REVIEWS

BERENDOVÁ, Nora. *STEPHEN I, THE FIRST CHRISTIAN KING OF HUNGARY: From Medieval Myth to Modern Legend*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024.
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The latest book by Nora Berend, titled *Stephen I, the First Christian King of Hungary: From Medieval Myth to Modern Legend* (Oxford University Press, Oxford 2024), immediately sparked significant interest in Hungarian historiography upon its release. It was followed by (more or less) critical reviews (by Borbás Barna,[1] Gábor Thoroczkay,[2] Gábor Klaniczay),[3] articles, discussions, and responses from Nora Berend to the critical feedback.[4] The strong response to the book is not only related to the figure of (Saint) Stephen I and the appeal of its central theme, which extends far beyond academic circles. The predominantly negative reactions from Hungarian historiography suggest that an even more significant determinant is the perception of Berend's theses as deconstructive, problematic, and controversial.

The monograph is divided into five separate thematic sections (and short Epilogue), which analyze the reign of Stephen I (Introduction), the historical existence of Cupan, duke of the Somogy, the political background to the creation of the rock opera *István a király* by Levente Szörényi and János Bródy about Stephen and Cupan (1983), the authenticity of the relic—the Holy Right Hand of Stephen, and the history of the Crown of Stephen. A symbolic introduction to the rather skeptical theses of Berend is the author's reflection on the testimonial value of the only 11th-century depiction of Stephen I, preserved on the coronation mantle of the basilica in Fehérvár. The medieval practice of schematized representation of historical figures, as well as the technical difficulty of embroidering the textile, prevents us from forming a clear picture of Stephen's appearance (p. 1). Similarly, it is not possible to reconstruct in detail the life and reign of the first Hungarian king based on the modest, idealized, and significantly later sources. According to the author, one should approach the hagiographical and chronicler accounts of Stephen's biographical data, character traits, education, and exceptional religiosity with particular skepticism. The characterization of Stephen as the founder of the Hungarian state and

1 BORBÁS, Barna. *Félresiklott mítoszirtás – így törölné el Szent Istvánt egy új oxfordi kötet*, https://www.valaszonline.hu/2024/10/11/berend-nora-szent-istvan-stephen-i-konyv-kritika/

2 THOROCZKAY, Gábor. *Óvatosabban Szent Istvánnal! – Thoroczkay Gábor válasza az első magyar királyról szóló vitában*, https://www.valaszonline.hu/2024/10/22/szent-istvan-berend-nora-konyv-thoroczkay-vita/

3 KLANICZAY, Gábor. Szembenézni a történelmi mítoszokkal (Nora Berend: Stephen I, the First Christian King of Hungary. From Medieval Myth to Modern Legend). In *BUKSZ–Budapesti Könyvszemle*, 2024, 36, 2, pp. 129-38.

4 BERENDOVÁ, Nora. *„Félresiklott könyvkritika" – Berend Nóra válasza és kollégánk megjegyzése a Szent István-kérdésről*, https://www.valaszonline.hu/2024/10/18/szent-istvan-stephen-i-konyv-berend-nora-valasz/

church, in her view, is more a product of medieval and later tradition (particularly on pp. 1-26).

I consider it essential to emphasize that in the Introduction, the author agrees with earlier or contemporary historians on several partial conclusions. On p. 7, she highlights that *"Stephen did not establish the Hungarian state or church single-handedly; immigrant nobles and ecclesiastics played a crucial role during his reign, as did his successors in developing, changing, and refining political and ecclesiastical structures."* On p. 2, she summarizes the testimonial value of the few and fragmentary sources from the period of Stephen's reign, and their difficult interpretative value, with the words: *"Our historical information itself is meagre. Sources are few, fragmentary, and difficult to interpret. This basic impediment determines our ignorance, extending to even the most elementary biographical data."*

