

Epic Songs in Árpáadian Age Hungary

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Abstract. While there is no direct evidence of epic singers in the Hungarian Conquest period, their presence and activity can nevertheless be posited on the strength of indirect evidence. Epic songs in Hungarian are known from the later fifteenth century, while the chronicles mention certain epic songs from the late twelfth century. Some of these epic songs celebrated the Conquest period and its events, and it seems unlikely that these songs were inspired by written sources and were, in this sense, secondary. The Hungarian expression *énekmondás* [song-speaking] is expressly archaic and has its parallels in Turkic languages. *Cobza*, the name of the musical instrument used by epic singers as accompaniment (Hung. *koboz*) is likewise rooted in the Turkic world and is a legacy of the pre-Conquest period, similarly to the designation of the performers as fiddlers.

Keywords: Hungarian epic song, Hungarian Conquest period, jocolator/*ioculator*, *cobza/koboz/kopuz*

We have little information on the musical life of the Hungarian Conquest period, particularly on epic songs and their singers, despite the untiring efforts in the nineteenth century, at the time of national spiritual awakening, to discover this genre and its possible sources. There was the hope that even though the Hungarians lacked a *Nibelungenlied* or a *Shahnameh* that the Germans and the Persians had, a heroic pseudo-epic like the *Kalevala* of the Finns could nevertheless be assembled from various folk poetry elements.¹ Indeed, epic songs and ballads represent a particularly charming ancestral form of Hungarian folk poetry. However, most of them are devoted to themes rooted in a later period, the age of feudalism; there are very few that hark back to a more distant past and have among their themes the hero hiding himself and his mythic slumber.² Obviously, there is no conclusive evidence that

1 Arany, *Naïv eposzunk* (originally published in 1863).

2 For a comprehensive analysis of the ballads, cp. Vargyas, “Kutatások a népballada középkori történetében.” Perhaps the most oriental one is “The Ballad of Izsák Kerekes”, discussed by Demény, *Kerekes Izsák*.

these would actually represent the legacy of the ninth–tenth-century Hungarians of the Conquest period.

Yet, there is another genre of Hungarian literature that possibly goes back to the distant past: that of epic songs.³ The first reliable pieces date from the later fifteenth century, although their true *floruit* was the sixteenth century. In addition to a range of Biblical and antique themes, all composed with an educational purpose, they also covered contemporaneous events or the early history of the Hungarians, usually in a simple vernacular, and always in a sung form. Curiously, there are no texts celebrating the events of the Conquest period with any measure of originality that are not a secondary reworking of the narratives recounted in the chronicles. The single exception is Demeter Csáti's *Song of Pannonia* with its expressly archaic form that evokes the *Legend of the White Horse*, one of the emblematic episodes in the conquest of the Carpathian Basin.⁴ However, we have no way of knowing how old this song actually is—it is quite possible that it only feels archaic compared to the well-known sixteenth-century standard. In sum, while both literary and folklore studies have raised the possibility of early Hungarian epic songs as the potential forerunners of the later compositions known to us, we cannot prove this.

The important question in this respect is: When was the start of the epic songs? Did they appear during the Árpáadian Age, in the eleventh–thirteenth centuries, or much earlier, already during the Hungarian Conquest period, in the ninth–tenth centuries? Leaving aside the natural research agendas of literary studies and scholarly inquiries into the past of the known Hungarian traditions, there are higher stakes involved: the ultimate question is whether songs were sung about the Hungarian past before the spread of literacy or, to put it somewhat differently, was the memory of early Hungarian history sustained by an oral tradition, which then partly found its way into the Hungarian chronicle tradition.

In the lack of surviving texts, the answer remains conjectural. The initial general consensus among historians was that oral tradition did not preserve trustworthy information and could therefore be dismissed. More versatile scholarly attitudes in this respect have only appeared in the past few years. Taking a Crimean Nogay epic song as a case study, it may be persuasively demonstrated that the memory of certain events can be fairly accurately preserved in oral tradition for hundreds of years, even if this does not always measure up to our modern criteria, and it is therefore often difficult to unravel fact from fiction.

