

## articles

# Campfire Stories? Traces of Oral Transmission during Tenth-Century Rus'-Nomadic Alliances<sup>1</sup>

Csete KATONA (Debrecen)

<https://doi.org/10.58377/byzslav.2025.3>

*This study explores the possibility that tenth-century multi-ethnic warrior groups exchanged stories (or story elements) with one another during joint campaigns. This claim is examined through the intersection of oral tradition and written history in the legend of Botond, a fictional tenth-century Magyar hero famed for his raid on Byzantium. Preserved in varied forms in late medieval Hungarian chronicles, the story's historical reliability has long been contested. Yet key narrative elements – such as a wrestling duel and the symbolic act of striking the gates of Constantinople – have close analogues in the Russian Primary Chronicle. While some similarities likely reflect common literary tropes of medieval historiography, others may preserve authentic memories of tenth-century events. The core narrative of the legend exhibits strong parallels with tenth-century Byzantine sources, suggesting a plausible historical core rooted in real events of the period. Parallels with the cultural practices of the Rus', Bulgars, and Pechenegs – peoples closely linked to the Magyars and to one another – underscore a shared heroic tradition in which wrestling and symbolic acts of aggression played key roles. These groups, often allied against Byzantium, likely exchanged stories within their multi-ethnic war camps, perhaps around the campfire. Oral narratives then circulated and evolved widely before entering the written traditions of the late Middle Ages.*

In 970, a coalition of Scandinavian Rus' and nomadic (or semi-nomadic) warriors – including Magyars, Pechenegs, and Bulgars – encamped outside the Byzantine city of Arkadioupolis during their advance towards Constantinople. According to the eleventh-century Byzantine historian John Skylitzes, who provides a detailed account of the campaign, the alliance spent their nights in camp engaging in drinking, dancing, and singing accompanied by flutes and

---

1 This paper was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. I would also like to thank the two anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

cymbals.<sup>2</sup> Skylitzes' portrayal of the enemies' drunkenness and "barbaric dancing" (*ὀρχήσσει βαρβαρικάις*) may function as a literary device to emphasise the perceived cultural and moral inferiority of the invading host compared to the Greeks. Notably, Skylitzes recounts how magister Bardas Skleros, the Byzantine commander responsible for the city's defence, exploited this disorganisation through a series of nocturnal skirmishes launched from within Arkadioupolis. These attacks, targeted against the unprepared "Scythians" (*Σκύθαι*) (the term used by Skylitzes to describe the enemy), proved highly effective and ultimately successful.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, it has been noted that Skylitzes, despite being a later chronicler of the events, preserved details of the fighting that are absent from our control source, Leo the Deacon's *Historia*. Both authors drew on a common anonymous source recording the events, yet Skylitzes provides unique insights.<sup>4</sup> More broadly, there is little reason to doubt that members of an army, particularly during what promises to be a protracted siege, might spend their nights in camp engaging in the kinds of revelry described.<sup>5</sup> Even the use of various musical instruments is well-documented in historical and mythological accounts and corroborated by linguistic evidence and archaeological findings concerning Viking Age Scandinavians, Rus', and steppe peoples. Instruments such as flutes (*αὐλός*) and reeds, along with idiophonic devices like rattles – possibly referred to by the Greeks as *κύμβαλον* – are well attested.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the comment in

2 *Ioannes Scylitzes, Synopsis historiarum*, (CFHB, Series Berolinensis, V), H. Thurn (ed.), Berlin 1973, 289.

3 *Ioannes Scylitzes*, Thurn (ed.), op. cit., 289–290. On the shifting meaning of "Scythians" in Byzantine historiography, see: Gy. MORAVCSIK, *Byzantinoturcica*, 2, *Sprachreste der Türkvölker in den Byzantischen Quellen*, Leiden 1983, 279–283.

4 A. KALDELLIS, The original source for Tzimiskes' Balkan campaign (971 AD) and the emperor's classicizing propaganda, *BMGS* 37/1, 2013, 35–52. S. McGRATH, The Battles of Dorostolon (971): Rhetoric and Reality, in: J. Haldon (ed.), *Byzantine Warfare*, London 2007, 347–362.

5 A similar episode is vividly recounted by the tenth-century monk Ekkehard, who describes a Magyar raiding party storming the monastery of Saint Gall in 926. A monk named Heribald, compelled by the invaders to join their picnic in the monastery yard, observed their actions. According to his account, after looting the monastery, the Magyars feasted, drank, and entertained themselves by throwing meat bones at one another. Following substantial consumption of wine, they shouted fearfully to their gods, danced, wrestled, and even engaged in weapon duels among themselves. When news arrived of the discovery of a nearby castle, the Magyars – despite being in the midst of their revelry – swiftly rose to their feet and formed into battle array. *Ekkehart IV., St. Galler Klostergeschichte (Casus sancti Galli)*, MGH SS rer. Germ., LXXXII, H. F. Haefele – E. Tremp – F. Schnoor (eds.), Wiesbaden 2020, 300–303.

6 J. BERGSAGEL, Music and Musical Instruments, in: P. Pulsiano (ed.), *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, New York 1993, 420–423. C. LUND, The Archaeomusicology of Scandinavia, *World Archaeology* 12/3, 1981, 246–265. M. MÜLLER, Reed-Pipe of the Vikings or the Slavs? An early find from the Baltic Region, in: E. Hickmann – D. W. Hughes (eds.), *The Archaeology of Early Music Cultures*, Bonn 1988, 31–38. G. KOLLVEIT, The Sutton Hoo lyre and the music of the Silk Road: a new find of the fourth century AD reveals the Germanic

Skylitzes' work represents a rare instance of an external observer shedding light on the daily lives of warriors during a campaign. It is not unreasonable to suggest that storytelling may also have formed a part of camp leisure activities, especially in conjunction with drinking. This specific theme – and indeed the relevant passage in Skylitzes' work – has yet to receive scholarly attention. It offers a valuable opportunity to highlight an example of cultural exchange among the diverse ethnic groups of Eastern Europe.

The army in question comprised multiple ethnic groups, none of which was biologically homogenous. Their identities, often complex and multifaceted, were still to some degree in the process of development at the time of these events. Among them were the Rus', the initiators of the campaign, a hybrid group of Scandinavian and Slavic warriors led primarily by the former. Their temporary allies were of steppe origin: the Finno-Ugric-speaking but culturally Turkic Magyars from the Carpathian Basin, the Turkic Pechenegs from the Pontic steppes, and the Bulgars from the Balkans, who by this time had lived alongside local Slavs for an extended period. This was neither the first nor the only instance during this period when Scandinavians (as well as Rus') and steppe people formed alliances. Throughout the tenth century, joint military operations and service in the courts of Byzantium, the Kyivan Rus', and steppe polities such as Khazaria, Volga Bulgaria, and later the Magyar headquarters in the Carpathian Basin, provided frequent opportunities for members of ethnically diverse retinues to exchange not only material culture and fashion but also stories and ideas.<sup>7</sup> However, the everyday realities of such interactions remain obscure. This is primarily because neither the Scandinavian Rus' nor the steppe peoples have left us extensive contemporary literary records. Nonetheless, given the long-standing oral storytelling traditions shared by these cultures, it seems likely that stories would have been exchanged around the campfire.

It would be intriguing to consider whether traces of such interactions lingered in the later memories of literate writers who retrospectively recorded the ancient histories of their predecessors. I propose that this possibility exists in the case of the Magyars (later Hungarians),<sup>8</sup> whose medieval chronicles from

---

lyre's missing eastern connections, *Antiquity* 96/365, 2022, 208–212. B. SUDÁR, A magyar koboz keleti hátteréhez, in: Sz. Merva (ed.), *Hadak útján XXII: A népvándorlás- kor fiatal kutatóinak XXII. konferenciája*, Visegrád 2017, 417–435. D. BARTHA, *Die avarische Doppelschalmel von Jánoshida mit 13 Tafeln und 10 Textabbildungen*, Budapest 1934. V. N. BASILOV, The Scythian Harp and Kazakh Kobyz: In Search of Historical Connections, in: G. Seaman (ed.), *Foundations of Empire Archaeology and Art of the Eurasian Steppes*, Los Angeles 1992, 77–100. B. LAWERGREN, The Ancient Harp Pazyryk: A Bowed Instrument? in: G. Seaman (ed.), *Foundations of Empire Archaeology and Art of the Eurasian Steppes*, Los Angeles 1992, 101–116.

7 Cs. KATONA, *Vikings of the steppe. Scandinavians, Rus', and the Turkic world (c. 750–1050)*, London 2023, 96–118.

8 This distinction in nomenclature will be maintained throughout the article. I refer to 'Hungarians' when discussing the high medieval period and the narrative of the chronicles but use 'Magyars' when addressing the historical context of the tenth century.

the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries preserved aspects of their earlier history. A largely fictional account of the deeds of a Magyar hero named Botond during a raid against Constantinople survives in varying forms in two Hungarian chronicles: the *Gesta Hungarorum* of Simon of Kéza (c. 1282–1283) and the fourteenth-century chronicle composition best known through its most famous manuscript, the *Illuminated Chronicle*. This episode contains elements that parallel aspects of the early written records of the Rus’.

The Rus’ early history, dating to the ninth and tenth centuries, was likewise recorded retrospectively in the famous *Povest’ Vremennykh Let*, commonly known as the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, which attained its final form in the early twelfth century. As I will argue, some concordances between these sources stem from literary borrowings and conventions in medieval chronicle writing. However, certain details are so specific – and rarely attested elsewhere – that they suggest a shared source. An example of this is a wrestling episode and the scene involving weapons being lodged in or on the gates of Constantinople. Given that the *Primary Chronicle*, composed in the vernacular Old Church Slavonic, could not have served as a literary prototype for the Latin-language Hungarian chronicles, it is plausible that these stories, or their elements, were transmitted orally.

Although these texts and the stories within them have received scholarly attention individually, their connections have not been explored.<sup>9</sup> I propose that the tenth century, a period of frequent contact between the Scandinavian Rus’ and the steppe people, is the most likely context for the development of such stories. Tales of heroic deeds could have circulated within ethnically diverse camps, such as the one described by Skylitzes, later to be retold in their respective homelands with additional or altered elements.