For Berend, however, the implications of these theses are different—the ambiguities, inconsistencies and gaps also suggest that Stephen's achievements in the fields of Christianization, church building and state formation may have been significantly overestimated by the political programme of King (Saint) Ladislaus I and his successors on the Hungarian throne (and, naturally, by the representatives of the Hungarian clergy). And a further: *"Careful historical work has dismantled many elements of the simplified idea of Stephen's greatness and foundational role, ... On the contrary, political use fixated on utter simplification and a conscious disregard for scholarly results, even starting to erect an alternative pseudo-scientific framework for government-sponsored history writing."* (p. 22). Berend pays there particular attention to the circumstances and background of the canonization of Stephen I. The canonization itself is viewed by the author as a political commission—thus, the canonization process was not a result of Stephen's ecclesiastical and state-building merits, but rather the political motivation and need of Ladislaus I to legitimize his own reign, which was threatened by the legitimate claims of the living King Solomon and the Árpád branch of Andrew I. (pp. 15-16).

Such simplification has become the target of somewhat justified criticism from reviewers. However, it should be added that the author's conclusions, which are supported by a typological comparison of the circumstances of the beatification of several medieval monarchs (pp. 16-17), and also by Berend's response to the criticism (see ref. 4), are, in their essence, far more convincing; while Stephen's merits and successes, at least made possible by his long reign, cannot be entirely set aside here, it is difficult to regard them as the primary motivation of the highly pragmatic king Ladislaus—who was only later significantly idealized, much like Stephen himself.

In her book, Berend also provides a detailed analysis of a related motif, namely the discovery of the Holy Right Hand of Stephen I. She points out several inconsistencies: the mention of Stephen's right hand only in the Hartvik's Legend, its alleged discovery far from the king's tomb, the suspicious circumstances surrounding the relic's appearance, and liturgical discrepancies that may suggest initial disputes over the authenticity of the remains and the later acceptance of the relic in Fehérvár (pp. 136-55). Berend's skeptical stance here is entirely legitimate; the issue of relic authenticity is problematic in many other cases, and even anthropological analyses, as demonstrated by the research of the remains of some Přemyslids, may not yield conclusive results. The possibility of future

proof regarding the authenticity of Stephen's right hand seems all the less likely, while (not only) Berend's reservations suggest that the possibility of a later forgery is probable.

The most controversial and disputed topic of the entire monograph appears to be the detailed section casting doubt on the historically accepted existence of the Duke of Somogy Cupan, a view generally accepted up until Berend (with the exception of her own research). Berend builds upon her long-term research on this matter. The basic framework of her stance rests on the excessive generality, unreliability, later provenance, and at least interpolated nature of the relevant sources – the three legends of Stephen I., Pope Paschal II's letter from 1102, the interpolated founding charter of the Pannonhalma Monastery (dating to 1001), and Hungarian chronicles, where the narrative of Cupan appears. Berend reminds us that Cupan is mentioned as the Duke of Somogy only in Hungarian chronicles from the 14th century and that his name (which, according to the author, is certainly not exclusively archaic, as its frequency is relatively high in the 13th century) does not appear in the so-called founding charter of Stephen for Pannonhalma, legends of Stephen or any sources older than Simon of Kéza's Chronicle. Therefore, Cupan may not have been a historical figure, and the continually growing, increasingly detailed story accumulated later historical layers or political contexts. Berend is particularly skeptical about the dismemberment (quartering) of Cupan's body, as this practice only appears in England during the 13th and 14th centuries. Berend traces the origin of the narrative about Cupan's "rebellion" to a forgery of the Pannonhalma charter of Stephen I, which was interpolated around 1215 to support Pannonhalma's claims to the ecclesiastical tithes of the Somogy county (pp. 27-68).

The complexity and intricacy of the issue of the Somogy tithes, the so-called charter of Stephen I. for Pannonhalma, and Cupan were subsequently highlighted by G. Thoroczkay (Óvatosabban Szent Istvánnal!), who emphasizes mainly the fact that the tithes from Somogy county already belonged to Pannonhalma according to the archaic 11th-century legends and the papal document from the early 12th century. The testimonial value of these sources cannot (according to Thoroczkay) be ignored. However, the question remains as to what the original historical basis of the entire narrative was—specifically, under what circumstances Pannonhalma came to possess the tithes, or at least the legitimacy of claims to them. It seems that the entire "Cupan and the tithes from Somogy" affair aptly illustrates how differently historians of the early Middle Ages approach the idea of methodologically correct or scientifically acceptable work with sparse and often interpolated sources. While the interpretations of Hungarian medievalists about the circumstances of Stephen's rise to power are based on the assumption of a continuous sequence of memories and data, surviving in the historical memory of monastic convents or through partially lost Hungarian chronicles, Berend rejects such a possible, yet still hypothetical construction.