3 Ghezso, *Epic Songs*.

4 For the different interpretations, cp. Hubert, “A Pannóniai ének”; Szabados, “Országot egy fehér lóért”; Ács, “A Pannóniai ének”; Kríza, “Song of Pannonia.”

In the light of the above, it does not seem wholly inconceivable that the Hungarian minstrels upheld the memory of the Conquest period for many centuries. Obviously, one prerequisite is the very existence and activity of minstrels in the Conquest period. Given that there is no direct evidence of their presence, their one-time activity needs to be demonstrated, and this is what I have set out to do in the present study. In line with the research methods employed in the study of early history, I have approached the issue from several angles, striving to integrate as many sources as possible. Firstly, I seek to trace Hungarian epic songs back in time: although none is known from before the late fifteenth century, there are references to them. Secondly, language provides intriguing insights into early Hungarian culture in that the word used to denote a specific phenomenon is telling—whether an early Hungarian or a loanword is used, and in the case of the latter, which word was adopted. Finally, knowing that epic songs hover on the boundary between text and music, it seemed prudent to also look at music history, or more to the point, at what can be gleaned from organology.

Before turning to the Conquest period, a brief overview of the references to epic songs from the period before the appearance of written sources seems in order, moving from the known epic songs backward in time.⁵ In the late fifteenth century, Galeotto Marzio (ca. 1427–1497), the Humanist historian in King Matthias's court remarked that “there are always musicians and cithara-players present at table, who sing the heroic deeds in the vernacular, accompanied by the lyre” (“Sunt enim ibi musici et citharoedi, qui fortium gesta in lingua patria ad mensam in lyra decantant”).⁶ The Viennese Johannes Cuspinianus (1473–1529) had also heard of them: he noted that the Hungarians “[...] clashed daily with the Turks and always triumphed over them, and their mighty deeds are still sung accompanied by the lyre. They do not sing love songs like here [in Vienna], but rather of the deeds of valiant men: John Hunyadi, King Matthias, Paul Kinizsi, and the elder Stephen Báthori.”⁷ Bonfini, another Italian historian, mentions that following the victory of Paul Kinizsi, King Matthias's general over the Turks in the 1479 Battle of Kenyérmező, songs were virtually born in the battlefield.⁸ A song commemorating King Matthias's Bosnian

5 These have since long been studied in the period's scholarship. Suffice it here to cite some of the more important studies: Sebestyén, “Gyázmagyarok”; Szabolcsi, “A középkori magyar énekmondók”; Jakubovic, “Honfoglaláskori hősi énekeink”; Falvy, “Énekmondók”; Zolnay, *A magyar muzsika*, 273–309; Rajeczky, ed., *Magyarország zenei története*, 94–101, 478–86.

6 Galeottus, *De Egregie*, 18; Zolnay, *A magyar muzsika*, 284–5; Szabolcsi, “A középkori magyar énekmondók,” 32.

7 Cuspinianus, *Oratio protreptica*, 52; Klaniczay, ed., *A magyar irodalom története*, 180.

8 “Coena non sine militari cantu transacta, incomposito extemporalique carmine ducum procerumque laudes concinuerunt”. Bonfinis, *Rerum Ungaricarum decades*, Tom. IV. Pars 1, 114. Cited by Szabolcsi, “A középkori magyar énekmondók,” 32.

campaign has actually survived (“The Battle of Szabács,” 1476)⁹ as well as another short fragment of no more than two lines from an epic song evoking the 1463 recapture of Jajca Castle (today: Jajce).¹⁰

We know that there existed an epic song commemorating the descent into the underworld of Lőrinc Tar, a Hungarian nobleman living in the early fifteenth century, narrating his visit to the purgatory of St. Patrick in Ireland (1411). This song was reworked 150 years after the event by Sebestyén Tinódi Lantos, the most renowned minstrel of the sixteenth century, who, as he acknowledged, had “heard the story sung” (i.e., he did not read it somewhere) and had in all likelihood incorporated its greater part into his own work (ca. 1552).¹¹ It is possible that a portion of the original poem survived in a Latin translation.¹²

