

Bortz and Membrok, etymology of two Cuman names from the 13th century

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In this paper I intend to offer an explanation of the above names, well-known from the sources connected to the Christianization of the Cumans in the 13th century. The first Christian missions, which were carried out by Hungarian Dominicans, are well documented by diplomatic letters between the Holy See and the Hungarian king, chronicles and historical scriptures of the Dominican order.¹ According to the Dominican sources, Paulus Hungarus, an excellent scholar of ecclesiastical law at the university of Bologna, became one of the early followers of St. Dominic, the founder of the preachers' order and adapted the goal of the founder, namely to convert the pagan Cumans to Christianity.² According to the papal letters, it was Robert, archbishop of Esztergom who administered the process by baptizing the Cuman prince, visiting the province, and leading the organization of the new bishopric, using royal support as well. As far as we know, there were several attempts to Christianize these pagans, "who had no idea of God".³

In 1222, the first monks went to Moldova, but the Cumans sent them back into Hungary.⁴

In 1227, the second group of Dominicans went further eastwards, to the Dnieper. Two of them were killed, before finally, chieftain *Bortz* sent his son to Hungary where he and his entourage were converted and further arrangements were made to the conversion of the whole tribe. They established close (although not totally vassal) connections with the Hungarian Kingdom.

Robert, archbishop of Esztergom and the crown prince, Béla (later king Béla IV) followed up this success, travelled to Transylvania in 1228 and participated in the baptism of the chieftain and thousands of their people there.

1 Historians have elaborated the history of the Cumans, e.g. Gyárfás 1870–1885/1992, Györffy 1951/1990, Golden 2013, Kliashorny 2013, Stoianov 2010 and especially that of the mission, e.g. Ferent 1981, Berend 2001, Spinei 2008, etc.

2 *Commentariolum de provinciae Hungariae originibus*: Pfeiffer, 1913: 142–146. Paulus Hungarus, killed by the Mongols in 1241, is venerated as a Beatus and commemorated November 13, cf. Diós II., 2009.

3 *Qui nullam Dei omnino notitiam habuerunt* in *Vita s. Dominici fundatoris ordinis fratrum Praedicatorum* by Theodoricus de Apolda., a. 1292, ed. AA. SS. Boll. I: 558–628; Gombos III: 2333.

4 Cf. *Annales ordinis praedicatorum*, Ferent 1981: 121–122.

In 1228, a Cuman bishopric was founded and a church (titulus BVM) built in Milkó/Milkovo, between the Eastern slopes of the Carpathian Mountains. Bortz, the chieftain got a royal donation in the vicinity, close to the south-eastern border of Hungary (Transylvania/Moldova) where the Teutonic Knight Order tried to establish their own realm (as they later did in Balticum), before they were expelled by king Andreas II.⁵

The mission made quite an impact on history. The mission lasted 19–20 years before the Mongolian invasion destroyed it by killing approximately 90 Dominicans. It means that there must have been quite many educated people involved. The 12 Dominican travelers (Otto, Julianus and their companions) were probably selected from those monks who worked among the Cumans and spoke their language. They delivered important information about Eastern Europe to the King and the Pope, including information about Hungarian groups still living as far as by the Ural Mountains at that time and about the threatening Mongolian invasion. As we know, well-organized Cuman units tried to escape from the Mongols and migrated into Hungary. It was probably these Christian Cumans, connected both politically and military to the Kingdom, who settled in Hungary.

Bortz⁶

Bortz is the name of the Cuman prince who was baptized in 1227.⁷ Variants of his name are *Barcz*, *Barc*, *Bruchi*, and *Bauch* in Dominican sources. He is obviously identical with *Brut*, *Brutus*, a chieftain by the Neper (i.e. Dnieper), who was baptized together with his family.⁸ His name was printed as *Biutus* in a historical book about the Hungarians saints, written by Gabriel Hevenesi SJ in the 17th century.⁹ In the Emonis chronicon from the 13th century, *Boricus* is to be found.¹⁰ Further on, Bortz was perhaps identical with *Begovars* (r: *Bey-Bars*) a Cuman chief, who in 1229 or 1230 participated in the war against Galich on the Hungarian side, as recorded in the Galich-Volhynian Annals.¹¹ According to Hungarian Dominican