The discussion surrounding Cupan aptly illustrates the uncertainty of our knowledge—particularly regarding Stephen's rise to power—an issue is rightly highlighted by Berend. On the other hand, it should be emphasized that Berend's critique is not always based on firm foundations. The most questionable element of her skepticism appears to be her emphasis on the absence of references to Cupan in foreign sources (pp. 28, 68). However, when taking into account the nature and limited number of other reports concerning

Stephen and Hungary in the works of chroniclers from the Holy Roman Empire, even Berend might concede that events before (and even after) the year 1000 were largely outside the scope of interest for German authors. At most, this may serve as evidence that Stephen's accession to power was not seen at the time as a decisive turning point in neither Germany nor in Pannonia. But accounts of resistance by a some local Somogy-region ruler may have survived—and very likely did survive—within the Hungarian tradition, as evidenced by 11th-century sources from the Kingdom of Hungary.

The valuable part of the chapter on Cupan lies in the reflections on the legitimizing motives of leading Hungarian noble families. Berend perceptively suggests that these families constructed a fictionalized past by heroizing and referencing their ancestors. The narrative about Cupan may have been created—or, in my opinion, more likely significantly expanded (M.D.)—by members of the Hont-Poznan (Paznan) kindred, such as by Jak noble family with connection with Wecelinus (pp. 44-45). It is unfortunate that Berend does not develop her observations further here, and that, like much of earlier Hungarian historiography, she does not draw attention to, for instance, the questionable reliability of Hungarian chronicles with regard to the origins and early history of Hont-Poznan kindred and other noble families in the Kingdom of Hungary. The alleged German (Swabian) origin of Poznan appears highly unlikely, not least because the form of his name in the earliest sources (Poznano, Poznan, Poznanus, Paznan—famous, well-known) clearly points to his Slavic ethnicity.[5] The latent potential in the inconsistencies found within Hungarian narrative sources thus remains only partially explored in this case as well.

The chapter on the Holy Crown of Stephen I provides a detailed mapping of the relevant opinions on the origin of the crown, particularly its upper part. Berend attempts, in the spirit of the older tradition, to sketch the possible form and provenance of the oldest crown—she does not question the royal title, the existence of the original coronation regalia, or Stephen's coronation (pp. 156-236). The chapter dedicated to the background of the successful rock opera, István a király, generated much more controversial reactions. The main storyline centers on the ideological and military clash between Stephen and Cupan, that is, Christianity versus paganism, the new against the old, devotion and obedience (to the Roman Church) against rebellion and untamed freedom. After thoroughly examining the period's circumstances and the conditions surrounding the creation and subsequent promotion of the rock opera, Berend concludes that the script was created or at least understood by some parts of Hungarian society as a certain reminiscence of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Simplified, in Stephen was seen also (not only) a successful normalizer with a vision similar to János Kádár, in the papacy in part the Soviet Union, and in Cupan, the figure of Imre Nagy (executed in

5 Studies of Hungarian historians are notably absent here, especially since part of Slovak historiography, on the other hand, develops insufficiently supported narratives about the Slavic (Slovak) ethnicity of Poznan and also Hont, their Great Moravian origin, or the foundation of the Zobor Monastery by Poznan. These hypotheses have found their way into synthesizing works on the history of the Kingdom of Hungary and the territory of Slovakia, even though such works should be based only on more reliable knowledge, on which a significant portion of historians agree.

1958), who wrongly decided, yearning for false freedom (especially on pp. 113-122). According to Berend, István a király essentially illustrates and culminates the political and ideological exploitation of the memory of Stephen (partially of Cupan, see pp. 124-128), characteristic of the ruling powers throughout the whole Hungarian history.