There are two uncertain references to epic songs recounting events of the fourteenth century. The first, an epic song narrating the revolt and execution of István Hédervári Kont and his fellow-conspirators (1388), is mentioned by János Thuróczi, King Matthias’s Hungarian chronicler: “A very illustrious knight, famous, and often greatly praised among all Hungarians, István Kont by name, whose daring and courage are still well remembered and not merely evoked in words, his praises are sung to the accompaniment of the lute.”¹³ In this case, roughly a century elapsed between the event and its textualization. The story of Felicián Zách and his family, who were executed in 1330 after the assassination attempt on King Charles I of Anjou (1308–1342) and his family, was still sung in the sixteenth century (“Accounts spread by word of mouth and are sung by minstrels to the accompaniment of the lyre,” *et a cytharedis ad lyram cantitur*).¹⁴ Yet, it remains uncertain when these songs were actually composed, and it is quite conceivable that they emerged well after the narrated events. Nevertheless, these data confirm that epic songs as a genre definitely flourished in fifteenth-century Hungary.

Curiously enough, no epic songs celebrating the Christian sovereigns of the House of Árpád are known, neither are there any contemporaneous references to them, while there are several allusions to songs commemorating the events of the Hungarian Conquest in the Hungarian chronicle tradition. Given that the sources

9 Imre, *A Szabács viadala*.

10 The text was written down by Miklós Zrínyi some two hundred years after the event. Cp. Gerézdi, “Az úgynevezett jajcai ének-törödédek.”

11 *Prohemium memoriale*, 35–60; Sággy, *Hungarians in Hell*, 31–2; Szilády, ed., *Régi magyar költők tára*, vol. 3, 357.

12 Széchy, “Adalékok a régibb magyar irodalomhoz”, 400–3. The text was recorded in 1520.

13 Turocz, *Chronica Hungarorum*, 311–12; Thuróczy, *Chronicle of the Hungarians*, 49–50; Thuróczy, *Magyar krónika*, 76.

14 Miklós Istvánffy’s remark. Fejér, *Cod. dipl. Hung.*, Tomi VIII. Volumen III, 427.

in question drew from each other, here the chronological sequence is reversed, and I will proceed from the earlier texts to the later ones. For example, the Anonymous Notary, the first Hungarian chronicler whose work has survived (ca. 1200), often speaks of the gabbling song (*cantus garrulus*) of minstrels, which he deems most untrustworthy and disdains. Yet, his passionate condemnations actually confirm the strength of this epic song tradition and the fact that songs celebrating the events of the Hungarian Conquest were still sung in his time, around the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Anonymous mentions them in the Prologue to his chronicle, claiming that he did not use them when composing his work.¹⁵ He repeatedly asserts his distaste for them: “Of their wars and brave deeds, if you do not wish to read the present pages of writing, then you may believe the gabbling rhymes of minstrels (*a garrulo cantu ioculatorum*) and the spurious tales of countryfolk who have not forgotten the brave deeds and wars of the Hungarians even to this day.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, Anonymous did draw from these songs: “Tuhutum wished thereby to acquire a name and land for himself. As our minstrels say: They take all the places for themselves and get a good name.”¹⁷ In this passage, he actually cites one of these minstrels, translating his words into Latin, and we therefore have no way of knowing how the original Hungarian sounded; yet, it has been suggested that Anonymous’s wording was in fact a poetic translation since it is rendered as a rhyming couplet.

The description of the adventures in Byzantium of the Hungarian warrior Botond is most instructive. Anonymous barely mentions him: “But as I have found this in no book written by historians, and have heard it only in the spurious tales of countryfolk, I do not propose so to write in the present work.”¹⁸ Yet, Botond’s deeds were set forth in narratives and—judging from the context—in songs, as well. Roughly a century later, around 1282, another chronicler, Simon de Keza, recounted these events in detail, most likely drawing from oral tradition. It is noteworthy that while the events of the Hungarian Conquest are covered extremely laconically, this episode of little importance is described in detail and at the greatest length of all the period’s events, in a near-literary style.¹⁹

15 “And it would be most unworthy and completely unfitting for the so most noble people of Hungary to hear as if in a dream of the beginnings of their kind (*primordia sue generationis*) and of their bravery and deeds from the false stories of countryfolk and the gabbling song of minstrels (*ex falsis fabulis rusticorum vel a garulo cantu ioculatorum*).” Anonymus, *The Deeds*, 4–5; Szentpétery, ed., *Scriptores rerum hungaricarum*, vol. 1, 33–34.