### The stories of Botond

The story to illustrate the possibility of wandering narratives between the two milieus is that of a fictional tenth-century Magyar hero named Botond. His heroic deeds during the Magyar incursions were preserved in various forms in three Hungarian chronicles from the later Middle Ages. One of these is the earliest

---

9 Scholarly literature on these texts is extensive. For an accessible overview, I refer here to introductory works that offer ample context for the development of chronicle writing in East Central and Eastern Europe: N. KERSKEN, *Geschichtsschreibung im Europa der ‘nationes’*. *Nationalgeschichtliche Gesamtdarstellungen im Mittelalter*, Cologne 1995. I. H. Garipzanov (ed.), *Historical Narratives and Christian Identity on a European Periphery: Early History Writing in Northern, East-Central, and Eastern Europe (c. 1070–1200)*, Turnhout 2011. J. SHEPARD, The Shaping of Past and Present, and Historical Writing in Rus’, c. 900–c. 1400, in: S. Foot – C. F. Robinson (eds.), *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 2: 400–1400*, Oxford 2012, 287–297. N. BEREND, Historical Writing in Central Europe (Bohemia, Hungary, Poland), c. 950–1400, in: Foot – Robinson (eds.), *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 2: 400–1400*, op. cit., 312–327. For a discussion of the specific scenes featured in these texts, refer to the relevant sections of this paper.

fully preserved Hungarian chronicle, the *Gesta Hungarorum* (c. 1200–1201), attributed to an anonymous scribe known as *P. dictus magister*, who likely served during the reign of King Béla III (1172–1196). In the *Gesta* of Anonymus, uniquely among these sources, Botond's actions are situated within the context of the Carpathian Basin and the Western European spheres of Hungarian military activity.<sup>10</sup> The other two chronicles – the *Gesta Hungarorum* by Simon of Kéza, composed around 1282–1283, and the *Illuminated Chronicle*, compiled in the fourteenth century (c. 1358) – make no mention of any Western exploits of Botond. Instead, they recount his deeds before the gates of Constantinople during a Hungarian raid on the Byzantine capital.<sup>11</sup> Regarding the same events, the narratives of these three chronicles differ and likely reflect the evolution of the legend over time. They appear to derive from a shared, now lost source – an early *gesta* or perhaps chronicle excerpts from the late eleventh or twelfth century – but they also influenced one another and, at times, drew upon oral tradition.<sup>12</sup>

According to the version of Simon of Kéza, the story unfolds as follows. It is set during a raid led against Byzantium several years after the battle of Lechfeld. While the Hungarians were encamped outside the city walls of Constantinople, a Greek giant emerged and issued a challenge, declaring that if he could not defeat two Hungarian fighters simultaneously in a wrestling match, the Greeks would submit and pay tribute. After enduring the persistent provocations of the Greek giant, the Hungarians selected a champion named Botond to answer the challenge. As Botond approached the designated wrestling arena, he made a brief detour to the gates of Constantinople. With a single blow from a club or axe (*cum dolabro*), he struck a large hole in the metal gate, astonishing the Greeks. During the subsequent wrestling contest, Botond defeated the Greek giant, prompting the emperor and his entourage, who had been observing the event from the city walls, to retreat in disgrace. Despite their victory, the

---

10 *Anonymi Bele regis notarii Gesta Hungarorum / Anonymus, Notary of King Béla: The Deeds of the Hungarians*, (Central European Medieval Texts, V), M. Rady – L. Veszprémy (eds. and trans.), Budapest 2010, 114–125 (LIII–LVII).

11 *Simonis de Kéza: Gesta Hungarorum / Simon of Kéza: The Deeds of the Hungarians*, (Central European Medieval Texts, I), L. Veszprémy – F. Schaer (eds. and trans.), Budapest 1999, 96–101 (42). *Chronica de Gestis Hungarorum e Codice Picto Saec. xiv. / The Illuminated Chronicle. Chronicle of the Deeds of the Hungarians from the Fourteenth-Century Illuminated Codex*, (Central European Medieval Texts, IX), J. M. Bak – L. Veszprémy (eds. and trans.), Budapest 2018, 104–107 (62).

12 K. SZOVÁK, L'histoire hongroise à l'époque arpadienne, in: S. Csernus – K. Korompay (eds.), *Les Hongrois et l'Europe: conquête et intégration*, Paris 1999, 378–380. L. VESZPRÉMY, 'More Paganismo': Reflections on the pagan and Christian past in the *Gesta Hungarorum* of the Hungarian Anonymous Notary, in: I. H. Garipzanov (ed.), *Historical Narratives and Christian Identity on a European Periphery: Early History Writing in Northern, East-Central, and Eastern Europe (c. 1070–1200)*, Turnhout 2011, 183–185. G. THOROCZKAY, A magyar krónikáirodalom kezdeteiről, in: G. Thoroczkay (ed.), *Ismeretlen Árpád-kor. Püspökök, legendák, krónikák*, Budapest 2016, 103–114. L. VESZPRÉMY, *History Writing and Historians in Hungary of the Árpáds*, Budapest 2024, 115–234.

emperor merely smiled at the Hungarians' demand for tribute. Consequently, after conferring with their leader, Taksony (*Tocsun*), the Hungarians abandoned the city and ravaged the territories of Greece and Bulgaria as they returned to Pannonia.<sup>13</sup>

A somewhat longer version of the legend is preserved in the *Illuminated Chronicle*. While the core narrative remains the same, the author introduces several intriguing details. When Botond is challenged to combat, the *Chronicle* attributes to him a defiant speech in which he declares that he is the smallest among the Hungarians but advises the Greek warrior to bring two companions to the fight – one to assist his passing soul in the afterlife and the other to bury him. Subsequently, Botond is instructed by the leader of the army, named Apor (*Opour*), to demonstrate his strength by striking the city's metal gate. With a single blow, he creates a hole large enough for a five-year-old child to pass through with ease. In Simon of Kéza's version, the Greek champion suffers a broken arm and succumbs to his injuries later, whereas in the *Illuminated Chronicle*, the Greek dies instantly during combat. Following this, the emperor's refusal to pay tribute, accompanied by laughter, leads to the subsequent devastation of Greece by the Hungarians. The episode concludes with a statement that the Hungarians conducted similar raids until the reign of Prince Taksony (*Toxun*).<sup>14</sup>

The story does not mention the Rus' directly and, at first glance, may seem unrelated to any Scandinavian or Rus' connections of the tenth-century Magyars. However, certain elements within the narrative bear parallels to Rus'ian historiography, suggesting that they may have been drawn from a shared oral tradition.

It is important to note that the late construction of these chronicles indicates that memories of a pagan past were faintly preserved and distorted. Medieval chroniclers often rearranged earlier oral traditions and written records in a disordered fashion, embellishing them with literary *topoi* and pure fantasy. The Hungarian authors were no exception to this practice. The existence of Botond, for example, is not supported by any contemporary sources, and there is no evidence that such a duel ever took place. Even the chroniclers show some restraint by their occasional interjection of the word *dicitur* ('as is told') or *perhibetur* ('as is held') during the narrative.<sup>15</sup> The third chronicler, Anonymus, even dismisses the entire story as a mere fabrication of peasant hearsay:

Sed quidam dicunt eos ivisse usque ad Constantinopolim et portam auream Constantinopolis Botondium cum dolabro suo incidisse. Sed ego, quia in nullo codice hystoriographorum inveni, nisi ex falsis fabulis rusticorum audivi, ideo ad presens opus scribered non proposui.

13 *Simonis de Kéza, Veszprémy – Schaer* (eds.), op. cit., 96–101 (42).

14 *Chronica de Gestis Hungarorum e Codice Picto Saec. xiv.*, Bak – Veszprémy (eds.), op. cit., 104–107 (62).

15 *Simonis de Kéza, Veszprémy – Schaer* (eds.), op. cit., 98 (42). *Chronica de Gestis Hungarorum e Codice Picto Saec. xiv.*, Bak – Veszprémy (eds.), op. cit., 106 (62).

Some indeed say that they reached Constantinople and that Botond cut the Golden Gate of Constantinople with his axe. But as I have found this in no book written by historians and have heard it only in the spurious tales of peasants, I do not, therefore, propose to write it in the present work.<sup>16</sup>

Anonymus, by contrast, situates the hero's actions within the context of the conquest of the Carpathian Basin and ultimately in Western Europe, where the figure of Botond serves a comparable narrative purpose to that in the other two chronicles. By avenging the Battle of Lechfeld,<sup>17</sup> he transforms a pivotal defeat, one that loomed large even in later "national" memory, into a moral victory. The versions in Simon of Kéza's chronicle and the *Illuminated Chronicle* are similarly deliberate authorial constructs. The Byzantine emperor's breach of faith similarly positions the Magyars on the moral high ground at the conclusion of the story – an unconvincing attempt by the authors to compensate for the failure to capture the city.

The scene has been the subject of previous scholarly inquiry. To identify Botond and his lineage in Anonymus' largely fictional account of Hungarian kindreds, as well as with similar-sounding names in other sources, have met with little success.<sup>18</sup> Researchers have also sought analogies to episodic details in near-contemporary texts and later folklore. These investigations revealed that certain elements are motifs found also in other texts, such as the breaching of a city gate.<sup>19</sup> Other details originate from the pagan past, with some reflecting indigenous traditions. For instance, the image of a hole large enough for a five-year-old child to pass through resonates in later Hungarian folk tales.<sup>20</sup> This, however, might also be found in other European folk traditions, and other aspects are even more plausibly of foreign origin, such as the enigmatic weapon attributed to Botond, which – alongside the Turkic etymology of his name – suggests connections to the nomadic Pechenegs.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the story is fundamentally part of a corpus of legends rooted in the pagan past,<sup>22</sup> blending local and foreign elements that were subsequently elaborated with literary borrowings.

16 *Anonymi Bele regis notarii*, Rady – Veszprémy (eds.), op. cit., 90–91 (XLII).

17 *Anonymi Bele regis notarii*, Rady – Veszprémy (eds.), op. cit., 118–124 (LV–LVI).

18 Gy. SEBESTYÉN, *A magyar honfoglalás mondái*, II, Budapest 1905, 153–171. Z. KORDÉ, Botond, in: Gy. Kristó – P. Engel – F. Makk (eds.), *Korai magyar történelmi lexikon (9.–14. század)*, Budapest 1994, 125.

19 H. MARCZALL, A Botond monda történelmi kapcsolatai, *Akadémiai Értesítő* 27, 1916, 90–100.

20 I. P. DEMÉNY, *Hősi epika*, Budapest 2002, 95–104.

21 Z. TÓTH, A Botond-monda eredete s az anonymusi Botond-hagyomány, *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 35, 1988, 467–483.

22 Most recently J. B. SZABÓ – B. SUDÁR, Botond(ok). Egy hős arcai – és a hazai tudomány, *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* (forthcoming). Their paper inspired the present piece, although I reach a different conclusion and deal with other aspects of the legend. The two authors explain the differing chronicle versions of the story with various poetic/singer traditions alive in medieval Hungary.

### The wrestling episode(s)

Certain elements in the narrative suggest a shared tradition, which, I would argue, the Rus' must also have embraced. Interestingly, no scholar has drawn attention to the wrestling scene and its closest analogue. The *Russian Primary Chronicle* records, under the year 992, an episode in which Prince Vladimir the Great (978–1015), returning from his campaign against the Croats, encountered a Pecheneg host near the River Trubezh, an eastern tributary of the Dnieper. An unnamed Pecheneg prince proposed resolving the conflict through a wrestling match, the outcome of which would determine whether the next three years would bring peace or war between the two parties. Vladimir initially struggled to find a suitable champion, but an elderly man in his army, who had joined the campaign with four of his sons, suggested his fifth son, who had remained at home by the hearth. This youngest child, it was claimed, possessed extraordinary strength, able to tear leather apart with his bare hands. When summoned by Vladimir, the boy was tested and demonstrated his might by ripping a handful of flesh and skin from the flank of an enraged bull. Thus, he was chosen to represent Vladimir in the duel. The following day, the Rus' boy faced the Pecheneg champion in combat and emerged victorious, upon which the Pechenegs took to flight and were cut down by the pursuing Rus'. In honour of this triumph, Vladimir founded the city of Pereyaslavl' at the ford where the duel had taken place.<sup>23</sup>

The story bears striking similarities to the Botond legend. In both versions, finding a champion proves difficult. As noted, Vladimir struggled for days, while the Greek warrior's continued harassment of the Hungarian army suggests that they, too, took time to find a man brave enough to face the enemy. Moreover, both protagonists are introduced as unknown before their respective narratives unfold and are depicted as diminutive figures. Botond is explicitly described as the "smallest among the Hungarians" (*minimus Hungarorum*), while the Rus' youth is the youngest of five brothers, so much so that his father did not even bring him to the campaign. The Rus' boy's puny size provokes ridicule from the Pecheneg warrior, who is "gigantic and fearsome" (превеликъ з'бло и страшенъ), just like Botond's Greek opponent (*magnus sicut gigans* and *gygas*). The element of mockery is also mutual in both tales. The Pecheneg's derisive smile at his opponent mirrors the Greek champion's scornful question as to why Botond did not bring a companion to assist him in the duel.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, both "Goliaths" meet their demise either during or as a consequence of the duel.