5 These facts make the impression that these Cumans were meant to be border guards in the South-East corner of Transylvania, a function which was later taken over by the Hungarian speaking Csángós, moved here probably from the vicinity of the Aranyos river, Transylvania. All these movements and the reorganization of the Székelys were part of a royal plan to secure the border guards in the area – a task which became even more important after the Mongolian invasion. Moving and settling people in any areas of the Kingdom was a royal privilege, which in such large scale could not have been carried out as a spontaneous event.

6 About his person cf. Kovács 2005.

7 Theiner, 1859 I: 86; Hurmuzaki, 1887 I: 102.

8 *Vita s. Dominici fundatoris ordinis fratrum Praedicatorum* C. 322. 323 (AA.SS. Boll. 4. augusti: 558–628) in: Gombos, III: 2335, no. 4964, Ferrarius, 1637: 40.

9 RMSZ 1695: 100–102, Puskely 1994: 176–177.

10 MGH SS 23: 511.

11 PSRL II: 761; Hodinka 1916: 368–369.

sources, Brut died like a good Christian, after the Galich campaign but before the episcopal church was built in 1234.¹²

The forms Bruchi, Brut and Brutus are formed by metathesis, Biutus must be a misreading and/or misspelling of Brut(us). Bauch is a misreading and misspelling of Barch. Boricius is obviously the same as Russian Boris (“warrior”), added probably by an educated Western European who had some but not enough information about Eastern Europe.

Several scholars made attempts to find an etymology for this name. According to Rásonyi, both Borč and Burč is a possible reading.¹³ Györffy and other Hungarian scholars connected it to Turkic *barc*, *bars* “panther”, while Drimba tried to explain it as *borch* “debt”, or *burč* “pepper”, which is little plausible.¹⁴ Bortz is sometimes identified with the Cuman prince *Begovars* (r.: *Bey-bars*) mentioned in the Galich-Volhynian Annals, i.e. the last consonant in his name must have been –s (written according to German orthography by –tz and pronounced /ts/ in Hungarian) and not –č.¹⁵ Although I doubt the identification because *Bagubars* brothers are mentioned in The Testament of Vladimir Monomakh between 1080 and 1086 (Russian Primary Chronicle 160, 162), which makes the impression that this is the name of a kindred or a military group and their leader, I do accept the phonetic explanation. This is not a unique development in Hungarian, see the same consonant cluster in *Barsil* “name of a Tc tribe” > Hung. *Bercel* (in toponyms, FNSz I, 196). The proper name, Bars “panther” was used together with the title *bey*: *Bey-bars* “lord Panther”, a name which often occurs among different Tc groups, and also in toponyms, among others in the territory of historical Hungary.¹⁶

Membrok/Bemborch/Bibrech

In several sources, the name of a second chieftain occurs as Bernborch, Membrok, Bernborch, Bemborch, Benbroch, Bembroth, Brebroth, Benbrorch, Henborz,

¹² Vita s. Dominici fundatoris ordinis fratrum Praedicatorum in Gombos III: 2334.

¹³ Rásonyi 1967: 138.

¹⁴ Drimba 2000: 48, 88. The *Burchevichi* tribe of the Cumans, also called *Borcsól* (1266: *Borchol*, 1288: *Borchoul*) in Hungary, *Burch-oghlu* in the Mamluk state, whose name means “sons of Burch”, are not named after this person, because they are mentioned in Russian sources already in 1193 (Dimnik 2003: 202).

¹⁵ Kovács 2005: 257.

¹⁶ Cf. Rásonyi – Baski I, 2007. These proper name > toponyms are well documented in Ukraine, among the Romanians and in historical Hungary (in Székelyland 1332–7: *villa Biborch*, the present *Bibarcfalva*, Rom. *Biborțeni*, FNSz I, 1988, 211a). Even the long vowel is documented in 1567: *Bijbarkfalva* (Jakab – Szádeczky 1994: 268).