Even the chapters on the royal crown and the rock opera clearly demonstrate the differences in historians' views on what a book about a medieval ruler should look like. G. Thoroczkay evaluates the chapter on the crown—written in a traditional analytical approach—as the most valuable, while he critically perceives the excessive length of the chapter on the rock opera and the shaping of Hungarian national identity in the 20th century. However, the chapter on the rock opera is just another piece of evidence that Berend shaped the text of the monograph largely as an analysis of historiographical concepts set within a specific political context.

Nora Berend's book has been received by Hungarian historiography somewhat neutrally, but it has also faced a wave of exceptionally sharp criticism (we can mention here especially the not quite correct response of Barna Borbás). Some of the criticisms seem to be justified—especially the author's stance on the reliability of sources (such as the Pannonhalma charter, parts of the Hungarian chronicles, King Stephen's Laws and several charters from later periods), which at times appears overly hypercritical. As a result, the book may give (and has given) many readers the impression that it is impossible to approach to the period of Stephen based on the surviving sources and that his reign cannot be meaningfully evaluated scientifically. At the same time, Berend offers only a relatively small number of alternative interpretations and conclusions that could lead immediately to new perspectives on Stephen and the early Kingdom of Hungary. It is generally true that questioning uncertain knowledge, or rather hypotheses, is often much easier than the arduous and long-term reconstruction of historical realities.

It seems that Berend sometimes does not fully engage with the frequently confirmed assumption that, although narrative sources often layer later additions onto the described narratives, they also very often stem from original historical core in the Middle Ages, and are therefore not merely fabrications. For example, it is worth noting that even the very unreliable late medieval hagiography, such as the Legenda maior of Saint Gerard, contain at least some information from the 11th century (such as the founding of monasteries in Tihany and Visegrád, the presence of Basilian monks in Csanád, etc.). However, even Stephen's charter for Pannonhalma holds a certain historical value—after all, it is precisely and only thanks to this document that we know Pannonhalma was not founded by Stephen, but originally by his father Géza. A similar assumption still applies in the case of the tithes and some rebellious opponent from Somogy (Cupan?), as well as in the later tradition of Stephen as a (co-)founder or at least a donor of ecclesiastical institutions, or in the accounts of successful military expeditions and the gradual expansion of Stephen's political base, all of which in themselves imply certain rulership skills. Taking these indications into account, perhaps Berend would at least partially correct or rephrase her bold words about earlier research on Stephen and his reign as *"the edifice which is built on air"* (p. 15).

Berend's emphasis on nationalist positions as something that has long created a false portrait of the first Hungarian king is also noticeable. This can be agreed with at least

partially. However, at the same time the question comes to the fore whether, with this assumption, any historian is not unconsciously (or unwittingly) going to the opposite extreme; does the vision of the omnipresent threat of distorting the image of the ruler (or any other historical figure) endanger the historian's objective ability to assess in which cases this actually did not occur? It would likely be an illusion to expect absolute objectivity in historical research from historians; but we should keep in mind that the threat to objectivity could also come from any (even positively valued and perceived) value positions we hold within ourselves.

However, Nora Berend's book is, despite occasional and minor shortcomings, a high-quality, innovative, and, above all, necessary work. It contains many insightful and well-founded observations, works diligently with sources, and brings forward several thought-provoking reflections and considerations. In many instances—particularly those related to the hagiographical heroization of Stephen's ecclesiastical and state-building merits, the description of Stephen's personal characteristics, his education, his relationship with the Church (pragmatic motives vs. personal devotion to Christianity), any connection of Stephen to the authorship of "Admonitions", the right hand of Stephen, detailed narratives such as the quartering of the body of Cupan, the circumstances and background of the Battle of Veszprém, and others—Berend's calls for a revision of older views are entirely justified. A significant contribution of Berend's work also lies in the methodological reflections on how to approach Hungarian sources from the 11th century. The author emphasizes the need to place considerably more focus on composition, motives, and contexts, rather than merely the information from Hungarian chronicles or legends. While comparisons with the wider European analogies, especially hagiographical schemes and the works of other chroniclers and the literati may not always be the successful methodological approach, without them, we risk missing significant aspects of the motives and ways of thinking also of authors in Kingdom of Hungary.