As Adolf Stender-Petersen observed as early as 1934 in relation to the *Primary Chronicle*, the core of this narrative – a small, obscure fighter defeating a monstrous champion – draws upon the biblical tradition of the David and

23 *Povest' Vremennykh Let*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., D. S. Likhachev (ed.), Saint-Petersburg 1966, 54–55 (henceforth: PVL). *The Russian Primary Chronicle. Laurentian text*, S. H. Cross – O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor (eds. and trans.), Cambridge 1953, 119–120 (henceforth: RPC).

24 *Simonis de Kéza, Veszprémy – Schaer* (eds.), op. cit., 98 (42).

Goliath story. This tradition served as a model for late medieval Christian writers, as several elements of the tale clearly echo *The Book of Samuel* (1 Samuel 17:1–58): (1) David is the youngest son of Jesse, who leaves him to tend the flocks while accompanying Saul with three of his sons to fight the Philistines. (2) Though perceived as unsuited for combat, David is, in fact, strong, boasting of slaying lions and bears that threatened his sheep. (3) Goliath challenges the enemy to determine the formal submission of their respective nations through single combat. (4) He harasses the Israelite army for 40 days and mocks their chosen champion due to his youth. (5) After the duel and Goliath's death, the Philistines flee, pursued by the Israelites.<sup>25</sup> The Rus'ian version aligns closely with these elements, and the *Primary Chronicle* is replete with biblical motifs throughout its narrative.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, the Hungarian versions omit certain details, such as the hero's lineage and non-combatant background, as well as the enemy's flight. These omissions likely arise from their incompatibility with a narrative set far from the Magyar homelands and culminating in retreat.

The historical credibility of the two stories is also comparable. Like the Botond legend, the account of the *Primary Chronicle* is embedded within a historical framework – namely, Vladimir's conflicts with the steppe nomads. However, it bears the hallmarks of folklore, likely woven around Vladimir's figure during the eleventh or twelfth centuries. The chronicler links the events to the folk etymology of the Rus' town of Pereyaslavl', which is said to have been named after the incident. However, the chronicle already lists Pereyaslavl' among Rus' towns in an earlier Rus'-Byzantine treaty, indicating an anachronism.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the level of detail in the story, compared to the taciturn treatment of the preceding campaign against the Croats, suggests that the chronicler arbitrarily inserted the episode into the annals under a random year.<sup>28</sup>

The combat scene, in essence – though, as we shall see, not in every detail – belongs to the topos of classical duels found throughout ancient and medieval world literature.<sup>29</sup> The example of the *Primary Chronicle* is often interpreted as a classical Indo-European motif. Within Rus'ian tradition, it acquired a distinctive meaning as a symbol of resistance against the nomads who persistently

---

25 For a discussion on single combat as a Near Eastern tradition: R. DE VAUX, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, D. McHugh (trans.), New York 1971, 122–135.

26 This owes much to the liturgical tradition of Rus', shaping history writing on deep levels: S. GRIFFIN, *The Liturgical Past in Byzantium and Early Rus*, Cambridge 2019, 35–36, 56–60, 229–231.

27 J. LIND, The Russo-Byzantine Treaties and the Early Urban Structure of Rus', *The Slavonic and East European Review* 62/3, 1984, 364–368. S. FRANKLIN – J. SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus 750–1200*, London 2013 [1996], 106–107.

28 A. STENDER-PETERSEN, *Die Varägersage als Quelle der Altrussischen Chronik*, Copenhagen 1934, 156–157. D. LIKHACHEV, *Velikoye naslediyе. Klassicheskoye proizvedeniya literatury Drevney Rusi*, Moscow 1979, 131–132.

29 P. WARD, *Verbal duelling in heroic narrative. The Homeric and Old English traditions*, Princeton 1990. V. M. UDWIN, *Between Two Armies. The Role of Duel in Epic Culture*, Leiden 1999.

harassed them from the steppes across various epochs. This theme is further reflected in the later tales of Rus'ian *byliny*, extending up to Mongol times and beyond, as well as in subsequent fairy tales.<sup>30</sup> The Hungarian chronicles also recount two analogous duels. The first features a Hungarian hero, Opos, battling a giant Czech warrior, while the second describes a confrontation between the Pomeranians and the Poles, the latter represented by Béla – then a fugitive, who would later become king of Hungary.<sup>31</sup> These accounts show some similarity with the Botond story. However, the first instance is mentioned only briefly in the narrative and lacks significant detail, while the second, framed as a judicial single combat resolving a legal dispute, is conducted in the medieval chivalric style with lances.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the presentation of the duel scenes in the Hungarian chronicles and the *Primary Chronicle* adheres to the conventions of medieval chronicle writing, which frequently drew upon circulating literary and biblical models. While these narratives are set against historically grounded backdrops, their frameworks falter when assessed for factual credibility.

Nevertheless, one detail stands out, which, to my mind, is unique to the accounts in the Hungarian chronicles and the *Primary Chronicle*. In all versions, the duel is described as a wrestling contest conducted in a designated space: Simon of Kéza refers to “the field of struggling without weapons” (*aream luctandi inermis*), the *Illuminated Chronicle* mentions “the field for contest” (*area ad certandum*), and the *Primary Chronicle* describes “a space duly measured off between the two armies” (разм’ьривше межѣ ов’ьма полкома).<sup>33</sup> This specific form of contest may stem from a genuine historical tradition rather than late medieval literary borrowings as it aligns well with the cultural tradition(s) of such a practice in the Rus’ and nomadic milieus. Wrestling has historically been a ubiquitous form of physical training and competition across most cultures.

30 J. BLANKOFF, Une survivance indo-européenne? A propos de combats singuliers dans la vieille Russie, *Ludus Magistralis* 65, 1991, 31–34. A. КОПТЕВ, The Mythological Serpent Fighting Motif in the Russian Primary Chronicle, Epic Poetry and Fairy Tales, in: P. Lajoie – S. Zochios (eds.), *New Research on the Religion and Mythology of the Pagan Slavs*, II, Lisieux 2023, 213–264.

31 *Chronica de Gestis Hungarorum e Codice Picto Saec. xiv.*, Bak – Veszprémy (eds.), op. cit., 148–151 (79), 192–193 (101).

32 D. BAGI, ‘Quamvis sim nobilior quam paganus ille, tamen pugnabo pro regni vestri commodo et honore domini ducis.’ Zur Kritik eines Kapitels der Ungarischen Chronikkomposition, in: A. Pleszczyński (ed.), *Historia narrat. Studia mediewistyczne ofiarowane Profesorowi Jackowi Banaszkiwiczowi*, Lublin 2012, 101–106. For judicial combat, see: R. E. KELLET, *Single Combat and Warfare in German Literature of the High Middle Ages*, London 2008, 10–29.

33 *Simonis de Kéza*, Veszprémy – Schaer (eds.), op. cit., 98 (42). *Chronica de Gestis Hungarorum e Codice Picto Saec. xiv.*, Bak – Veszprémy (eds.), op. cit., 106 (62). PVL, 55. RPC, 120.

Although its popularity in early medieval Europe cannot be directly compared across regions, wrestling appears to have held a particularly strong tradition within the cultural milieu of the Scandinavians, the Rus', and the Magyars.

Old Norse-Icelandic sagas and mythological texts frequently depict wrestling scenes, often set during sporting events, heroic trials, or encounters with otherworldly beings.<sup>34</sup> The accounts are later in time, but such a strong correlation about Viking Age customs in later medieval traditions are unlikely to be inventions of the age. In relation to the Rus', the *Primary Chronicle* provides an example that is particularly relevant. In 1022, Mstislav, son of Prince Vladimir and ruler of Tmutarakan, entered into a conflict with the Kasogians, a tribe related to the Circassians and dwelling in the vicinity of the Sea of Azov. As a conflict resolution, the Kasogian prince, Rededya, proposed a duel without weapons, a challenge which Mstislav accepted. Calling upon God for assistance, Mstislav overpowered the Kasogian prince in a wrestling match, emerging victorious.<sup>35</sup>

It is notable that in the Rus'ian accounts, the suggestion of wrestling as a means of conflict resolution is consistently made by the enemy – the Pechenegs and the Kasogians, respectively – suggesting it was perceived as a customary practice in the steppes. Indeed, there is abundant historical and visual evidence of steppe and Central Asian peoples being highly skilled in wrestling. This is evident in Scythian metalwork, Persian epic literature, and historical texts such as *The Secret History of the Mongols*.<sup>36</sup> Despite the significant temporal and geographical distance between the histories of different steppe peoples, from Central Asia to Eastern Europe, certain shared conditions appear to have fostered similar cultural traditions over centuries and across vast regions. Magyar warriors undoubtedly practiced wrestling as well. This is corroborated by the tenth-century monk Ekkehard, who describes a Magyar raiding party that stormed the monastery of Saint Gall in 926. The Magyars, occupying the monastery's yard, passed the time with various games, including wrestling.<sup>37</sup> Even later medieval frescoes related to King Ladislaus I (1077–1095) in Hungarian churches associate this custom with the people of the steppes.<sup>38</sup>

34 S. WETZLER, 'Var talað mart um glímur' – Ringkampf im alten Island, in: M. Teichert (ed.), *Sport und Spiel bei den Germanen: Nordeuropa von der römischen Kaiserzeit bis zum Mittelalter*, Berlin 2014, 377–399.

35 PVL, 64. RPC, 134.

36 L. CHRISTOPOULOS, Greek Influences on the Pazyryk-style Wrestling Motif of the Kesheng-zhuang Bronze Buckles, *Sino-Platonic Papers* 260, 2015, 1–13. H. E. CHEHABI, Wrestling in the Shahnameh and later Persian epics, in: A.-A. Seyed-Ghorab (ed.), *The Layered Heart. Essays on Persian Poetry*, Washington 2019, 237–282. K. A. KRIPPES, Wrestling and Wrestler as Epic Aspects of the Secret History, *Mongolian Studies* 12, 1989, 95–100.

37 *Ekkehart*, Haefele – Tremp – Schnoor (eds.), op. cit., 302.

38 Gy. LÁSZLÓ, *A népvándorlások művészete Magyarországon*, Budapest 1974, 107–118. L. VARGYAS, Honfoglalás előtti hagyományok Szent László legendájában, in: L. Mezey (ed.), *Athleta Patriae. Tanulmányok Szent László történetéhez*, Budapest 1980, 9–19. M. HOPPÁL, *Folklor és hagyomány. Válogatott tanulmányok*, Budapest 2004, 112–114.