Heubory, Bribrech, Bribrch, Bribroch, Bribchu.¹⁷ Most scholars use the form Membrok, although most variants have an initial b-. Fejér obviously meant that all these forms referred to the same person, i.e. Bartz.¹⁸ According to Gyárfás, these (and Borth) was a deformation of Boriz (Boris)¹⁹. Some scholars, e.g. Pfeiffer and Ferentş argued that Bortz Membrok was one person with a double name.²⁰ According to Richard and Györffy, Bortz and Membrok were father and son.²¹ Ferentş and Theodorescu used the double name Bortz Membrok for the father, and the (incorrect) variant Burch for the son.²² Berend (2001, 217) mentioned them as just two chieftains. Kovács (2005, 256) agrees with Györffy according to whom the Dominicans wanted to emphasise their successes by mentioning not one but two names, father and son and Membrok is just a variant of Beybars, i.e. Bortz. He also suggested an etymology (269), based on the idea that the second part Membrok is Bortz, i.e. bars “tiger, panther”, combined with men “great, big” or bey “lord”.

Before working on the etymology it must be decided whether the forms with an initial *b-* or with an *m-* are the original forms or both. *B-/m-* alternation is well documented in Kipchak languages, see the name of another Cuman chieftain, called *Maniaχ* in Greek, *Monoch* in Hungarian, but *Bonjak*” in Russian sources (around 1090).²³ This change in Kipchak is well attested already by Mahmud al-Kashgari, who wrote that the Kipchak (and Oguz and Suvar) changed initial *m-* to *b-*. Still, one must remember that the Cuman tribal organization included peoples of different dialects and languages. It is noteworthy that most variants have an initial *b-*, and only very few an initial *h-* or an initial *m-*. Metathesis, misprints, misreadings and orthographic traditions stand for the rest of the variations. E.g. taking *e* or *i* for *r* and vice versa were usual misreadings, while the *e > i* development is a Kipchak feature.²⁴

In my opinion, for further explanations we have to look into the Hungarian Dominican source, the *Vita s. Dominici fundatoris ordinis fratrum Praedicatorum* „Life of St. Dominicus, the founder of the Order of Preacher Friars”, written in the 13th century by Theodoricus de Apolda, who collected it from different ancient sources (!). It is in his work where the two chieftains occur: Brut and Bernbroch. Both names show contaminated spelling. They are probably copied from two

17 *Vita s. Dominici fundatoris ordinis fratrum Praedicatorum* C. 322. 323 (AA.SS. Boll. 4. augusti: 558–628) Gombos: 2335, no. 4964, MGH 23: 920, Reichert 1897: 306; Tugwell 1998: 89, 93, 95–96; Curta 2008 II: 427, note 47, etc.

18 Fejér, 1829, III: 110 cited the different forms which are to be found in sources in parentheses after the name of Bort (r. Bortz): *Bort* (i.e. *Bribroth*, *Bibrech*, *Bemborch*, *Boriz*). By other means, he meant that they all refer to the same person.

19 Gyárfás II, 1873: 220.

20 Pfeiffer 1913: 79, Ferentş 1981: 125.

21 Richard 1941: 2, Györffy 1951/1990: 269.

22 Ferentş 1981: 126 and Theodorescu 1974: 168, 172.

23 Cf. Györffy 1948/1990: 213.

24 SIGTJA Regional'nye rekonstrukcii, 2002: 225–227.

different sources, because Brut contains metathesis while Bernbroch does not, i.e. the metathesis is not based on a common dialect. The *Vita* gives us similar information about both persons:²⁵

They are both *dux*, a kind of tribal or military chieftains;

They are both baptized together with their families;

They both died as good Christians;

They are both buried in the chapel of Our Lady, i.e. they both died before the cathedral of the episcopate was built.

How many newly baptized chiefs could have died a sacred death and buried in the same chapel between 1227 (or rather 1230) and 1234, when the episcopal church was built? It seems to me that Theodericus perhaps cited here two sources about the same person, but in any case surely not about a father and his son, a relation which he probably would not have left unmentioned.

