

A Transylvanian Folk Legend about the Tatars

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Introduction

During the course of history, Hungarian and Tatar peoples had contacts (mainly martial) with each other in the 13th and in the 16-18th centuries. Although Zsolt Barta¹ have given an overview over folk legends regarding the Tatar invasion of Hungary in 1241-2, the folk legends regarding Tatar invasions taking place during the Turkish occupation of Hungary have not been processed in a similar way. With this paper, I would like to add to our knowledge of late Hungarian folk legends regarding Tatars. In this context it is important to distinguish between the so-called "Tatar Invasion", which was actually the great Mongol invasion of 1241-2, and the lesser Tatar invasions of the Turkish occupation period. During the period between 1475 and 1774 the Crimean Tatar Khan was a vassal of the Turkish Sultan, and occasionally owed to send the Sultan fighting troops when needed. These smaller Tatar invasions happened during the 16-17th centuries. On these occasions they were partly included in the Turkish army and partly operated independently but together with Vlach (Rumanian) auxiliary troops. These last operations were mostly restricted to the Hungarian Principality of Transylvania, which was also dependent on the Sultan, but which often attempted to lead an independent policy in harmony with the Hungarian Kingdom. This was the name of Northern Hungary under the rule of the Habsburgs, before the Turks were ejected from the Hungarian heartland at the end of the 17th century.² The longest period of Crimean Tatar engagement in Hungary was the 15 Year War, which lasted from 1591-1606.³ The folk legend that is the topic of this paper refers to a later, minor Tatar invasion in Transylvania during the middle of the 17th century.

The historical background

The folk legend from Gyergyószárhegy, which this paper deals with, was first described by Antal Soós (born in Mezőberény, ca. 1839 – + Pápa, 1901) in 1863, after he had walked along the Northern banks of the river Maros in July, 1862. The author was a student of the Calvinist school in Marosvásárhely between 1861 and 1862. He sent his travel description by letter to the school's Literary and Debating Society, which preserved the text in their yearbook. The part regarding our subject runs as follows: Our road led from Borszék through [the villages of] Ditró and Szárhegy. On the border of the latter stands a relatively large mound to the right of the road, which the people call the Tatar Mound... The Gyergyó valley was destroyed by the Tatars in 1707, whereupon the Székelys cut down three thousand of

¹ Barta, Zsolt: A magyarországi tatárjárás legendárium: *Tatárjárás*. [Legends of the Tatar invasion in Hungary] Budapest. 2003. 300-310.

² During the Ottoman occupation, the central and southern part of Hungary was under Turkish rule; the northern part of the country was independent in name and ruled by the Habsburg emperor, who was elected king of Hungary; and eastern Hungary, i.e. Transylvania and the eastern part of the Great Hungarian Plain became a principality, using forward the ancient Hungarian juridical and monetary system and was connected to the Hungarian Kingdom. Transylvania was a part of Hungary, populated mostly by Hungarians. It was later that the number of Rumenians increased. The eastern part of Transylvania was populated by a Hungarian group called Székelys, the medieval borderguards of the country. According to their tradition, they are descendants of the Huns who joined the Hungarians in 895, when they arrived in the Carpathian Basin.

³ Fodor, Pál – Hegyi, Klára – Ivanics, Mária: *Török és tatár hódítók*. [Turkish and Tatar conquerers] Budapest, 1993.

them on this site. According to the legend, they employed a ploy, which meant that each village brought out their pots and vessels, and layered the road with up-turned pots, and waited for the [Tatar] horses to step into the vessels and become frightened by the noise, so the running enemy could be slaughtered by the locals in hiding. The Mound would have been destroyed a long time ago, if the authorities had not declared it to be a historical monument. There is a convent in Szárhegy, which remained intact even during the Tatar invasion, due to its thick walls of defence. There are old documents in its library. The city of Gyergyó was also in our road: Gyergyószentmiklós is mostly an Armenian, not Székely town, not because there are few Székelys living in it, but because trade is mainly controlled by the Armenians. There is a school with four classes there.” (Soós Antal: Travel Descriptions. July, 1862. In: Yearbook. [Yearbook of the Literary and Debating Society of the Calvinist School of Marosvásárhely, 1862-63.] Manuscript kept at the Teleki-Bolyai Library, Marosvásárhely. Part of the Bolyai Collection (Documents of the Calvinist School). Notation: Ms. Fo. 408. 148. p].⁴

