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Byzantium and the Ancient Hungarians: The Life-Work of Gyula Moravcsik

If we want to revive the memory of Gyula Moravcsik and recall his personality, life and scholarly work at the centenary of his birth, first of all we have to take notice of a specific feature of his scholarship. He belonged to the rare type of scholars who was already able to determine the programme and scope of his scholarly activity in the very beginning. He studied Greek, Latin and Hungarian at the University of Budapest between 1910 and 1914 and perfected his studies in Rome (1911), in Paris in the École Normale Supérieure (1913) and Munich (1913). He was member of the Eötvös College, the Hungarian École Normale Supérieure where Zoltán Gombocz, the excellent linguist was professor at that time. In 1912 Gombocz published his famous monography about the Bulgaro-Turkic loanwords in Hungarian - a work which exercised a stimulating influence on the researches in Hungarian prehistory in general and on the formation of the scholarly personality of Gyula Moravcsik in particular. It was Gombocz who suggested that he should compile a vocabulary of the Hungarian and Turkic terms and names occurring in Byzantine sources. Moravcsik clearly recognized the actuality and importance of this task the realization of which filled his whole life.¹

He undertook the work on two lines. On the one hand, beginning with the Hunnic legend of the mythical stag, he studied important problems of Hungarian prehistory,² on the other hand he began to collect the source material for the historical relation between Byzantium and the Hungarians. His work, scarcely begun, was interrupted by the First World War for five years and the war captivity whirled him in the far-away Krasnoyarsk and Irkutsk. Tragic event, as it was, the war and the impressions and experiences obtained during it also enriched and stimulated scholarly work. Thus, András Alföldi was deeply impressed by the horsemanship of the Cossacks and this experience stimulated him to study the history and culture of the nomadic peoples, the Huns and Avars. B. Munkácsi collected his „Blüten der ossetischen Volksdichtung, Ö. Beke the materials for his Cheremis Dictionary in prisoner's camps. Moravcsik used his linguistic entourage to learn Russian, Neo-Hellenic and Turkish. In spite of the difficulties of his adventurous escape from Siberia (viz. a. locomotive driver hid him and his companions in the water tanks on both sides of the steam boiler where they had to beat the sparks flitting from the funnel during the whole travel, nevertheless their garments became burnt through by the sparks like a sieve until they arrived at Sanktpeterburg) - in spite of these difficulties he was able to bring home his Turkish grammar com-

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1. Biographical data concerning the life of Gyula Moravcsik are taken from his curriculum vitae, placed by him at my disposal many years ago, and from his own narrations.
 2. See Die literarische Tätigkeit von Gy. Moravcsik. Zusammengestellt von R. Benedicty. Acta Ant. Hung. 10 (1962) 295 foll.

piled by himself in Siberia and other scholarly records. Perhaps even more important were the impressions made on him by the landscapes and peoples of those territories where the Turkic component of Ancient Hungarian culture formed. It happened not by chance that after all the Byzantino-Hungarian contacts appeared in the broad framework of the Byzantino-Turkic relations in his life-work.

Returning from war captivity, he continued his studies of the historical problems and the collection of sources concerning Byzantino-Turkic and Byzantino-Hungarian relations. At first, his interest focussed on the Huns (their tactics, Attila and Buda, the death of Attila in history and legend)³ but then he passed over to the history of the Onogurs and other Turkic peoples (as Petchenegs, Bulgars, Khazars, Cumanians, Osmanli Turks) which played an important role in Byzantino-Hungarian historical contacts.⁴ It is a remarkable fact that he neglected a particular study of the Avars. This was obviously a consequence of his scholarly conception which focussed on Byzantino-Hungarian relations and only include those Turkic peoples which exerted some influence on these relations. His particular interest for the Huns was probably due to the medieval idea of the historical continuity between Hungarians and Huns.