When searching for parallels in other texts, the two discussed sources also show exceptionalism. I am unaware of any medieval examples of the David and Goliath story, or its secular adaptations, being presented as a wrestling scene.<sup>39</sup> The early medieval Old English poem *Beowulf* offers a parallel that is closest in intent to our examples. It has been suggested that the scene in which the hero wrestles Grendel to the ground and later bringing his head to Heorot as a trophy of his triumph – freeing a “nation” from a monstrous foe – represents a “judicial ordeal of God” rooted in the David and Goliath tradition.<sup>40</sup> However, it should be noted that Grendel does not function as a champion in the same sense.

It should also be emphasised that the stories of Botond, Vladimir’s tanner boy, and Mstislav fall within a specific literary theme known as “the individual combat of champions.” The primary motivation behind this theme was to avoid the spilling of blood between entire armies. This motif is clearly distinct in both intent and execution from other forms of single combat found in medieval (or earlier) epics and romances.<sup>41</sup> Since the latter two examples are recorded in the same source, this strengthens the credibility of wrestling being an accepted tradition among the Rus’, or perhaps a broader steppe custom. Consequently, the connection to the Botond scene becomes more compelling.

Evidence suggests that such narratives circulated during the period. Anonymus’ reference to peasant tales about Botond is particularly indicative in this regard. Similarly, episode of the *Primary Chronicle*, albeit with omissions, appears to have been transmitted orally across long distances, as demonstrated by the presence of an “individual combat of champions” scene in the Old Norse-Icelandic *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*, a parallel well-recognised in scholarly literature.<sup>42</sup> According to this likely thirteenth-century narrative, Björn, an Icelandic hero, serves the “Russian” king Valdimarr – a name corresponding to Vladimir in Old Norse tradition. During a foreign invasion led by

---

39 Cf. R. M. KARRAS, *Thou Art the Man. The Masculinity of David in the Christian and Jewish Middle Ages*, Philadelphia 2021, 27–48. J. J. COHEN, *Of Giants. Sex, Monsters and the Middle Ages*, Minneapolis 1999, 65–71. B. D. UTTER, Gawain and Goliath: Davidic parallels and the problem of penance in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, *Comitatus* 44, 2013, 121–156. I would note an intriguing parallel in Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum*, where the renowned hero and duellist Starcath wrestles an invincible giant in Byzantium. However, since Starcath himself is a giant, the similarity to the Botond legend lies solely in the wrestling scene’s setting in Byzantium. Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, I, F.-J. Karsten (ed.) – P. Fisher (trans.), Oxford 2015, 388.

40 M. W. BLOOMFIELD, Beowulf, Byrhtnoth, and the Judgement of God: Trial by Combat in Anglo-Saxon England, *Speculum* 44/4, 1969, 545–559. S. H. HOROWITZ, Beowulf, Samson, David and Christ, *Studies in Medieval Culture* 12, 1978, 17–23.

41 H. A. HOFFNER JR., A Hittite analogue to the David and Goliath contest of champions?, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30/2, 1968, 220–225. M. L. WEST, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, Oxford 2007, 486–487. KELLETT, *Single combat*, op. cit., 11–12.

42 STENDER-PETERSEN, *Die Varägersage als Quelle*, op. cit., 161–163. S. H. CROSS, La tradition islandaise de saint Vladimir, *Revue des Études Slaves* 11/3–4, 1931, 139–141. KOPTEV, *The Mythological Serpent*, op. cit., 217–218.

a champion and kinsman of Valdimarr, named Kaldimarr, the king is challenged to single combat to decide the fate of the kingdom. As Valdimarr himself does not intend to fight, he struggles to find a substitute among his retainers until the Norse warrior Björn volunteers. Representing the king, Björn triumphs over Kaldimarr in the decisive duel and earns the nickname *kappi*, meaning 'champion'.<sup>43</sup> Although this duel is fought with weapons rather than involving wrestling, and its chronology is difficult to reconcile with the Pecheneg invasion of 992 recorded in the *Primary Chronicle*, the dating discrepancies are of little consequence.<sup>44</sup> Both Icelandic sagas and the *Primary Chronicle* are too temporally distant from the events they describe to be considered precise records of tenth-century chronology. Nevertheless, the episode in *Bjarnar saga* demonstrates that a narrative tradition of duels fought on Vladimir's behalf persisted in thirteenth-century Iceland. Another intriguing detail of the *Primary Chronicle's* story also appears in Norse tradition: the tanner boy's trial of strength involving a bull. This motif finds its counterpart in the *þáttr* (a short tale akin to a saga) of *Þorsteinn Uxafóts* ('Bull's-Leg').<sup>45</sup> These tropes were likely brought north by Viking mercenaries who traversed different courts during the tenth century, facilitating the exchange of narrative traditions across regions.

To sum up, the closest analogies of the Botond legend's fighting scene are found in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*. These episodes are the only medieval examples that reference wrestling in comparable contexts, yet they have never been linked. Furthermore, the narratives are set in the tenth century, a period when the Magyars and the Rus' were often in contact with one another. The specific parallels between these accounts are intriguing, particularly given the absence of textual connections between the sources. The *Primary Chronicle* was written in Old Church Slavonic, while the Hungarian chronicles were composed in Latin, ruling out the possibility of direct literary borrowings. Indeed, no scholar has argued otherwise. It is plausible, therefore, that this element of the stories might originate from indigenous tradition which probably wandered orally as the Norse parallels indicate. Tenth- and eleventh-century Byzantine military tactics also resonate in Old Norse saga tradition, likely stemming from stages in Scandinavian and Greek officers' messes or the imperial court circles.<sup>46</sup> The oral transmission of plot structures and motifs was likewise common

43 *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*, in: S. Nordal – G. Jónsson (eds.), *Borgfirðinga sögur*, Íslenzk fornrit, III, Reykjavík 1938, 120–122.

44 Some suggest that Kaldimarr should be identified with Yaropolk I (972–978) and Björn with one of the two Varangians who, according to the *Primary Chronicle*, killed him. This would place the events around 978. However, Björn's birth is estimated to have been in 989, with his time in Rus' calculated to be between 1008 and 1010. S. NORDAL, Formáli, in: Nordal – Jónsson (eds.), *Borgfirðinga sögur*, op. cit., lxxvii–lxxviii, lxxxvi–lxxxvii. STENDER-PETERSEN, *Die Varägersage als Quelle*, op. cit., 162–164. CROSS, *La tradition islandaise*, op. cit., 139–141.

45 STENDER-PETERSEN, *Die Varägersage als Quelle*, op. cit., 164–166.

46 J. SHEPARD, Middle Byzantine Military Culture, Harald Hardrada and Tall Stories, in: N. Yu. Gvozdetskaja – I. G. Konovalova – E. A. Melnikova – A. V. Podossinov (eds.), *Stanzas of*

in Byzantine frontier zones, as illustrated by Arabic and other Eastern fable tropes in exchange between the Greek and Muslim worlds.<sup>47</sup> These highlight the importance of not dismissing resemblances or potential transmissions between narratives, even when they contain variations or may have originated independently from a shared source.

### The gate of Constantinople

The hypothesis regarding the potential early oral roots of the wrestling scene is further supported by another episode in the Botond legend, which also appears to have had its own established tradition as early as the ninth to tenth centuries: the episode of the gate of Constantinople. In the Hungarian chronicles, the gate is described as being copper (*aerea*) or metal (*metallina*) in the two versions.<sup>48</sup> These probably refer to the Golden Gate, which was constructed under Theodosius II (408–450), as Anonymus (our third chronicler) refers to it as the *porta aurea*.<sup>49</sup> Two key aspects are important in this context: the motif of breaking the gate and the symbolism of the gate itself. There are parallels to both of these elements in other texts, some of which touch on both aspects.

Several medieval texts describe instances in which individuals use various weapons against gates with specific intentions. My wording remains intentionally vague, as no exact parallels exist for a situation where a champion (1) uses an axe (2) to breach a gate (3) specifically to showcase the attackers' strength (4). The most commonly cited parallel is found in the *Gesta Principum Polonorum* (c. 1112–1118) by the Polish writer Gallus Anonymus, concerning the occupation of Kyiv by Bolesław I the Brave (992–1025). According to Gallus, the Polish duke entered the town without resistance and then struck the Golden Gate of Kyiv with his sword. To explain the astonishment of his retainers at this unexpected act, the chronicler records a monologue in which the duke compares piercing the gate to what he intends to do to the Rus' princes' sister when he takes her as a concubine.<sup>50</sup> The historicity of this episode is highly questionable, as it is notably absent from contemporary accounts, and there is uncertainty regarding the precise date of the construction of the Golden Gate, which likely postdates 1018 when Bolesław took the city.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, neither the actor (a rul-

---

*Friendship. Studies in Honour of Tatjana N. Jackson*, Moscow 2011, 473–482.

47 M. D. LAUXTERMANN, 'As though from India itself': Stories of Byzantium, in: J. Shepard – P. Frankopan (eds.), *Revisiting the Byzantine Commonwealth: Nodes, Networks and Spheres*, Oxford 2025, (forthcoming). I would like to thank Marc D. Lauxtermann for granting me access to his forthcoming publication.

48 *Simonis de Kéza, Veszprémy – Schaer* (eds.), op. cit., 98 (42). *Chronica de Gestis Hungarorum e Codice Picto Saec. xiv.*, Bak – Veszprémy (eds.), op. cit., 106 (62).

49 *Anonymi Bele regis notarii*, Rady – Veszprémy (eds.), op. cit., 90 (XLII).

50 *Gesta principum Polonorum. The Deeds of the Princes of the Poles*, (Central European Medieval Texts, III), P. W. Knoll – F. Schaer (trans. and ann.) – T. N. Bisson (ed., corr.), Budapest 2003, 42.

51 *Gesta principum Polonorum*, op. cit., fn. 3, 42.

er, not a champion), nor the timing (after the city was taken), nor the weapon (a sword, rather than an axe) or the outcome of the strike (no hole created) nor the symbolic intent (rape) seems to parallel the Botond legend. Judging by his extensive knowledge of Hungarian political matters and geographical names, Gallus undoubtedly visited Hungary,<sup>52</sup> although the length of his stay and the sources to which he had access remain unknown. His account suggests that the literary prototype for such a story may have circulated, and that the topos was adapted to particular circumstances – whether cultural, narrative, or otherwise.