The legend was first published by Balázs Orbán in 1869. He draws from two sources: from oral and written tradition. According to the legend, the attacking Tatars were defeated by the local women by a clever trick: They placed pottery on a hill, which the enemy believed to be warriors with helmets, therefore they fled into the marshes, where their horses' feet were caught in the pots hidden there, making it easy for the women to kill them and bury them in the so-called Tatar Hill or Tatar Mound. Orbán also mentions Kalári or Klára Puskás, a woman from Ditró, who killed seven Tatars, then gave birth to triple twins.⁵

In this case, we are lucky to have a written source about the historical battle which served as the basis for the legend, although it was not a major battle, only a local skirmish. The chronicle written by György Ferentzi (or Ferenczi), Catholic priest of Gyergyószentmiklós, which is entitled *Regestrum ecclesiae S. Nicolai in Girgio (Hungariae)*⁶ “Register of the parish St. Nicolaus in Gyergyó (Hungary)”, preserves the local memory of a punishing campaign led by the Turks against György Rákóczi II, Prince of Transylvania in 1658. Orbán quotes Ferentzi when he tells of how the defenders, who were in minority, defeated the joint Moldavian (Vlach) and Tatar army, which came from the direction of Moldavia. Their leader was a local teacher named Gábor, the deacon and an angel sent by God helped them.⁷ The motif of the angel is not repeated in any of the oral traditions recorded in the field, therefore I presume that it may have been added by the priest. It must be noted, that the deacon wore the name of one of the archangels (Gabriel), which may have inspired the introduction of an angel. The battle is described by Leonard Losteiner (1741-1813), a Franciscan historian, in the 349th section of his chronicle composed in 1777. The two historical works written by Losteiner (“*Chronica*” and “*Propago Vitis...*” 1786-89), are preserved in manuscript form on the Franciscan convent of Csíksomlyó.

Prince György Rákóczi II was removed from his throne in 1657, after his unsuccessful Polish campaign, during which he still enjoyed the support of the Wallachian (or Vlach) *voydvodas* (leaders), who were Turkish subjects.⁸ The Prince first conceded power to Ferenc

⁴ I am much obliged to Katalin Olosz who copied the text from the manuscript, and sent it to me.

⁵ Orbán, Balázs: *Székelyföld leírása történelmi, régészeti, természetrajzi s népművészeti szempontból*. [Historical, Archeological, Natural and Folkloristic Descriptions of Székelyföld] Pest 1869. II, Csík-szék, 116.

⁶ Szinnyei, József: *Magyar írók élete és munkái*. [The Lives and Works of Hungarian Authors] Budapest, 2000.

⁷ Orbán, 1869. 116.

⁸ Petrity-Horváth, Kozma: II. Rákóczi György veszedelméről: *Apa és fiú. Erdély öröksége. Erdélyi emlékiratok Erdélyről*. [About the Peril of Prince Georgius Rákóczi II. In: Father and Son. Transylvanian Auto-Biographers about Transylvania] Budapest, 1994. 105-153.

Rhédey, but later rebelled against the Sultan.⁹ The chronicler and politician János Bethlen wrote: “[In 1658] the Grand Vezir commanded his Asian and European forces with about one hundred thousand soldiers and a large supply of cannons [against Transylvania] and was already threatening the fortification of Jenő, while the Tatar Kham [khan] arrived at the border of Transylvania, supported by the voyvodas of the two Wallachias.”¹⁰ According to other sources, the army contained one hundred Tatar soldiers, as well as many thousand Turkish and Wallachian soldiers, from both Wallachian principalities.¹¹ Historians have estimated that the Tatar Khan’s army numbered a few thousand during the 15 Year Long War.¹² It was thus a force to be reckoned with. The male population of Székelyföld (land of the Székelys) went to war, and the women found themselves in a vulnerable position, as testified by the legend. Ferentzi recorded the names of two heroic women, Mrs. András Apor (born Borbála Lázár), and Mrs. György Cserey (born Kata Baróthi),¹³ which indicates that the warrior women of the legend take inspiration from reality, although the character of the pregnant Klára Puskás is clearly unrealistic.

Elements of the legend

I collected variations of the legend in the field, by the help of 15 informants, during August 2006.