16 Anonymus, *The Deeds*, 90–1; Szentpétery, ed., *Scriptores rerum hungaricarum*, vol. 1, 87.

17 “Vt dicunt nostri ioculatores: Omnes lóca sibi aquirebant, | Et nomen bonum accipiebant.” Anonymus, *The Deeds*, 60–61; Szentpétery, ed., *Scriptores rerum hungaricarum*, vol. 1, 65.

18 Anonymus, *The Deeds*, 90–91; Szentpétery, ed., *Scriptores rerum hungaricarum*, vol. 1, 87.

19 *Simon of Kéza, The Deeds*, 98–9; Szentpétery, ed., *Scriptores rerum hungaricarum*, vol. 1, 171–72.

The *Chronicon Pictum* or *The Illuminated Chronicle* (1358), the first of the fourteenth-century chronicle compositions, which possibly drew on much earlier texts, also contains some interesting information: speaking of the seven leaders of the Hungarians, it notes the following: “Since worldly vanity makes men attribute to themselves greater excellence than they are credited with by others, those seven captains composed lays about themselves (*de se ipsis cantilenas componentes*) and have them sung among themselves in order to win worldly renown and to publish their names abroad, so that their posterity might be able to boast and brag to neighbours and friends when these songs were heard.”²⁰ This passage appears virtually verbatim in the text of the other variants, one of which contains some additional information: “Similarly, in the seven songs recited by the Hungarians about the seven captains, [it is said] of Árpád that there were many gemstones in the snow-covered mountains and that the said Árpád was seated in the saddle of the thickest-necked horse.”²¹ There is yet another variant, the *Pozsony Chronicle*, that despite its strongly differing rendering can be confidently assigned here: it contains an account of the sorry fate of the seven Hungarian captives whose ears were cut off before being sent back to Hungary after the Hungarians’ defeat in the 955 Battle of Lechfeld. Instead of the seven captains, this chronicler identifies the seven captives with the seven Hungarians who composed songs about themselves: they and their descendants sang their story ‘walking among the tents’ until King St Stephen had them settle down.²² The latter narrative gave rise to several misinterpretations, and most scholars agree that the first variant should be regarded as the one preserving the authentic tradition: it was the seven leaders of the Hungarians who had songs recited about themselves.²³ The issue of primacy among the textual variants is raised because these chronicle compositions quite certainly drew on earlier chronicles that have not survived, the implication being that familiarity with the songs about the captains could date from well before the first known fourteenth-century variant. The one-time existence of epic songs about the leaders of the Hungarians is also underpinned by Anonymous’s cited couplet embedded in the story of Tétény, one of the Hungarian leaders.

Thus, the Hungarian chronicle tradition bolsters the activity of Hungarian minstrels during the Árpáadian Age on several counts, while the chroniclers take

20 *The Illuminated Chronicle*, 81.

21 Mikó, “Élt-e valaha Szent István fia,” 16. “Item in septem cantilenis, quae de septem capitaneis decantari Hungari solebant, de ipso Arpad, quod de montibus niveis plures gemmati fundarentur, et super emissarium habentem cervicem pinguissimam ipse Arpad insideret.”

22 Szentpétery, ed., *Scriptores rerum hungaricarum*, vol. 2, 51; Kulcsár, ed., *Krónikáink magyarul*, 36.

23 For a discussion of this passage, cp. Jakubovich, “Honfoglaláskori hősi énekeink,” 266–68; Sebestyén, “Gyászmagyarok,” 1–11.

their existence for granted, as well as the fact that they were the ones to preserve the narratives about the Conquest period. This is all the more important because, unlike in later periods, it can be wholly excluded that the performers of the epic songs were inspired by any of their readings.