The Botond legend, however, demonstrates peculiarities not found in other texts, suggesting that while the narrative framework may have been inspired by a literary model, its specific details likely have other origins. For instance, the weapon used by Botond is difficult to identify and has few, if any, literary parallels. It is referred to as *dolabrum* in the Latin texts, sometimes translated as ‘axe,’ though a more accurate interpretation would be ‘club’ or ‘mace.’ The Magyars did not employ this type of weapon in the tenth century. Clubs and maces were more characteristic of the nomadic Pechenegs, and even in later depictions and charter evidence, these weapons are associated with them. Given that the name Botond is of Turkic origin, with its etymology tracing back to the verb *butan* (‘to strike’), from which the word for ‘mace’ (*but/buta/bud/buda*) is derived, a Hungarian scholar has suggested that the story might, in fact, be a borrowing from the Pechenegs.<sup>53</sup>

Another potential motif in the story concerns the very gate of Constantinople itself. The gate must have had its own legend outside Byzantine circles as early as the eighth century, as evidenced by the Bulgar duke Kardamos (777–803), who threatened Emperor Constantine VI (780–797) that, should he fail to honour an owed tribute, he would march to the Golden Gate – a clear allusion to its symbolic role in the city’s defence.<sup>54</sup> It appears that the Hungarian chroniclers were well aware of this strong symbolism, as all three versions specifically mention the gate, as noted above.<sup>55</sup>

Fixing a weapon into the gate of Constantinople is also reliably documented within the cultural practices of the ninth and tenth centuries, and therefore the “gate scene” involving Botond might not necessarily derive from literary borrowings in the later Hungarian chronicles. Any action of piercing a weapon into the gate would have required admittance by the Greeks. By the tenth century, the gate was protected by outer walls, which were pierced by another gate.<sup>56</sup>

52 P. W. KNOLL – F. SCHAEER – W. POLAK, Editor’s introduction, in: *Gesta principum Polonorum*, op. cit., xxvi–xxvii.

53 TÓTH, A Botond-monda eredete, op. cit., 471–472, 480–481.

54 *Theophanes, Chronographia*, I, C. de Boor (ed.), Leipzig 1883, 470. *The Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor. Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284–813*, C. Mango – R. Scott (trans.), Oxford 1997, 646. Already noted by MARCZALL, A Botond monda, op. cit., 92.

55 Anonymus had probably visited the Balkans. VESZPRÉMY, *History Writing and Historians*, op. cit., 207.

56 C. MANGO, Golden Gate, in: A. P. Kazhdan (ed.), ODB I, 858–859.

This might have applied earlier as well, as is suggested by another analogous episode recorded by the Byzantine chronicler Theophanes the Confessor in the year 813. The Bulgar khan, Krum (803–814), surrounded the Imperial City with a vast multitude and then paraded along the walls from the Blachernai palace to the Golden Gate. After this display of force, Krum entertained himself with pagan sacrifices of various kinds on the meadows in front of the Golden Gate, culminating in his attempt to fix his spear into the city gate. However, he had to request permission from the emperor to do so, which was denied. This led Krum to retreat to his tent, after which he sought peace negotiations.<sup>57</sup> Since this account is from a contemporary source, its authenticity is likely. The Byzantine perspective, however, complicates its interpretation. Why would Krum ask for permission if the act were intended as a “symbol of victory”?<sup>58</sup> His request implies an amicable, or at least consensual, intent, supported by Krum’s subsequent appeal for peace. Yet, if the act of stabbing a spear into the gate was not hostile in nature, why did the emperor deny it? The ensuing peace negotiations and the emperor’s later attempt to assassinate Krum suggest hesitation or deliberate delay on the part of the Byzantines. The emperor may have realised that the act was merely a gesture to preserve Krum’s prestige among his followers, thus preventing the disintegration of his horde.<sup>59</sup> In any case, the story confirms that striking a weapon into the Golden Gate had a historical tradition by the ninth century and was associated with the symbolic end of a conflict.

Another well-known instance where a weapon is associated with the Golden Gate is recorded in the *Primary Chronicle*. After detailing the Byzantine-Rus’ peace treaty of 907, the chronicle states that the Rus’ hung their shields on the city gates as a sign of victory.<sup>60</sup> While the Byzantine peace treaties incorporated into the chronicle are derived from Greek originals and therefore considered authentic,<sup>61</sup> the mention of the shields is an addition by the author(s) of the *Primary Chronicle*. There are reasonable doubts regarding the historicity of Oleg’s raid in 907, which is purportedly concluded by these stipulations, mainly be-

---

57 *Theophanes*, de Boor (ed.), op. cit., 503. The story is embellished later in Symeon Magister and Logothetes: *Theophanes continuatus, Ioannes Cameniata, Symeon Magister, Georgius monachus*, (CSHB, XXXIII), I. Bekker (ed.), Bonn 1838, 612–613 (8).

58 J. SHEPARD, Slavs and Bulgars, in: R. McKitterick (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History. Vol. 2. c. 700–c. 900*, Cambridge 1995, 235.

59 On the Byzantine tactic of delaying, see: J. SHEPARD, Information, disinformation and delay in Byzantine diplomacy, *BF* 10, 1985, 251–269.

60 PVL, 17. RPC, 65.

61 J. MALINGOUDI, *Die russisch-byzantinischen Verträge des 10. Jhds. aus diplomatischer Sicht*, Thessaloniki 1994. They also reflect similar legal practices in Scandinavia that were recorded slightly later: M. STEIN-WILKESHUIS, A Viking-age treaty between Constantinople and northern merchants, with its provisions on theft and robbery, *Scando-Slavica* 37, 1991, 35–47. IDEM, Scandinavians swearing oaths in tenth-century Russia: Pagans and Christians, *Journal of Medieval History* 28, 2002, 155–168. Criticism on the presentation of Rus’ towns in the treaty: LIND, *The Russo-Byzantine Treaties*, op. cit.

cause no Byzantine sources mention such an assault.<sup>62</sup> However, the ritual act of hanging shields on a city gate need not necessarily be an invention of later writers, as noted by Dmitri Obolensky and George Ostrogorsky.<sup>63</sup> A contemporary account, unrelatable to Byzantine or Slavic authors, confirms that this was a Scandinavian custom. The Mainz redaction of the *Annales Fuldenses* reports under the year 882 that Charles the Fat forced a Viking host, led by Godfrid and occupying Asselt, to make peace, after which the Vikings hung a shield above the city gate as a sign of peace. This turned out to be a trap, as Franks who entered the town, now thought to be peaceful, were either captured or killed.<sup>64</sup> Regardless of the outcome, the account reflects the Frankish chronicler's belief that shields hanging on a city gate signal peace, a custom apparently shared by the Scandinavians. The correlation of two distinct accounts, produced in widely differing milieus but concerning roughly contemporary events, strongly suggests the authenticity of this custom among the Scandinavians. It is perhaps unsurprising that the twelfth-century Rus'ian chronicler misunderstood the message from the perspective of time, interpreting it as sign of triumph, following the Greek's subjugation. The situation, therefore, closely parallels that of Krum's story and, indeed, the Botond legend, in which the Hungarians were forced to leave the city after the duel.

Much like the wrestling scene, such stories could be transmitted over long distances and were preserved for extended periods. Stories related to Prince Oleg, for example, certainly were. This is exemplified by the famous episode in the *Primary Chronicle*, where Oleg's death by his horse is foretold. This trope found its way North, evident in the well-known parallel scene of the "death in the horse's skull" in the high medieval Icelandic saga of Örvvar Oddr.<sup>65</sup>

The most reliable and closest analogous stories associated with the gate of Constantinople involve people (the Bulgars and the Rus') who were in close contact with the Magyars during the time when the Botond story takes place. Both stories are tied to peace negotiations. Could it be that the Botond story

62 FRANKLIN – SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus*, op. cit., 106–107.

63 A new summary of the historiography of the Rus'-Byzantine treaties, including differing viewpoints on the 907 raid and the "hanging of shields", is provided by M. V. BIBIKOV, *Sovremennyye issledovaniya dogovorov Rusi i Vizantii X veka, Khristianstvo na Blizhnem Vostoke* 8/3, 2024, 77–92. Ostrogorsky's opinion is missing from the survey: G. OSTROGORSKY, *L'expédition du prince Oleg contre Constantinople en 907, Annales de l'Institut Kondakov* 11, 1940, 47–62.

64 *Annales Fuldenses sive annales Regni Francorum Orientalis*, MGH SS. rer. Germ., VII, F. Kurze (ed.), Hannover 1891, 98. The other redaction of the annal omits this detail: *Annales Fuldenses*, Kurze (ed.), op. cit., 107–108.

65 E. MELNIKOVA, *The death in the horse's skull. The interaction of Old Russian and Old Norse literary tradition*, in: S. Hansson – M. Malm (eds.), *Gudar på jorden. Festskrift till Lars Lönnroth*, Stockholm 2000, 153–168. A. STENDER-PETERSEN, *The Byzantine Prototype to the Varangian story of the Hero's Death through his Horse*, in: A. Stender-Petersen (ed.), *Varangica*, Aarhus 1953, 181–188.

holds some historical kernel, stemming from real events? After all, the Magyars, the Bulgars, and the Rus' were part of the same alliance in the 970s, a plausible context for the circulation of stories like these within a joint camp.

### The historical core – campaigns against Byzantium

Several questions arise concerning the Botond legend from a historical point view: When does the story take place according to the narratives? How much weight should be given to the description of the campaign? And does it convey any historical reality? Naturally, it should not be expected that historical accuracy was a primary concern for medieval historians writing some 300 years after the events. Unlike the Magyar campaigns against Western European kingdoms, which the *Illuminated Chronicle* records based on the contemporary chronicle of Regino of Prüm (finished in 908) and his continuator Adalbert of Magdeburg,<sup>66</sup> no contemporary written accounts were available for the Hungarian chroniclers concerning the southern campaigns. There is also no evidence that they were able to read Greek. As a result, their sources were limited to earlier, now-lost Hungarian chronicle fragments and oral tradition. Despite this, the passages may still contain a historical core, albeit in a distorted form.

The legend, in its general outline, is well-rooted in tenth-century history, when the Magyars launched multiple campaigns against Byzantium, starting in 934. These campaigns have long been studied, and the sequence of events has been reconstructed with relative clarity.<sup>67</sup> However, all of these raids, with one exception, are known only through Byzantine sources, and the brevity of these accounts makes a detailed analysis challenging. What we do know is that the Magyar armies reached Constantinople on two separate occasions, in 934 and 958/959.

In 934, Byzantine historians, all drawing from the account of Georgius Monachus Continuatus, report that the Magyars – referred to as “Turks” (*Τουρκοί*)<sup>68</sup> – had captured prisoners in Thrace and swiftly advanced toward the

66 G. SILAGI, Die Ungarnstürme in der ungarischen Geschichtschreibung: Anonymus und Simon von Kéza, *Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di Studi sull'alto medioevo* 35, 1988, 245–272. L. VESZPRÉMY, A kalandozások Regino krónikájában és a magyar elbeszélő forrásokban, *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 130/3, 2017, 781–799.

67 Gy. MORAVCSIK, *Byzantium and the Magyars*, Amsterdam 1970, 53–61. G. FASOLI, *Le incursioni ungare in Europa nel secolo X.*, Firenze 1945, 161–162. T. von BOGYAY, Ungarnzüge gegen und für Byzanz: Bemerkungen zu neueren Forschungen, *Ural-Altäische Jahrbücher* 60, 1988, 27–38. T. P. ANTONOPOULOS, Byzantium, the Magyar Raids and Their Consequences, *BSI* 54, 1993, 254–267. M. GRIGORIOU-IOANNIDOU, Οι σύγγροι και οι επιδρομές τους στο δυτικο-ευρωπαϊκό και στο βυζαντινό χώρο: τέλη 9ου-10ου αι., *Byzantina* 20/1, 1999, 65–135. L. BALOGH, A New Source on Hungarian Raids against Byzantium in the Middle of the Tenth Century, *Chronica* 7–8, 2007–2008, 16–25. Relevant sources have been published by Gyula Moravcsik and will be cited from his edition: Gy. MORAVCSIK, *Az Árpád-kori magyar történet bizánci forrásai. Fontes Byzantini historiae Hungaricae aevoducum et regum ex stirpe Árpád descenduntium*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Budapest 1988.