The legend itself occurs in five variations:

1. The Tatars attack the Gyergyó valley, while most of the men are away. The women and the boys use tricks in their battle against the Tatars. They set camp by swampy terrain in the middle of the valley. They put down poles by the edge of the marshes and dressed them up in clothes, or disguised chariots as artillery. They placed men’s hats on their heads. They also placed pottery and other obstinances in the middle of the marsh. The Tatar army believed, when looking at them from afar, that they are facing a great army, and attacked them. But the legs of their horses got caught in the pottery and they fell. Thus the women could kill the Tatars, who had fallen to the ground. They buried several hundred of the dead near the site, in the so-called Tatar Mound (informant no. 1-14.)

2. The Tatars attacked the Gyergyó valley, but the women and boys defeted them with a trick: They dressed poles or sheafs in clothes and lured the Tatars into the marshed, were their horses could not thread. A local woman was particularly heroic. She is called by various informants Klára/Kalári Puskás, Teréz Puskás or Erzsébet Mezei, and she is believed to have come from the village of Ditró or Szárhegy. She led the people and killed several enemies, although she was pregnant. At the end of the day or the next day, she gave birth to twins (or triplets). The dead were buried in the Tatar Mound (informant no. 1-10, 15).

3. In this version, the heroine is named Klára Barabás and is the wife of the local miller. She was found pregnant in the mill by the Tatar soldiers. The woman could see them coming, so she stould in wait, and threw a stew with strong paprika into their eyes. This blinded the Tatars, so that the woman could kill six of them. But she could not overcome the last Tatar, so

⁹ Bethlen, János: *Az erdélyi történelem négy könyve, amely tartalmazza fejedelmeinek cselekedeteit 1629-től 1663-ig*. [The Four Books of Transylvanian History, which Contain the Deeds of the Princes]. Budapest, 1993. Chapter IV.

¹⁰ Bethlen, 1993, chap. VII.

¹¹ *Kolozsvári emlékirók, 1603-1720*. [Auto-Biographers of Kolozsvár, 1603-1720]. Ed.: Bálint J.- Pataki J. Bukarest 1990.

¹² Ivanics, Mária: *A Krími Kánság a tizenöt éves háborúban*. [The Crimean Khans During the 15 Year War]. Budapest, 1994. chap. 43.

¹³ Orbán, 1869. 116.

she invited him into the mill and killed him by the dam. She gave birth to twins at the end of the day (informant no. 2, 3).

4. There lived a woman named Mrs. Báakai, called the Black Woman in the village of Szárhegy. Mrs. Báakai warned the habitants of the village that a great danger is coming, but she also told them that she will not be alive to see it. She promised them that she would return even from the dead to prophesy the outcome of the battle. On one feast day, when the villagers were praying by the chapel on Szármányhegy Mountain, they saw a black horse, which jumped from the Délhegy Mountain (south of Szárhegy, 1695 m.) to the chapel on Szármányhegy Mountain (north of Szárhegy, 967 m.)¹⁴ Its hoof left a mark on the white stone. Mrs. Báakai rode the horse, and she prophesied, that the people would win and also told the people what kind of strategy they should use. Then the village dressed poles and other objects in men's clothes and lured the attackers into the marshes. Implying the advice of Mrs. Báakai, they overcame the enemy, and buried the dead under the Tatar Mound. (Informants no. 2, 3, 6-9, 12, 15).

5. Some or at least one of the Tatars managed to escape through the shallow waters of the marsh, but could not cross the river Maros at the village of Remete (Hermit), therefore he settled down by the banks of the river and lived there like an hermit for a long time. The villagers of Szárhegy mostly believe that members of the Portik family are his descendants (informant no. 2-6, 8, 9, 11, 15). Not every person with the name Portik knows about this legend, but during my trip in 2006, I met two members of the Portik family, who also believed their family to have descended from the Tatars. So did a member of the Portik Hegy family (a priest) I met during a journey in 1993.