The next spate of evidence comes from the linguistic record. Anonymous designates minstrels with the Latin word *ioculator*, a term that also appears in various other sources, such as legal documents.²⁴ For example, a village called Igrickarcsa whose residents were *ioculatores* belonged to the castle district of Pozsony (Bratislava) (mentioned in documents dated to 1244, 1253, and 1329).²⁵ Another village inhabited by royal *ioculatores* was in County Zala (mentioned in 1251, 1255, 1256, 1260, and 1271).²⁶ We know of still another *ioculator* who had estates at Köveskál in County Veszprém (1296). A royal *ioculator* is mentioned as having land at Vészveres in County Zólyom (1263), while the estate of another royal *ioculator* at Endréd in County Somogy is mentioned in 1288.²⁷ Although *ioculator* was a rather broad category in medieval Latin, and probably also in medieval Hungary, Anonymous's text would suggest that the term was used to designate performers engaged in presenting historical songs. The charters sometimes specifically speak of royal *ioculatores* (*ioculatoribus Regis, Joculatores nostri*), who were also landowners (e.g., *quandam terram ioculatorum nostrorum Igrichy uocatam*)²⁸ or received estates,²⁹ suggesting that they were held in esteem and were not mere wandering minstrels. This prestige can in all likelihood be ascribed to their social role as custodians of the memory of noble families and even of the royal dynasty, as professional memory-keepers. This was particularly important in periods with low levels of literacy and in other similar societies. The passage of the *Chronicon Pictum* noting that the leaders composed songs about themselves so that their fame and renown would not fade underpins that the nobility deemed this role to be highly important. One faint reference dates from a later period: the *Styrian Rhymed Chronicle* would suggest that Iván Kőszegi had his own—probably German—epic singer, a certain Peter der Wachtelsack.³⁰ There are other references to the activity of *ioculatores*: the 1279 Synod of Buda forbade, among other things, men of the church to listen to *ioculatores*;³¹ some 250 years earlier, Bishop

24 For a comprehensive overview, cp. Szabolcsi, "A középkori magyar énekmondók," 21–35.

25 Modern Sípokarcsa, now part of Egyházkarcsa (Kostolné Kračany, Slovakia).

26 Modern Zalaigrice. For the charter, cp. Szöcs, *Az Árpád-kori országbírók*, 55.

27 Zolnay, *A magyar muzsika*, 288–94.

28 King Andrew III's charter, published by Szabolcsi, "A középkori magyar énekmondók," 26.

29 An *ioculator* called Zumbot (Szombat) received the Urbana estate from Queen Maria, Béla IV's wife: Szabolcsi, "A középkori magyar énekmondók," 26.

30 Seemüller, *Ottokars österreichische Reimchronik*, 539; Ottokár, *Stájer rímes krónika*, 57.

31 *Antiquissimae constitutiones*, 70; Szabolcsi, "A középkori magyar énekmondók," 26.

St Gerard had also grumbled in his treatise that priests had a great fondness for *scurrae* (clowns).³² Obviously, it is also possible that *ioculatores* were entertainers and not performers of epic songs, although it is conceivable that they were actually performers, as Anonymous and Simon de Keza were both members of the clergy who had quite certainly heard minstrels singing their songs.