68 MORAVCSIK, *Byzantinoturcica*, op. cit., 320–327.

Byzantine capital. To address this threat, Emperor Romanos (likely I, Lekapenos, 920–944) dispatched Theophanes, the *patrikios*, who held the high office of *protovestiaros* and *paradynasteuon*, to negotiate with the invaders. Without hesitation, Theophanes offered a substantial sum to ransom the captives and, through his negotiations, successfully persuaded the Magyars to return home, avoiding further conflict.<sup>69</sup>

The raid is also mentioned in the *Murūj ad-Dahab wa-Ma'ādin al-Jawhar* (*Meadows of Gold and Mines of Precious Stones*) by the renowned tenth-century Arab historian Mas'ūdī. He hesitates to date the enterprise to the year 320 AH (ca. 932) or shortly thereafter, which aligns it with the 934 raid.<sup>70</sup> The passage, however, is somewhat muddled and contains confusion regarding four Turkic tribes – the *yajnī*, *bajanāk* (Pechenegs), *bajgird* (a term frequently used for the Magyars and later Hungarians), and the *nūkarda* – who became entangled in a conflict with each other and the Byzantines over the matter of some Muslim merchants. Following this, a joint force of around 60,000 horsemen, with a Pecheneg predominance in leadership, advanced towards a town called W.l.n.d.r (Walandar?), defeated a Byzantine relief army composed of Greeks and baptized Muslims sent by Emperor Romanos, and captured the city. After this, the account shifts to more verifiable details. Following three days of looting, the Turks turned their attention toward Constantinople, ravaging the surrounding countryside. Upon reaching the walls of the great city, they camped there for 40 days, ransoming their female and child captives for brocade and silk clothing. Finally, they continued their devastations in the region.<sup>71</sup> Although the initial part of the account is difficult to interpret and should be approached with caution,<sup>72</sup> the details that follow, particularly after moving away from W.l.n.d.r, appear to be based on reliable information and align with the Byzantine reports of the Magyar raid against the capital in 934. That the raid concerns the Magyars is made clear by Mas'ūdī's reference to similar expeditions launched by these Turks to al-Andalus, Frankia, and Galicia.<sup>73</sup> The story is further supported by

69 MORAVCSIK, *Fontes Byzantini*, op. cit., 64, 68, 70, 84–85.

70 J. MARQUART, *Osteuropäische und ostasiatische Streifzüge. Ethnologische und historisch-topographische Studien zur Geschichte des 9. und 10. Jahrhunderts (ca. 840–940)*, Leipzig 1903, 64.

71 Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, II, C. B. de Meynard – P. de Courteille (eds. and trans.), Paris 1863, 58–64. Mas'ūdī, *Les prairies d'or*, I, Charles Pellat (ed.), Paris 1962, 177–179.

72 The identification of these Turkic tribes and the city of W.l.n.d.r., as well as the connection of the campaign to other Byzantine wars in the Balkans, has proven elusive. See, for instance: MARQUART, *Osteuropäische und ostasiatische Streifzüge*, op. cit., 67–74, 519–529. S. RUNCIMAN, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus and his Reign*, Cambridge 1969, 105–107. The most elaborate discussion with earlier literature is found in: GRIGORIOU-IOANNIDOU, *Οι ούγγροι και οι επιδρομές*, op. cit. 106–119.

73 Maçoudi, de Meynard – de Courteille (eds.), op. cit., 58, 64.

multiple references in Greek sources to the so-called Vardariot Turks, who – possibly as a result of this raid – settled in Byzantine Macedonia during this period and later served as auxiliaries of the empire.<sup>74</sup>

The second Magyar campaign which reached as far as Constantinople happened in 958/959, first documented by Theophanes Continuatus and later repeated by other authors. Like the first, it was preceded by plundering in Thrace and the capture of numerous captives before arriving at the city. The threat was significant, prompting Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (945–959) to pray for a successful defence and mobilize troops from three themes under the leadership of strategos Pothos Argyros to repel the invaders. The commander launched a surprise attack on the Magyar host at night, seizing much booty and many captives, which forced the invaders to retreat in disgrace and return to their homeland.<sup>75</sup> Prior to this, in 943, the Magyars had successfully extracted a regular tribute from Emperor Romanos Lekapenos in exchange for a five-year peace.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, elements of the Botond campaign – camping in front of the city but not laying siege, demanding tribute or ransom, and the eventual retreat of the invaders – are corroborated by contemporary sources. The campaigns must have provided ample opportunities for individual acts of bravado or heroic deeds to emerge (according to Mas'ūdī, for instance, they camped in front of Constantinople for 40 days). These raids, therefore, most probably served as the core material for later Hungarian chroniclers.

Perhaps due to this, earlier Hungarian research has specifically identified the Botond campaign with the raid of 958/959,<sup>77</sup> based on Simon of Kéza's comment that the Hungarians did not move for five years after their devastating defeat at Lechfeld (955).<sup>78</sup> My position on this matter is slightly different. When we consider the Byzantine sources, none of the two raids perfectly match all the elements of the legend. In the case of the 958/959 raid, the military defeat is notably absent from the chronicles, whilst in 934 they did receive tribute. We also must excuse Simon of Kéza for possibly miscalculating a year or two. His internal evidence suffers another blow when compared to the *Illuminated Chronicle*, which dates the campaign not five years (as Simon of Kéza claims) but twenty-one years after Lechfeld.<sup>79</sup> A fifteenth-century medieval author,

74 N. OIKONOMIDÈS, Vardariotes – W.I.nd.r – V.n.nd.r: Hongrois installés dans la vallée du Vardar en 934, *Südost-Forschungen* 1/1, 1973, 1–8.

75 MORAVCSIK, *Fontes Byzantini*, op. cit., 69–71.

76 MORAVCSIK, *Fontes Byzantini*, op. cit., 61–62, 68–69, 70, 85.

77 Gy. KRISTÓ, *Háborúk és hadviselés az Árpádok korában*, Szeged 2003, 56. MORAVCSIK, *Byzantium and the Magyars*, op. cit., 55, 60–61. Gy. GYÖRFFY, Landnahme, Ansiedlung und Streifzüge der Ungarn, *Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 31, 1985, 267.

78 *Simonis de Kéza*, Veszprémy – Schaer (eds.), op. cit., 96 (42). The description of the Battle of Lechfeld precedes the chapter on Botond (41).

79 *Chronica de Gestis Hungarorum e Codice Picto Saec. xiv.*, Bak – Veszprémy (eds.), op. cit., 104 (62).

Ransanus, who relied on earlier versions of the chronicle, gives a timeline of twenty years for the same event.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, Simon of Kéza provides another potential clue to date the event to a different year. He concludes the chapter by stating that Prince Taksony was the leader of the army, and that this was the “last raid” (*ultimum spolium*) the Hungarians ever conducted.<sup>81</sup>

The *Illuminated Chronicle* is less explicit than Simon of Kéza, as it features a certain Opour – an otherwise completely unknown figure – as the leader of the army. However, it still associates the raid with the reign of Taksony, stating: “Communitas itaque Hungarorum cum suis capitaneis sive ducibus hec et alia huiusmodi usque ad tempora Toxun ducis gessisse perhibetur.” (“These and suchlike deeds are said to have been done by the Hungarian community and their captains or dukes until the times of Duke Taksony.”)<sup>82</sup> Although this phrasing leaves room for other campaigns to have occurred after the one featuring Botond, the association with Taksony is strengthened by an embellished initial in the manuscript that depicts Prince Taksony at the very beginning of the chapter about the Botond legend.<sup>83</sup> Anonymus also supports this association, stating that the last Hungarian raid occurred during Taksony’s reign.<sup>84</sup> Even if we cannot decisively confirm this based on these accounts alone, Simon of Kéza’s double-dating of the event leaves room to identify the Botond campaign as the last raid.

The incursion in 958/959, however, was not the last of its kind. The Magyars were again on Byzantine soil around 960 and 961, suffering defeats at the hands of Leo Phocas, commander of the Western forces, and Marianos Argyros, the strategos of the Macedonian theme, respectively.<sup>85</sup> They likely launched several smaller attacks afterward, as indicated by a letter from Emperor Nikephoros Phokas (963–969), in which he accuses the Bulgars in 967 of providing free passage to Magyar raiding parties through their lands into Byzantine territory.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, a military manual, *De re militaribus*, written during his reign, expresses concern over acquiring extensive military intelligence through

80 *Petrus Ransanus, Epithoma rerum Hungararum*, P. Kulcsár (ed.), Budapest 1977, 97.

81 *Simonis de Kéza, Veszprémy – Schaer* (eds.), op. cit., 96–97 (42).

82 *Chronica de Gestis Hungarorum e Codice Picto Saec. xiv.*, Bak – Veszprémy (eds.), op. cit., 107–108 (62).

83 *Chronicon Pictum*, 36. [https://web.archive.org/web/20120304111134/http://konyv-e.hu/pdf/Chronica\\_Picta.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20120304111134/http://konyv-e.hu/pdf/Chronica_Picta.pdf) (retrieved November 28, 2024).

84 *Anonymi Bele regis notarii*, Rady – Veszprémy (eds.), op. cit., 124–125 (LVI).

85 MORAVCSIK, *Fontes Byzantini*, op. cit., 72, 75–76. *Leo Diaconus, Historia*, (CSHB, XI), K. B. Hase (ed.), Bonn 1828, 18–19 (II, 2). The dating (or even separation) of these events has been questioned; however, the presence of different commanders and their tenure in office suggest that they are distinct events and should be dated as presented here. For further references to the debate, see: *The History of Leo the Deacon. Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century*, A.-M. Talbot – D. F. Sullivan (eds. and trans.), (DOS, XLI), Washington D.C. 2005, fn. 17., 72. L. BALOGH, Nicephorus Phocas and the Scythians, *Chronica* 11, 2011, 12–17.

86 MORAVCSIK, *Fontes Byzantini*, op. cit., 85, 100.

spies and foreign captives in preparation for hostile raids, including those by the Magyars.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, Liudprand of Cremona reported upon his arrival in Constantinople in 968 that 300 Magyars had captured 500 Greeks around Thessalonike and dragged them away to their abodes. The success of this raid prompted another group of 200 Magyars to enter Thrace, although 40 of them were captured by Emperor Nikophoros.<sup>88</sup> When Liudprand was planning to return home from the Byzantine capital in July, he was warned that the Magyars controlled the land routes and advised not to risk his safety. Although this intelligence turned out to be false,<sup>89</sup> it illustrates the relatively regular nature of such incursions.

With all of this in mind, it seems quite unlikely that the Botond legend's chronology could be exclusively tied to the raid of 958/959. Historically, the last Magyar raid ended disastrously in 970 with the defeat at Arkadioupolis. Prince Taksony of the Árpád dynasty led the Magyar tribes in the mid-tenth century, likely until the rise of Prince Géza, whose reign began in 972. Thus, Taksony's reign must have quickly waned after the defeat at Arkadioupolis.