Although historical legends usually have a local character and a patriotic flare, many also contain international motifs.¹⁵ Oral tradition mixes the memory of the Tatar invasion with several other, independent legends. The following motifs have been borrowed into the legend of Szárhegy from a common tradition:

A. Burial Mound: this motif has several parallels across the country. The following data are connected to the Tatar Invasion in 1241: According to the legend of Szederkény in Borsod County, a burial mound called *Feshalom* was raised after the battle by the village Muhi in 1241, as a burial place the dead.¹⁶ The *Katona* Mound (Soldiers' Mound) in Kölpény, Mezőség (Transylvania), is connected to the 13th century battle with the Tatars, as are the nearby *Gyilkoscsup* (Murder Peak) and *Vérhegy* (Blood Mountain) place names.¹⁷

All the following examples are recorded from the part of Hungary eastern from the Danube and probably refer to Tatar military expedition during the Ottoman rule in Central Hungary (16-17th century): The people of Nagyszalonta brought weapons to the fields during the Turkish occupation, in order to withstand the enemy attacks if the guard in the *Csonka torony* (Broken tower) gave the warning signal. Their weapons came to use once. The battle of Nagyszalonta was won by the Hungarians. To commemorate this, they built the so-called

¹⁴ *A történelmi Magyarország atlasza és adattára, 1914.* [Atlas over Historical Hungary]. 2. ed. Pécs 2003. 26 D 3, and *Erdély a részek térképe és helységnévtára.* [Atlas and Geographical Lexicon of Transylvania and Partium]. Ed. Herner, János. Szeged 1987. 19 T 69-70.

¹⁵ Lengyel, Dénes: *Történelmi monda: Magyar Néprajz. V. Népköltészet.* [Historical Legends. In: Hungarian Folklore. Folk Poetry.] Budapest 1988. 151.

¹⁶ Szendrey, Zsigmond: *Történelmi népmondák:* [Historical Folk Legends] In: *Ethnographia*, 1920, XXXI. 49.

¹⁷ Orbán, op. cit. IV. Pest, 1870. Marosszék. 202.

Testhalom (Body Mound) with the Turkish dead.¹⁸ Similar burial mounds are the *Tatártemetés* (Tatar Grave) in Kisgéres, the *Agyagos* and *Tatárjárás* (Clay Mound and Tatar Invasion) in Jászdósa, the Tatar Mound in Karcag, the Csomortány Mounds of Hódmezővásárhely and the several *Testhalom* Mounds of Harangod. It is claimed that Tatars are buried in the *Botahalma* Mound (Hill of Bota) in Krasznabélteki and by the *Tatártó* (Tatar Lake) by Dancsház.¹⁹

B. Strategy: this is a common topos from legends about the Turks and Tatars. E.g.: during the Turkish raids near the city of Bihar diószeg, all men were away in war, thus the women and the old people fled to an island to avoid the enemy. The old men cut faces into pumpkin heads, put burning candles in them, then put the pumpkins on their own heads and raised themselves on wooden legs. The Turks, who attacked at night, saw the shining heads, and believed that they were facing giants. They fled. The place is called *Asszonysziget* (Women's Island) since then.²⁰ This has a close parallel in a version told by no. 1 of my informants: Teréz Puskás, the warrior heroine, put lamps into pumpkins to create the impression of a great army at night. Both Asszonysziget and the Tatar Mound in Gyergyó lie at watery places. (The marsh offered real protection).

C. Mrs. Báakai/The Black Woman: She is the heroine of the legend who is believed to be a shamaness. Several prophecies are tied to her character. Some place her figure in the Middle Ages and some in the 19th century (informant no. 5). Mrs. Báakai was called both a *táltos* [shaman], (informant no. 2, 3), and a prophetess as well. Prophecies attributed to her are passed on independently of the Tatar legend. The same prophecies are ascribed to the legendary *táltos*, Bence Úz by the Csángó folk group of Gyimes mountains²¹: there would be iron birds in the sky and iron chariots on the ground. This is supposed to have come true in the aeroplanes and in the cars. Furtheron, it was said in the village Csinód that Úz Bence prophesied the same as Mrs. Báakai did (informant no.5): "A thousand years will pass and a thousand won't".²² This prophecy is believed to refer to the end of the world.

D. The ghost: The ghost of the prophetess arrives on a black horse (informants nos 7 and 15).²³ But the ghost of Mrs. Báakai is remarkable among unrestful souls, since she does not return because of some personal pain or injury, but to protect her community. In this sense, she reminds us of certain male heroes, such as Hunnic prince Csaba, the legendary son of Attila, who is the greatest hero of the Székelys, and who is also expected to return from the

¹⁸ Op. cit. 161.