Hungarian medieval studies are based on a long-standing tradition and continues to produce numerous and high-quality outputs (in relation to Stephen I, names such as László Veszprémy, Attila Zsoldos, Kornél Szovák, Gábor Thoroczkay can be mentioned). However, in the context of established notions about Stephen's reign, one cannot shake the impression that, compared e.g. to Czech medieval studies of the 10th–12th centuries, a more cautious and traditionalist approach prevails, particularly when it comes to revising some of Györffy's detailed interpretations and overly bold theses regarding Stephen's personality, his character, exceptionalism or even visionary qualities, and his extraordinary relationship with the Church, among others. Perhaps this is also the reason why contemporary authors do not devote sufficient attention in their studies to the controversies associated with the established image of Stephen. Examples include the aforementioned origin of dux Poznan and narrative about Hont, Poznan, Wecelin and Cupan, further the absence of any mention of Stephen in Bruno of Querfurt's writings (also not reflected by Nora Berend), or the two mentions by Thietmar of Merseburg, who, as late as around 1015, only recognizes Stephen by his pagan name, Vajk (not analyzed by Nora Berend). These are highly significant indications—it is important to note that Bruno of Querfurt consistently wrote about the deeds of Christian rulers (including Bolesław the Brave and St. Vladimir the Great) on every suitable occasion.

Yet, despite having spent several years in Hungary, he does not mention the Christian king Stephen even once.[6] All these indications should make us cautious regarding the evidential value of Hungarian chronicles and other narratives related to the personality and reign of Stephen.

There are therefore several reasons why Nora Berend's book is a valuable work, one that has the potential to advance our understanding the political background of Stephen's reign and history of the Kingdom of Hungary in the first half of the 11th century. The book—for the most part successfully—attempts to show that many of the prevailing views on Stephen I and his reign are still influenced by a certain degree of mythologization, stemming partially from nationalist-driven concepts, but especially from entrenched and often mechanically repeated theses of authorities, and excessive reliance on later, particularly narrative sources.[7] The book does not create a new, comprehensive reconstruction of the early history of Hungary and Stephen's reign. Its purpose is primarily to present a detailed argument against some of the established ideas, and it can be understood as a call for the emergence and development of further discussions, not only on Stephen I and the early history of the Kingdom of Hungary, but also on the methodological and conceptual foundations of future studies.

Marek Druga, PhD.
(Historický ústav SAV, v. v. i. / Institute of History of SAS, Bratislava)

6 It is likely not a coincidence that this inconsistency was addressed specifically by Györffy, as Bruno's silence did not fit into his portrayal of Stephen as an exceptionally Christian ruler for his time. Györffy argued that Stephen—primarily an authoritative secular organizer of the Church—did not align with Bruno's ideal image of a Christian monarch (GYÖRFFY, István király és műve, pp. 123-124). It should be added, however, that Györffy's interpretation rests on rather unconvincing arguments. In the early 11th century, such interventions by rulers into the Church organization—including the German emperors Otto III and Henry II, as well as the Polish duke Bolesław the Brave—were in fact a natural and widely accepted part of the reign of the ruler, and were recognized as legitimate even by the Church itself. A more realistic possibility, then, seems to be the opposite one—namely, that around the year 1005, Bruno had not yet found a Christian king in Hungary who would correspond to his idea of an ideal ruler, one who actively organized and supported the Church, as e. g. Bolesław the Brave was in Bruno's view.

7 These reservations can also be applied to other sovereign ideals, including the case of the Moravian duke Svatopluk (871-894) in the Pannonian context. Some interpretations in Slovak historiography, which emphasize both the contemporary and later significance of Svatopluk as a royal model, placing him on a symbolic pedestal far above other East-Central European and European rulers, can hardly be reconciled with the respected principles of modern historical research.