social sciences.[132] Although we tend to believe that the various phenomena and institutions of human culture, including social groups, could only be created by great legislators and wise rulers, in fact, in most cases, legislative decisions are preceded by a long cultural evolution, whose existence is just acknowledged by the lawmakers. Recognizing the processes that preceded the legislative acts in the early Árpád Era is made significantly more difficult by several factors: a lack of sources, the nature of the extant sources, and our way of thinking.[133]

The third concept is 'exaptation.' In biology, exaptation is the version of pre-adaptation when a gene, tissue, or structure developed for a certain purpose later

129   Fedinec et al., *Ukrajna története*, 154–62. See also the meanings of the term *hajdú* (Benkő, ed., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 512). The diverse reintegration of the 'apîrû also resulted in the fact that their groups of different sizes or individuals can be found in many spheres of activity depending on space and time. (Bottéro, "Les Habiru," 100–3).

130   Menger, *Investigations*, 130–33; Merton, "Unanticipated Consequences." For Menger, the concepts of unintended consequence and self-organization are commingled.

131   Kauffman, *At Home*; Strogatz, *SYNC*.

132   Hayek, *Studies*, 96–105; Menger, *Investigations*, 129–59; Szafruga, *Politics*, 7–71.

133   Strogatz, *SYNC*, 34; Szafruga, *Politics*, 7; Menger, *Investigations*, 148.

acquires a new function.[134] The phenomenon of exaptation seems to cross the boundaries of the organizational levels of inanimate nature, biology, and human society, similarly to the rules of network organization.[135] Accordingly, the concept is already used for various phenomena of human culture,[136] including social networks.[137]

The three phenomena are obviously not independent of each other: certain unforeseen consequences can trigger self-organizing processes that result in the emergence of a social cluster, which may eventually acquire a new function within the network of society. Since royal measures are better documented than spontaneous processes, the importance of the latter may easily be hidden. As an analogy, I refer to the already mentioned Hajdúk. Fortunately, the sixteenth and seventeenth century sources are much more abundant and varied than for the actions of Stephen Bocskai to blot out the processes of the preceding hundred years.

## Conclusion

Belief in 'progress' is part of the modern European view of history. Thus, we tend to see the foundation of the Christian kingdom as a positive or at least necessary stage of development.[138] However, significant groups of people in the eleventh and twelfth centuries experienced this process quite differently and did not intend to integrate into the new secular and ecclesiastical structures or give up their previous independence. The adaptation of the Western economic and social system in Hungary therefore started unexpected processes: pagan rebellions, frequent wars, and 'wandering.' These parasocial groups[139] appeared primarily on the frontiers. It was difficult to control them, and they posed a potential threat to the stability of the kingdom. Something had to be done with this group, and it was Coloman who recognized not just the threat but also the opportunity. This is the explanation why these 'wanderers' suddenly disappeared from twelfth-century sources—they had found their place in society under a different name.

Historical processes rarely proceed along a straight line, and perhaps even more rarely is their starting point a deliberate design. The Pechenegs and the Cumans were organized on the Eurasian steppe not because their descendants would one day become military auxiliaries of the Hungarian kings. Spontaneous processes have

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134   Futuyma, *Evolution*, 261, 486, 547.

135   Frenkel et al., "Adaptation and Exaptation."

136   Lass, "How to Do;" Knappett, *Archaeology*, 155–56, 159.

137   Murphey, Fukada, and Falout, "Exapting."

138   Clastres, *Society Against*, 189–218; Scott, *The Art*, 8.

139   Rowton, "Dimorphic Structure and the Parasocial Element."

more solid consequences than non-spontaneous ones. The *őrök* (guards) and *lesők* (scouts) who were organized by the central authorities for a certain military task did not evolve into a group similar to the Székelys. They lacked the social cohesion created by previous spontaneous processes.

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