In the sixteenth century, epic songs were generally called histories or historical songs, although this was hardly the olden designation of compositions of this type.³³ In medieval Latin sources, they were called *cantilena*, while the Hungarians simply referred to them as songs. A considerably more archaic, although rarely used expression should also be recalled in this context, namely the term *énekmondó* [song-speaker], which did not merely designate singers but was used to denote professional musicians. As far as I know, it is first attested at a relatively late date, in 1593: István Póli addresses his audience in the cadence of his epic song with the following words: “Would that you fill that great cup with goodly wine for the song-speaker.” Some fifty years later, an unknown composer refers to himself in the closing lines of his military song: “Whoë’r listens and a soldier hopes to be / Should ready his money the song-speaker to give!” (1648).³⁴ Although the attestations date from a late period, the formation of the compound noun is expressly archaic: the renowned Hungarian historian György Györffy, lists several words with a similar structure among the occupation names in the Árpadian Age: *boradó* [one who pays his tax in wine], *márcadó* [one who pays tax in mead], *mézadó* [one who pays tax in honey], *mézmívelő* [honey-maker], *disznóóvó* [hog-keeper], *bivalyóvó* [buffalo-keeper], *erdőóvó* [forest-keeper], *kenyérsütő* [bread-baker], *kővágó* [stone-cutter], *vasverő* [(iron)smith], *szállásadó* [hosteler], and *tömlőcívó* [jailer].³⁵ The makers of various commodities known from the late Middle Ages may also be added here: *pajzsgyártó* [shield-maker], *asztalgyártó* [table-maker], *kannagyártó* [pitcher-maker], *nyereggyártó* [saddler], *szíjjártó* [girdler], etc., and this mechanism of word formation is still active today (*jegyvizsgáló* [ticket inspector]). While *énekmondó* fits perfectly into this series, the examples offer no clues as to the date when the word first came to be used, but neither do they exclude an early date. The word itself is also noteworthy because it refers to singing with the verb ‘speak.’ This combination is attested much earlier and was used more widely than the expression *énekmondó*. The first occurrences date from the mid-fifteenth century and it became quite widely used in the sixteenth century: “I speak a song unto you,” “Sing unto the Lord and speak a song to His

32 Gerardi Moresenae, *Deliberatio*, 70; Zolnay, *A magyar muzsika*, 282; *Deliberatio*, 256–57.

33 Pap, *Históriák és énekek*, 7–59.

34 Póli, *Jovenianus császár históriája* (1593), see: Orlovsky, ed., *Régi magyar költők tára*, 336.

35 Györffy, “Az Árpád-kori szolgálónépek,” 290–92; Heckenast, *Fejedelmi (királyi) szolgálónépek*, 131.

name!” (*Hussite Bible*),³⁶ “Let us speak a pleasing song with thanksgiving” (Orbán Batthyány), “Let us speak a new song unto our Lord” (Mihály Sztárai).³⁷ These examples verify the linguistic embeddedness of the combination because Hungarian written texts from earlier centuries are few and far between. Yet, there is one point that would indicate the archaic nature of the expression: phrases with a similar structure are widespread in Turkic languages. In modern Turkey, the singing of any genre is denoted with the verb *söylemek* [speak]: *türkü söylemek* [sing (speak) a folk-song], *sarki söylemek* [sing (speak) a song], *destan söylemek* [sing (speak) an epic song]. The same phrase and structure can be found in Uzbek (*kusik ayt-*), Kazakh (*en ajtu- / ән аўмы*), and Turkmen (*aydym aýtmak*), in which the words denoting various types of songs are associated with the verb *ayt-* [speak], an archaic form. In these cases, although the words used differ, the notion of singing is nevertheless expressed with the same linguistic logic as in Hungarian, which is not typical of other languages. Given the strength of the Turkic–Hungarian linguistic connections and the identical logic behind the ‘to speak a song’ phrases in the Turkic languages and Hungarian, their similarity is hardly coincidental and can be regarded as an indication of the Hungarian expression’s archaic nature. Therefore, we appear to have possible reminiscences of the steppean Turkic connections of the Hungarian expression for the performance of epic songs, which harks back to the pre-Conquest period.

The third perspective is provided by the musical instruments used to accompany epic songs. While we know nothing about the melodies or how the songs were actually performed, the written sources make the occasional mention of the instruments. The most frequently mentioned instrument is the *cithara*, which appears in Anonymous’s chronicle (*dulces sonos cythararum* [sweet sounds of zithers]), alongside the lyre and the lute. Despite the uncertainties in the terminology of medieval musical instruments, these were quite certainly lute-family string instruments. It is instructive that the early Hungarian Bible translations usually render *cithara* as fiddle [*hegedű*] (“Psallite domino nostro in cythara; in cythara et uoce psalmi,” Sing unto the Lord with the fiddle; with the fiddle and the voice of a psalm).³⁸ This word is rather old in the Hungarian language, and since it has no external connections, it is feasible that it was an internally formed word, the implication being that its appearance in the Carpathian Basin can be linked to the arrival of the ancient Hungarians.³⁹ Regrettably, we do not know what type of instrument it actually denoted, since the first description dates from the late seventeenth century when it designated a bowed string instrument,—like today—and a distinction was drawn between German,

36 *Apor-kódex*, 49, 55, 60, 62.