The realization of his scholarly programme required enormous research work. For lack of critical editions of the Byzantine sources, he had to examine the manuscripts of the texts in the great libraries of Europe in order to establish a reliable philological basis for his work. In spite of his teaching duties, he was already able to publish his excellent monography entitled „A magyar történet bizánci forrásai” (The Byzantine Sources for Hungarian History) in 1934.⁵ It was shortly followed by the two volumes of „Byzantinoturcica” in 1942-43, the first one being an alphabetical handbook of the Byzantine historical sources, the second containing the Vocabulary of the Turkic and Hungarian terms and names occurring in Byzantine texts.⁶ The critical edition of Constantine Porphyrogenitus' „De administrando imperio”, surely the most important Byzantine source for Hungarian prehistory, was also prepared for printing at that time, but its publication became only possible in 1949 when he used his Kossuth-prize for the costs of the printing.⁷ Next year it was followed by the Hungarian translation of the Greek text⁸ and in 1953 he already published his book entitled „Bizánc és a magyarság” (Byzantium and the Hungarians)⁹ summarizing the main results of his life-work in concise form.

The next decades of his life were filled by revising, enlarging and preparing his main works for second edition. Thus, the enlarged and revised edition of Byzantinoturcica I-II was published in 1958,¹⁰ the revised edition of De administrando imperio in 1967.¹¹ The volume

3. See op. cit. in note 2. Nos 2, 26, 34, 36, 45.

4. Op. cit. in note 2. Nos 22, 38, 72, 76, 78, 86, 96, 101 etc.

5. Op. cit. in note 2. No 115.

6. Op. cit. in note 2. Nos 184 and 190.

7. Op. cit. in note 2. No 211.

8. Op. cit. in note 2. No 220.

9. Op. cit. in note 2. No 234.

10. Op. cit. in note 2. No 291.

of his most important papers under the title „*Studia Byzantina*” also came out in the same year¹² while the English version of „*Bizánc és a magyarság*” appeared in 1970.¹³ At the same time, however, he was continually working on the translation into Hungarian of the Byzantine sources for Hungarian history. The manuscript of this great work was almost complete at his death in 1972 and was published under the title „*Az Árpád-kori magyar történet bizánci forrásai*” (The Byzantine Sources for Hungarian history of the Árpadian Age) in 1984.¹⁴ Thereby his life-work became topped.

I don't want to speak about the great esteem, appreciation and distinction conferred upon him both at home and abroad. Nor wish I to emphasize that his scholarly works became an indispensable basis for both international and Hungarian Byzantine studies. This would be to repeat well-known facts. But I should like to refer to some specific features and ideas in his life-work which may have particular actuality for us to-day.

First of all, I would mention his interest in Byzantine Greek popular culture, folklore and language. Suffices to refer to his papers on the Byzantine Charon, on the motive of the eagle hovering with outspread wings, on the Byzantine literary works written in popular language.¹⁵ Thereby, he has clearly shown the importance of popular culture which is sometimes living latently under the surface of the refined high cultures and in case of their decline it may serve as basis for the revival of the nation as Greek history exemplifies it.

Another important perception in his scholarly work is the great role of Byzantine Christianity among the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe in general and in the political, social and cultural life of the Ancient Hungarians in particular. In a series of excellent papers¹⁶ he pointed out that the Ancient Hungarians were already acquainted with Christianity before the conquest and that the influence of the Byzantine culture manifested itself in the missionary work of the Byzantine church most effectively. The discovery of a Turkic runic inscription of Christian character on the bag-plate from Bezdéd!¹⁷ fully justifies his assumptions.