Simon of Kéza also provides intriguing details about the start of the campaign, shedding light on elements that may link it again with historical events:

Postquam autem Italiae provincias aliquas spoilassent V. annis fuere sine motu. Tandem in Bulgariam adeuntes usque Idropolim pervenerunt, dumque exercitum super se venientem non vident, usque Constantinopolim venientes descenderunt prope murum.

After raiding some provinces in Italy, the Hungarians did not move for five years. Finally, they marched to Bulgaria, advancing as far as Adrianople [my modification]. When they saw that no army was marching against them, they continued as far as Constantinople and camped by the walls.<sup>90</sup>

In the terser wording of the *Illuminated Chronicle*:

Vicesimo autem primo anno egressi in Bulgariam intraverunt et inde Ydropolim venientes ipsa expugnata Constantinopolim tandem obsederunt.

Going forth in the twenty-first year, they entered Bulgaria; and after they had come to Adrianople [my modification] and taken it by storm, they finally laid siege to Constantinople.<sup>91</sup>

According to both versions, the Magyar army first moved into Bulgaria. Whether this movement was belligerent (a 'march' or 'mounting an expedition') or

87 MORAVCSIK, *Fontes Byzantini*, op. cit., 73.

88 *Liudprandi Cremonensis, Relatio de legatione Constantinopolitana*, (Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis, CLVI), P. Chiesa (ed.), Turnhout 1998, 207 (45).

89 *Liutprandi Cremonensis*, Chiesa (ed.), op. cit., 207 (45–46).

90 *Simonis de Kéza, Veszprémy – Schaer* (eds.), op. cit., 96–97 (42).

91 *Chronica de Gestis Hungarorum e Codice Picto Saec. xiv.*, Bak – Veszprémy (eds.), op. cit., 104–105 (62).

not (a 'move' or 'entry') cannot be determined conclusively. The chroniclers use *adeuntes* and *intraverunt* in both neutral and hostile contexts throughout their narratives.<sup>92</sup> The context, perhaps, leans slightly towards hostility.

Byzantine sources, however, do not mention Magyar undertakings in Bulgaria, which had passed into the Imperial sphere during the tenth century. Letters sent by Nicholas Mystikos to Tsar Symeon (893–927) in the 920s warn the Bulgars of a possible alliance against them involving the Magyars, Rus', Alans, and Pechenegs.<sup>93</sup> However, this alliance never materialized and may have been no more than a rhetorical strategy to mislead the Bulgar ruler. Another vague reference to a possible attack on the Bulgars comes from Theophanes Continuatus, who reports that the surrounding peoples, including the Croatians and the Magyars, sought to exploit Tsar Symeon's death (927) and decided to launch hostilities.<sup>94</sup> Skylitzes builds on this account, adding the Serbs to the list of potential threats, but he too is ambiguous, mentioning only the fear of such attacks rather than their actual occurrence.<sup>95</sup> Against such raids speaks that Tsar Peter (927–969) effectively conducted his war against the Byzantines immediately upon ascending the throne. Thus, any reconstruction of Magyar hostilities against the Bulgars remains speculative at best.<sup>96</sup>

Regarding the raids that must have traversed Bulgaria to reach the Byzantine Empire, Byzantine sources succinctly document assaults in 934, 958/959, and 961, stating that they impacted the Byzantine province of Thrace.<sup>97</sup> In 960, the Magyars are merely noted to have crossed the Danube, while the tenth-century *Vita Lucae Iuvenis* laments their plundering of Hellas, an event likely occurring in 943.<sup>98</sup> Additionally, an unsuccessful attempt to cross the Danube – again without explicit mention of Bulgaria – is described in the *Vita Basilii Iuvenis*. This account also refers to continuous raids against Byzantium, albeit without specifying their chronology.<sup>99</sup> They probably correspond to the period when the text was composed, sometime after the mid-tenth century.<sup>100</sup>

92 *Simonis de Kéza*, Veszprémy – Schaer (eds.), op. cit., 16 (5), 86 (35). *Chronica de Gestis Hungarorum e Codice Picto Saec. xiv.*, Bak – Veszprémy (eds.), op. cit., 16 (6), 44 (15), 54 (21), 92 (52), 94 (53), 98 (58), 250 (135), 266 (143), 332 (182).

93 MORAVCSIK, *Fontes Byzantini*, op. cit., 24–26.

94 *Theophanes continuatus*, Bekker (ed.), op. cit., 412 (VI, 22).

95 *Ioannes Scylitzes*, Thurn (ed.), op. cit., 222.

96 For opposing views cf.: D. ZIEMANN, Der Schwächelnde Nachbar – Bulgarien zwischen Ungarn und Byzanz in der zweiten Hälfte des 10. Jahrhunderts, in: T. Olajos (ed.), *A Kárpát-medence, a magyarság és Bizánc*, Szeged 2014, 373–377. Kh. DIMITROV, *Bŭlgaro-Ungarski otnošeniya prez srednovekovieto*, Sofia 1998, 71–81. Gy. KRISTÓ, *Levedi törzsszövetségétől Szent István államáig*, Budapest 1980, 299–307. GRIGORIOU-IOANNIDOU, Οι ούγγροι και οι επιδρομές, op. cit., 100–103.

97 MORAVCSIK, *Fontes Byzantini*, op. cit., 61, 64, 68–72, 84–85.

98 *Leo Diaconus*, Hase (ed.), op. cit., 18 (II,1). MORAVCSIK, *Fontes Byzantini*, op. cit., 29–30.

99 MORAVCSIK, *Fontes Byzantini*, op. cit., 28–29.

100 For various datings, see: von BOGYAY, Ungarnzüge gegen und für Byzanz, op. cit., 35. GRIGORIOU-IOANNIDOU, Οι ούγγροι και οι επιδρομές, op. cit., 105–106.

The absence of records regarding Magyar raids specifically targeting Bulgaria, or occurring prior to their advances into Byzantine territory, might be attributed to a lack of Byzantine awareness of such activities.<sup>101</sup> However, the consistent Byzantine efforts to identify potential allies against Bulgarian power, even during extended periods of peace – such as under the reign of Peter, when a Byzantine princess resided at the Bulgar court – argue against this explanation.<sup>102</sup> This silence becomes even more improbable when considering Nikephoros Phokas’ accusations mentioned earlier. These allegations strongly suggest that the Bulgars allowed the Magyars passage through their territory. Peter’s response to Nikephoros, as recorded by Zonaras, was unambiguous: he had pledged allegiance to his new allies and had no intention of breaking that agreement.<sup>103</sup> While diplomacy can evolve significantly over four decades, the lack of evidence for Magyar hostilities against the Bulgars aligns well with the subsequent alliance between them. The only notable instance of the Magyars “moving into” Bulgarian territory during this period is the campaign of 970. At that time, the Rus’-occupied Bulgaria served as the staging ground for the Rus’-Magyar-Pecheneg coalition before their advance over the Haemus Mons into Thrace.<sup>104</sup>

Following this, the chronicles state that the Hungarians advanced to the Byzantine city referred to as Idropolis or Ydropolis.<sup>105</sup> Simon of Kéza’s account leaves it unclear whether the city was merely by-passed or engaged, but the *Illuminated Chronicle* is explicit in claiming that the Hungarians occupied it. The identity of the city is typically, though not definitely, linked to Adrianople (modern-day Edirne, Greek Ἀδριανούπολις), which was the most significant Byzantine fortification on the European mainland after Constantinople itself. Knowledge of Adrianople was likely accessible to Hungarian chroniclers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when the texts were composed, as the city frequently changed hands among Balkan powers during that period. The Magyars, of course, never captured Adrianople, unlike the Bulgars, who briefly held it under Khan Krum and later under Tsar Symeon.<sup>106</sup>

I am only aware of two instances in which the Magyars, both times with assistance, are reported to have laid siege to a Byzantine city other than Constantinople. One of these is found in Mas‘ūdī’s account of a Magyar-Pecheneg alliance capturing the said W.l.n.d.r. Unfortunately, the town has never been

101 SHEPARD, Information, disinformation, op. cit., 253.

102 J. SHEPARD, Bulgaria: the other Balkan ‘empire’, in: T. Reuter (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History. Vol. 3. c. 900–c. 1024*, Cambridge 2008, 579–580.

103 *Ioannes Zonaras, Epitomae historiarum*, III, M. Pinder (ed.), Bonn 1897, 513 (XVI,27).

104 *Ioannes Scylitzes*, Thurn (ed.), op. cit., 288.

105 The manuscripts differ in the transcription of the name. *Scriptores rerum Hungaricarum tempore ducum regumque stirpis Arpadianae gestarum*, I, E. Szentpétery (ed.), Budapest 1937–1938, 171, 310.

106 P. SOUSTAL, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos)*, (TIB, VI), Vienna 1991, 161–167. T. E. GREGORY – N. P. ŠEVČENKO, Adrianople, in: ODB I, 23.

conclusively identified, and the garbled nature of the report, coupled with the absence of corroborating sources, renders the event doubtful.<sup>107</sup> The second example is the siege of Arkadioupolis in 970. Located near present-day Lüleburgaz in Turkey, the city was a key fortification within the Byzantine defensive system, guarding the *Via Militaris*, the strategic military roads leading to Constantinople. By the thirteenth century, however, Arkadioupolis had largely fallen into ruin, and its population had relocated to Adrianople.<sup>108</sup> Given its diminished significance by this period, it is unlikely the city would have been prominent in the imagination or accounts of Hungarian scribes.<sup>109</sup>

They may have substituted the, by then, largely unknown city of Arkadioupolis, whose name, despite its correct rendering as “Archadinopolis” in other high medieval Latin texts,<sup>110</sup> they did not recognize. The compound term Idropolis/Ydropolis – literally meaning ‘a town by the water’ or ‘water-town’ – could align with ancient descriptions of Adrianople, known for its location on the navigable Hebros River. However, Adrianople was also known in Latin writings of the time under its correct name.<sup>111</sup> There remains the possibility that the chroniclers simply fabricated the episode. Yet, it is unclear why they would feel the need to introduce a fictitious city into the narrative – one besieged before the army advanced on Constantinople – if the event had no historical grounding. Place names in the Hungarian chronicles are typically tied to real locations and held significance during the time the chronicles were composed. Thus, whether referring to Arkadioupolis or Adrianople, the inclusion of the city likely served a deliberate purpose.

In any case, a city is known to have been captured during the campaign of 969–970 by the Rus’; Philippopolis, a city originally Byzantine but held by the Bulgars at the time. Situated on the River Hebros, Philippopolis was taken, and its inhabitants were executed by Sviatoslav as a means to control the subjugated Bulgars and prevent any sabotage of the alliance.<sup>112</sup> Between Philippopolis and Arkadioupolis – the two historically confirmed sieges of the campaign – lay

---

107 It has recently been argued that the city was located in the Eastern Byzantine provinces and that the raid was conducted by Magyar diasporic communities remaining in the East: J. B. SZABÓ – B. SUDÁR, Hol lehetett a rejtélyes „vlnđr-i” csata?, *Századok* 156/1, 2022, 117–137. Runciman, without explanation, linked the siege of Hydropolis (sic) with the siege of W.L.n.d.f. RUNCIMAN, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus*, op. cit., 105.

108 A. P. Kazhdan (ed.), Arkadioupolis, in: ODB I, 173.

109 Even the later Byzantine copyist, Zonaras fails to mention the city in connection with the campaign. *Ioannes Zonaras*, Pinder (ed.), op. cit., 524 (XVII,1).