¹⁹ Szendrey, Zsigmond: Történeti népmondáink: *Ethnographia/Népelet*. [Our Historical Legends. In: *Ethnographia/Folk Life*]. 1926. XXXVII. 33.

²⁰ *Magyar Néprajzi Lexikon* [Hungarian Lexicon of Folklore], (from now on: MNL). Budapest, 1982. V. Legends about the Turkish Occupation.

²¹ The Csángós are a Hungarian group of Roman Catholic faith living east of the Székelys in the Gyimes mountains and along the Tatra river, between the Carpathian mountains and the Siret river and even farther east in Rumania. Some of them are perhaps descendants of Hungarians, who did not migrate into the Carpathian Basin in 895, but most of them are most probably descendants of border guards, who were resettled from Torda county (Transylvania) to the eastern slopes of the Carpathian mountains and the plain east of the mountains in connection with the Tatar Invasion. Their southern groups assimilated Cumans who populated this region before the Tatar Invasion in 1241.

²² Magyar, Zoltán: *A csángók mondavilága. Gyimesi csángó népmondák*. [Legends of the Csángós. Folk Legends of the Csángós of Gyimes]. Budapest, 2003. 542-4.

²³ Cf.: The Csángós of Gyimes believe that the ghost that comes in the shape of a horse is sometimes coloured black. Op. cit. p. 374. The ghost horse is a very common topos in Europe, see Partridge, J.B.: Notes on English Folklore: *Folklore*, vol. 28, nr. 3 (Sept. 30, 1917), 311-315, and Parke, Aubrey L.: The Folklore of Sixpenny Handley, Dorset, Part I: *Folklore*, vol. 74, no. 3 (Autumn, 1963), 481-87.

dead. Yet Mrs. Báakai does not belong in the same category, since her function is not battle, but the mental preparation of the people and the insurance of victory through teaching them a strategy.

E. The stone of Szármányhegy Mountain: This is a white stone slab now partly destroyed by miners next to the St. Anthony-chapel on the hill. It has several pits on its surface, which is why the locals believed that the shoe of a rider's horse, believed to be either St. László (Ladislaus) (informer no. 1, 6) or Mrs. Báakai (informer no. 3-5), had left its trace on the stone. Informers no. 8, 10 and 14 can not name the rider's person. This motif originates from Middle-Eastern legends, and was assimilated into the cult of St. László (ruled between 1077 and 1095), one of the holy kings of Hungary, but was also associated with Christ and the *táltos* (shaman) Bence Úz.²⁴ This is how the motif was brought to the Gyergyó valley, where it became associated with the figure of Mrs. Báakai, which must be considered a late contamination. The horse of St. László was often believed to have left a hoof mark on a mountain in legends that tell of how the king chased the invading Cumanians.²⁵

F. The hermit: This motif is actually an independent legend explaining how the village of Gyergyóremete (Hermit) was given its name. A similar legend is told of the village of Dunaremete.²⁶ The motif of the Tatar hermit may be considered a later contamination in the legend of Gyergyószárhely, due to the circumstance that the character of the fleeing Tatar has been mixed up with the character of the local hermit. There lived hermits on the Szármányhegy Mountain in the 1600's²⁷, so this legend also contains a historical element.

G. Tatar descendants: The population of the village of Gyergyóremete is partly believed to descend from the escaping Tatars. The villages of *Tatárfalva* (village of the Tatar/Tatars) and *Tatárvágás* (the clearing of the Tatars in a forest) are also believed to have been founded by stranded Tatar soldiers.²⁸

H. Legendary heroine: Several more legends tell of heroic women. According to the legend of *Tatárkelő* (Tatar's crossing) in Csongrád County, a woman smashed the skull of a Tatar, who was chasing her, with a piece of bread.²⁹ According to the *Csángós* in Gyimes, a Hungarian girl fooled the cannibal Tatar woman who wanted to eat her, and tricked her into letting her go.³⁰ The people of Gyergyó remember their own heroine by several different names: Klára/Teréz Puskás or Barabás or possibly Erzsébet Mezei. This is unusual, since most legendary heroines are nameless. The name Puskás (Gunner) refers to an underclass of

²⁴ Magyar, 2003. 266, 545.