37 Szilády, ed., *Régi magyar költők tára*, vol. 4, 56; Szilády, ed., *Régi magyar költők tára*, vol. 5, 155.

38 Psalms 98:5. *Apor-kódex*, 27, 49, 69, 94, 101.

39 Benkő, ed., *A magyar nyelv*, 82.

Polish, and Hungarian fiddles. However, we know that the medieval *cithara* was a plucked and not a bowed string instrument, and it is therefore possible that *hegedű* [fiddle] was used in a broader sense.

There is another Hungarian instrument name that appears to date from the pre-Conquest period and denoted a plucked string instrument, the cobza (Hung. *koboz*). This was an instrument distinctive to the world of the steppe, whose name was the Turkic designation of the widely used long-necked lutes, or of one of their variants.⁴⁰ Although in Hungarian linguistic studies this instrument is generally linked to the thirteenth-century arrival and settlement of the Cumans, its name crops up in earlier documents,⁴¹ and as it is the *par excellence* musical instrument used by the epic singers of the steppean peoples, it seems reasonable to assume that it was familiar to and used by the Hungarians of the Conquest period. Curiously enough, the cobza usually denoted a plucked string instrument among the steppean peoples, although in some cases it designated a bowed string instrument (e.g., the Kazakh *kobyz*).

Moreover, occupation names were formed from both the fiddle and the cobza (*hegedűs* [fiddler], *kobzos* [cobza-player]),⁴² which are also attested in the medieval charters of Hungary in relation to epic singers, in other words, to professional performers. In Hungarian, the Biblical King David is often described as a fiddler: “David is still a fiddler in this world,” are the words of Sebestyén Tinódi Lantos, the most famed Hungarian minstrel in the mid-sixteenth century.⁴³ The cobza was not merely one of the Turkic peoples’ several musical instruments, but was expressly the attribute of epic singers. Similarly, the singers themselves, representing one particular type of performers, were designated according to the instrument accompanying their songs: cobza-player, fiddler, or lute-player. Thus, the data on the epic singers of the Árpáadian Age can be complemented with the names of the musical instruments brought from the east—whose names were obviously not adopted in the Carpathian Basin—and the instruments themselves, among which the cobza was explicitly associated with epic songs in its original Turkic context. The duality of the Hungarian word as well as of the Turkic word transplanted into Hungarian is far from infrequent in early Hungarian culture. The Turkic background of an instrument used by performers of epic songs again points to the pre-Conquest period and the Turkic world.

40 Sudár, “A magyar koboz.”

41 First attested in a 1193 charter, in a rather enigmatic expression ‘*in coboz terra*.’ In 1237, it appears as a personal name (*Choboz*). Rajeczky, ed., *Magyarország zenei története*, 99; Benkő, ed., *A magyar nyelv*, 509.

42 First attested in 1326: *Johannes dictus Kobzus* (and also one of the earliest mentions of a musician in Hungary); 1394: *Stephanus Hegedus*. Szabolcsi, “A középkori magyar énekmondók,” 27, 29.

43 Tinódi, *Krónika*, 387.

In conclusion, it appears that in Hungary the tradition of epic songs was present already in the period preceding the earliest written texts and that there can be no doubt that these songs preserved the memory of the events of the Conquest period. It is possible that in view of its close Turkic analogies, the verb ‘speak songs’—which in later times was quite clearly related to the epic songs—can be linked to these epic songs. Given its Turkic background, the word *koboz* [cobza], probably adopted before the Conquest period, likewise points to eastern traditions. When arriving to the Carpathian Basin, the ancient Hungarians brought with them the culture of the mounted nomads of the steppe, into which the performance of epic songs fits in perfectly. Taken together, the various strands of evidence reviewed in the present paper provide sufficient proof for the presence and activity of epic singers in the Hungarian Conquest period.

Sources

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