110 Archadinopolis and another form Argionopolis: *Historia de expeditione Friderici imperatoris*, in: A. Chroust (ed.), *Quellen zur Geschichte des Kreuzzuges Kaiser Friedrichs I.*, MGH SS rer. Germ. Nova Series, V, Berlin 1928, 62, 147.

111 Medieval Latin texts typically render the name correctly as Adrianopolis, as even a cursory search reveals: <https://www.dmgh.de/search?q=adrianopolis> (retrieved February 10, 2025). The form Idropolis/Ydropolis does not appear in any other documents and is therefore suspect. It may be a compound of the Latinized form of the Greek prefix *ύδρο-* from the word *ύδωρ* (‘water’). Cf. SOUSTAL, *Thrakien*, op. cit., 161–162.

112 *Leo Diaconus*, Hase (ed.), op. cit., 105 (VI,10).

Adrianople, located just beyond the crossing of the Haemus Mons and directly on the military road leading to Arkadioupolis. Given its strategic position, it is reasonable to assume that some interaction with Adrianople occurred during Sviatoslav's campaign. The *Primary Chronicle* explicitly mentions that the campaign involved the destruction of towns, which stood deserted even at the time of the chronicle's writing.<sup>113</sup> However, this unspecific assertion reflects the chronicler's tendency toward exaggeration and glorification rather than providing reliable details. Adrianople was likely not occupied by the Rus'-led coalition. According to Skylitzes, Emperor John Tzimiskes (969–976) gathered his forces there before launching a counteroffensive against the Rus'.<sup>114</sup> Had Adrianople been captured during the Rus' advance, it seems highly probable that Byzantine sources would have documented the event, especially given Skylitzes' detailed accounts, which even include the etymology and foundation history of the city.<sup>115</sup> Adrianople was most probably by-passed by the alliance, which would not be an unprecedented incident.<sup>116</sup>

What I am proposing here is that the 970 campaign could provide as much raw material as any other raids for the Hungarian chroniclers to embed the Botond story into a historical framework. The campaign certainly inflicted severe hardships on the population of Bulgaria, involved Byzantine cities, and was the last of its kind conducted by the Magyars. Other elements – such as surrounding Constantinople, receiving tributes, and returning home either defeated or with riches – could have been drawn from earlier oral pools of cultural memory. Without access to written records or knowledge of medieval Greek, the late chroniclers seemingly jumbled information from earlier chronicle fragments and oral traditions, blending details from disparate historical episodes into a cohesive narrative. This was their usual working method in case of other episodes too, notably with the Battle of Lechfeld.<sup>117</sup> By the time the chronicles were composed, the specific details of these events had understandably faded, leaving room for reinterpretation and embellishment.

---

113 PVL, 33. RPC, 88.

114 *Leo Diaconus*, Hase (ed.), op. cit., 126–127 (VII,8–9), 130 (VIII,1).

115 *Leo Diaconus*, Hase (ed.), op. cit., 130 (VIII,1).

116 Khan Krum also by-passed it and occupied the city only on his return from the walls of Constantinople. *Theophanes*, de Boor (ed.), op. cit., 503.

117 L. VESZPRÉMY, Az augsburgi csata (955) historiográfiai képéhez, in: T. Fedeles – D. Bagi – G. Kiss (eds.), „Köztes Európa” vonzásában. Ünnepi tanulmányok Font Márta tiszteletére, Pécs 2012, 517–530. *IBID.*, Telling and Retelling of Early History between the Middle Ages and the 18<sup>th</sup> Century: The Hungarian Raids. The Cases of the Battles of Pressburg (907) and Lechfeld (955), in: A. Coroleu – D. Defilippis – R. Green – F. Rädle – V. Rees – D. Sacré – M. Woods – C. Wulf (eds.), *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Upsaliensis. Vol. 1. Proceedings of the Fourteenth International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies (Uppsala 2009)*, Leiden 2012, 1189–1191.

## Final remarks

The legend of the Magyar hero Botond took on various forms throughout the Middle Ages. Its origins in tenth-century oral tradition evolved into an embellished literary format in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Hungarian chronicles, shaped by the tastes of contemporary Christian audiences and the specificities of the genre. Its closest parallel is found in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, which records the ancient history of the Rus'. The Rus' episode of a tanner boy turning out to be a champion is also framed within a historical context but bears clear marks of chronicle-writing clichés. Both stories are rooted in a Biblical framework (the duel between David and Goliath), follow a recognizable literary trope (the individual combat of champions), and rather than involving an armed clash, feature wrestling. This strong correlation might suggest literary borrowing between the texts, but no evidence of such has been found, and given the differing languages, this remains unlikely.

Instead, the common roots of these stories likely lie in indigenous traditions. The Botond legend could be tested against tenth-century Byzantine (and in one case, Arabic) historical records, which confirm several elements of the campaign's depiction, making the medieval chroniclers' presentation a "potentially believable" story. It undoubtedly drew from earlier events, albeit in a distorted form, most likely relying on oral sources related to the Magyar raids against Byzantium in the tenth century. Memories of the 970-campaign culminating in the disastrous defeat at Arkadioupolis and marking the last Magyar attempt to raid Byzantine territory, likely found their way into the Hungarian chronicles of the later Middle Ages. This is particularly possible, given that the significance of this loss may have been on par with the defeat at Lechfeld. The less clear allusions to the battle could be attributed to the lack of written records about the Byzantine campaigns available to the late chroniclers.

The oral roots of the legend accounts for many of its elements, which have previously been difficult to trace but find close analogies in the traditions of the Magyars' contemporary allies. Naturally, the process of transmission may also have occurred gradually over time, given the dynamic interconnections among the peoples of the steppe – particularly the Magyars – and the Norse-speaking populations during the ninth and tenth centuries. Cultural exchanges likely took place through various forms of contact, including trade and raiding, the latter often involving the taking of captives and thereby creating ample opportunities for the diffusion of narratives.<sup>118</sup> Nevertheless, in the case of the Botond story, the specificity of the analogous motifs, combined with the considerable credibility of Skylitzes' account, strongly indicates a context of transmission within a shared encampment. The expeditions of the tenth century, particularly the 970-campaign provided fertile ground for stories to circulate among the diverse ethnic groups that formed the alliance, including the Scandinavian

---

118 KATONA, *Vikings of the steppe*, op. cit., 42–118.

Rus' and Turkic nomads like the Bulgars and Pechenegs. These groups shared experiences of duels, the taking of Byzantine cities, and the iconic gates of Constantinople, as well as a tradition of wrestling – motifs that appear prominently in the Hungarian chronicles. Many of these stories were likely transmitted, sometimes even across vast distances, reaching as far as Scandinavia through the Rus' and other Scandinavian adventurers.

The allied army of 970, which camped near Arkadioupolis on its way to Constantinople, aspired to take the great city by force – something no one had ever accomplished. Their army was massive, even by Byzantine standards, and their leader, Sviatoslav, was one of the most ambitious and successful of the Rus' princes.<sup>119</sup> It is no wonder that driven by confidence, if not hubris, the camp would have been filled with merrymaking, with singing, dancing, and drinking in the evenings (instead of keeping a vigilance guard). In such a lively atmosphere, storytelling would have played a central role, serving not only to bolster morale but also to reinforce the group's cohesion.<sup>120</sup> With the army brimming with enthusiasm, it is not hard to imagine tales circulating about heroic deeds – stories of winning duels, wrestling contests, and perhaps even fantasizing about conquering the gates of Constantinople. These shared narratives would have added to the aura of invincibility surrounding the campaign.

Indeed, the merriment and camaraderie of such co-joined campaigns likely played a role in the development of epic storytelling traditions. The fusion of Scandinavian, Rus', and Turkic warriors in a leader's hall would have created a unique cultural space for the exchange of ideas, stories, and songs. This melting pot of traditions could have contributed to the emergence of literary forms like for instance the Rus'ian *byliny*, which bear resemblance to both Icelandic sagas and steppe ballads. They seemingly lingered into the cultural memory of the Magyars as well.

Cultural exchange between the Scandinavian Rus' and the Turkic nomadic milieu was already well-established by this time. Sviatoslav, as a prime example, was deeply influenced by steppe culture. His portrayal as a riding nomad chief – complete with ponytails and a lifestyle focused on constant warfare, sleeping under the open sky with his saddle as a pillow, and roasting meat over charcoal

---

119 On scholarly reconstructions of this exceptional campaign, see: A. D. STOKES, The Background and Chronology of the Balkan Campaigns of Svyatoslav Igorevich, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 40/94, 1961, 44–57. *IBID.*, The Balkan Campaigns of Svyatoslav Igorevich, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 40/95, 1962, 466–496. W. K. HANAK, The Infamous Svjatoslav. Master of Duplicity in War and Peace? in: T. S. Miller – J. Nesbitt (eds.), *Peace and War in Byzantium: Essays in Honor of George T. Dennis, S.J.*, Washington, D.C. 1995, 138–151. FRANKLIN – SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus*, op. cit., 143–151.

120 J. JESCH, Constructing the warrior ideal in the Late Viking Age, in: L. H. Olausson – M. Olausson (eds.), *The Martial Society. Aspects of warriors, fortifications and social change in Scandinavia*, Stockholm 2009, 71–78.

– aligns with typical steppe nomad practices.<sup>121</sup> This rugged, warrior-centred lifestyle resonated with both the Turkic and Scandinavian traditions, further intertwining the cultural elements of these diverse groups.

During the Battle of Dorostolon, Sviatoslav was even challenged by Emperor John Tzimiskes himself to single combat in order to decide the outcome of the battle and spare the blood of others. The Rus' prince, however, refused, deciding instead to rely on the full battle.<sup>122</sup> Whether the offer was a rhetorical device or not, it vividly demonstrates the association of heroism with such duels in the minds of the Byzantines. It was perhaps not unprecedented for such challenges to occur between them and their adversaries, despite its strategic disadvantages.<sup>123</sup>

There is nothing surprising therefore, that the legend of Botond – probably created through an amalgamation of wandering oral stories – was placed in a similar context. It serves as a faint but significant trace of cultural exchange from the pagan era, a testament to the shared heroic ideals that transcended ethnic and regional boundaries. While the story was eventually framed within the context of Christian morality and historical chronicling, its roots in the pre-Christian, warrior-oriented cultures of the steppe and northern Europe shine through, offering a glimpse into the enduring power of oral storytelling and the heroic traditions that shaped early medieval warrior groups.

Csete Katona  
University of Debrecen  
Faculty of Humanities, Institute of History  
Department of Medieval, Early Modern  
Hungarian History and Auxiliary Sciences  
Egyetem tér 1.  
4032 Debrecen  
Hungary  
*csete.katona@gmail.com*

---

121 V. TARRAS, Leo Diaconus and the Ethnology of Kievan Rus', *Slavic Review* 24/3, 1965, 395–406. FRANKLIN – SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus*, op. cit., 143. KATONA, *Vikings of the steppe*, op. cit., 122.

122 *Ioannes Scylitzes*, Thurn (ed.), op. cit., 308–309.

123 S. KYRIAKIDIS, Accounts of single combat in Byzantine historiography, *Acta Classica* 59, 2016, 114–136.