²⁵ Magyar, Zoltán: *Szent László a magyar néphagyományban*. [Saint Ladislaus in Hungarian Folklore]. Budapest, 1998. 124-134.

²⁶ Timaffy, László: *Táltosok, tudósok, boszorkányok. Kisalföldi népmondák*. [Shamans, Wise Men, Witches. Legends of the Kisalföld.] Győr, 1992. 103.

²⁷ According to Orbán, (1868, 114-5. note 1), the first sanctuaries on Szármányhegy was built by an ancestor of the Lázár family, who erected 5 shrines, following the instructions of a saint who appeared in his sleep. The hermitage was founded next to the chapel by count Lázár István sr. in 1642, where hermits lived until 1665. Then count Lázár István jr. gave custody of the hermitage to the (Franciscan) friars, who founded a monastery on Szármányhegy Mountain.

²⁸ MNL. V. Legends of the Tatar Invasion.

²⁹ MNL. V. Legends about the Tatar Invasion.

³⁰ Magyar, 2003. 203.

Székely borderguards³¹ which became a family name. The heroine's name may refer to the military ranking of her family.³²

I. Twin birth: The local heroine gives birth to twins after her deeds. The double fruitfulness following a great physical deed is the *non plus ultra* proof of feminine power.³³

Conclusion

The legend of Gyergyó is folk tradition which carries an element of historical truth. Several topos motifs can be identified in it, which have been borrowed from other legends, such as the legend of Saint Ladislaus. In the material that is collectible today, we may observe the process of both forgetting motifs, of contaminating motifs that are no longer understood with other explanations and other deformations of the tradition that are attributable to generational differences. The best example of this is the transformation of a historical legend into a pure ghost story. The folk tradition is best preserved in Gyergyószárhegy. Here, the story is contaminated with tales about sorceresses and ghosts, although the same story is told in a more realistic manner in Gyergyóremete. The tales of the informants nos 2 and 3 (an old, married couple) have the clearest structure. Their grandchild (informant no. 4) and other youths tell the tale as a simplified ghost story. The informants pass the legend on in individual variations, collecting the motifs from a common pool of tradition. Most of the informants are aware of the motifs of the strategy, Mrs. Báakai, the stone with the imprint of a horseshoe and the Tatar settlers of Remete. The motif of Klára Barabás, the miller's wife, is only known to the very old couple (informants no. 2 and 3).

The richness of the motifs found in this legend, which is at the same time a carrier of local identity, shows that there are still collectible, authentic folk traditions of historical value in the Gyergyó valley. This legend will not be forgotten there in the near future because the mound, marked by a cross and an inscription still stands there as a historical monument and the Portik families not only remember but also openly admit their Tatar origin, which is widely accepted in the community.

³¹ It was used in this sense e.g. during the conscription of the Székely border guards in 1604, see *Székely Oklevéltár. Új Sorozat IV. Székely Népeség-összeírások, 1575-1627*. [Székely Documents. New Series IV. Székely Conscriptions, 1575-1627]. Ed. Demény, Lajos. Kolozsvár 1998. 174, 176, 182.

³² The heroine of Gyergyó and her parallels are unique in the Central European material, because although most sword-wielding heroines have strong mythological traits, the heroines of legends about the Tatar and Turkish invasions seem prosaic, and their environments are realistic. In the European material, the story of most warrior heroines can be classified in two types: a) a woman of extraordinary powers marries a hero; b) a father only has one daughter, therefore the girl dresses in man's clothes when war breaks out and goes to war. Both types of legend are set in an aristocratic or imaginary (mythological) setting. See Hooker, Jessica: *The Hen Who Sang: Swordbearing Women in Eastern European Fairytales: Folklore*, vol. 101, no. 2. (1990). 178-184.

³³ This motif has a parallel in Irish folklore: Macha, the Lady of Ulster, is forced to run against the king's horses while pregnant. She gives birth to twins right afterwards, then dies of the pain. See Tatár, Mária Magdolna: *Epona hagyománya a magyaroknál: Ősök, táltosok, szentek. Tanulmányok a honfoglaláskor és az Árpád-kor folklórából*. [The Tradition of Epona among the Hungarians. In: Ancestors, Shamans, Saints. Studies in the Legends Relating to the Conquest Age and the Árpád Period.] Budapest, 1996. 139-151.