Similarly, his historical conclusions drawn from the interpretation of the Greek inscriptions to be read on the Holy Crown, have general validity. On the basis of these epigraphic texts he arrived at the conclusion that „the Crown represents the official documentary recognition and assurance on behalf of Byzantium of the sovereignty of the Hungarian King-

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11. Constantine Porphyrogenitus *De Administrando Imperio*. Greek Text Edited by Gy. Moravcsik. English Translation by R. J. H. Jenkins. Dumbarton Oaks 1967. *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae*. I.
 12. Gy. Moravcsik: *Studia Byzantina*. Budapest, 1967.
 13. Gy. Moravcsik: *Byzantium and the Magyars*. Budapest, 1970.
 14. Moravcsik, Gy.: *Az Árpád-kori magyar történet bizánci forrásai*. Budapest, 1984.
 15. *Il Caronte Bizantino*. *Studi Bizantini e Neellenici* 3 (1931) 43–68, *Görög költemény a várnai csatáról*. (A Greek Poem on the Battle at Varna.) MGT I. Budapest, 1935, *Sagen und Legenden über Kaiser Basileios I*. *Studia Byzantina*. 147–220.
 16. Cf. Gy. Moravcsik: *Byzantinische Mission im Kreise der Türkvölker an der Nordküste des Schwarzen Meeres*. Oxford 1966 and *Byzance et le christianisme hongrois du Moyen Age*. *Corsi di cultura sull' arte ravennata e bizantina*. Ravenna 1969. 313–341.
 17. Harmatta, J.: *A magyarság őstörténete*. (The Prehistory of the Hungarians.) *Magyar Tudomány* 35 (1990) 260.



dom.”... „Thus, it is a monument of that struggle which was fought by the Hungarians, settled on the water-shed of East and West during their whole history, relying sometimes upon the West against the Eastern attacks and sometimes upon the East against the Western influences threatening their existence.”¹⁸ He wrote these sentences in 1935, perhaps he had a presentiment of the actuality of this historical vision at the end of the 20th century.

Lastly, in one of his last papers,¹⁹ he examined some important problems of the Hungarian conquest. In professional literature different opinions were expressed about the political situation of the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century. According to one conception, the central part of the Carpathian Basin east of the Danube belonged to Great Moravia while according to the other idea the whole territory was uninhabited desert. Consequently, to the east of the Garam-Danube line there existed a political vacuum in the Carpathian Basin. Thus, the latter view denies the reliability and historical reality of the description to be found in the *Gesta Hungarorum* written by P. magister, according to which the Hungarians fought many battles against local princes of Bulgarian descent and in the course of the conquest they also defeated Bulgarian and Byzantine auxiliary troops.

Contrary to this opinion, Moravcsik has convincingly shown that the data of the *Gesta Hungarorum* cannot be mere inventions. The *Gesta* tells that the land between the Danube and the Tisza rivers was conquered by the Great Kean, the dux of the Bulgarians up to the Polish and Ruthenian frontiers. According to the *Gesta* the Great Kean was great-grandfather of dux Salan, ruling on the territory between the Danube and Tisza at the time of the Hungarian conquest. By help of Byzantine and Bulgarian sources Moravcsik could verify this relation of P. magister and prove the inner probability of that assertion in the *Gesta Hungarorum* that the Bulgarian tsar Symeon came to the aid of dux Salan and that even the Byzantine Emperor sent auxiliary troops against the Hungarians as well as that the Bulgarian princes were really ruling in the Eastern part of the Carpathian Basin with the consent of the Byzantine Emperor in the sense of the Byzantine idea of continuity. These important hints may give valuable orientation and stimulation for further study of the Hungarian conquest at the occasion of its approaching 1100th anniversary.

In 1942, in the midst of the flaming lands of Europe, Moravcsik sent the biblical message δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις Θεῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνη ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας to his readers. Sixteen years later in 1958 in the second edition of *Byzantinoturcica*, he still regarded this message as actual and repeated it. If he would live and be among us, surely he would again repeat it thereby also testifying that he belonged to the ἄνθρωποι εὐδοκίας.

18. Moravcsik, Gy.: A magyar szent korona görög feliratai. (The Greek Inscriptions of the Hungarian Holy Crown.) *Értekezések a Nyelv- és Széptud. Oszt. köréből.* XXV, 5. Budapest 1935. 46–47.

19. Gy. Moravcsik: Der ungarische Anonymus über die Bulgaren und Griechen. *RÉSEE* 7 (1969) 167 foll.