The etymology can be elaborated by using two variants, *Bibrech* and *Bibrege*, printed as such in 1637 and in 1695, respectively. *Bibrech* is to be found in the history which Sigismundus Ferrarius OP wrote about the Hungarian Dominican province (1637, 40), which he, an Italian, reorganized after turbulent centuries. He was a devoted historian who collected all manuscripts about the order, so he used reliable information. *Bibrege* occurs in the hagiographical book (RMSz 101, Puskely 1994, 176–177) published by Gabriel Hevenesi SJ about Hungarian saints after the example of the Bollandists. He mentioned shortly in the biography of Paulus Hungarus that he baptized many Cumans, among others their two supreme commanders, *Biutus* and *Bibrege*.²⁶ These forms are corroborated by the more contaminated *Bibrech*, *Bibrch*, *Bibroch* and *Bribchu*. Hevenesi wrote more details about Paulus Hungarus than Ferrarius, still, they both mentioned that the Dominicans worked 19–20 years among the Cumans before the Mongolian invasion. It is most probable that Hevenesi read the book of Ferrarius and although to different degrees, they both preserved some traditions about the mission that was remembered in the Hungarian Dominican province. They are important contributions.

25 "... et sic primo omnium ducem, nomine Brut, cum aliquibus de familia sua baptizaverunt; qui post aliquot annos in confessione verae fidei perseverans, obdormivit in Domino, facta prius confessione et communione, ut moris Christianorum est, suscepta, per manus fratrum in capella beatae Virginis, quam in eadem gente commorantes fratres, ut se ibi quandoque colligerent, aedificaverant, honorifice est sepultus. – C.323. Post haec Bernborch nobiliorem ducem cum mille circiter de familia sua ad fidem Iesu Christi convertebant, quem de sacro fonte baptismatis non sine magno gaudio illustris rex Ungariae Andreas, pater sanctae Elisabeth levavit. Hic dux, dum in extremis ageret, in manibus fratrum in agone constitutus, dixit: Discedant a me omnes Cumani pagani, quia video circa eos daemones horribiles; remaneant soli fratres et Cumani baptizati, quia ecce video fratres martyrizatos qui exspectant me, ut secum ducent ad gaudia, quae praedicaverunt. Et his dictis, cum mirabili gaudio exspiravit, et in capella beatae Virginis supra memorata traditus est sepulturae." (Gombos III: 2335).

26 RMSz 1695/1737: 101, Puskely 1994, 175–177.

In my opinion, *Bibrech/Bibrege* can be explained as a borrowing from Persian *bābr* ‘tiger’, i.e. Tc “bars”.²⁷ In Persian the Proto-Iranian *a* became *ā* and there is the well-known development of *e > i* in Kipchak languages, which caused the change *a > e > i* in the first syllable. It is how *Babrak*, an Iranian name²⁸ became *Bibrech/Bibrege* among the Cumans.

The variants *Bernborch*, *Bernborch*, *Bemborch*, *Benbroch*, *Bembroth*, *Brebroth*, *Benbrorch* did not follow this *e > i* development. *Membrok* on the other hand, shows the not uncommon *b > m* change, although *m > b* would be more usual in a Kipchak language. A similar development happened in the case of Persian *barāt* (i.e. the name of the Muslim holiday *sab-i barāt*) which became *meret* in Kipchak.²⁹ This word for tiger does not occur in the Codex Cumanicus. The Cumans must have borrowed it before they arrived to the Pontic steppes, probably somewhere in Transoxania or from the Alans in their neighborhood, even perhaps not from the Jász/As group they arrived together with to Hungary. Modern genetic research proved the mixed, Oriental-Eastern European origin of the Cumans.³⁰ Although earlier anthropological measurements are now more or less outdated, I will quote it here in lack of a throughout research carried out in these groups. The population in Greater and Lesser Cumania are actually anthropologically different (Czeizel 1990: 162–164), so it is obvious that the groups have different history and also their contacts with the Iranian word happened through different channels, especially as one of them came from the Kazakh steppes, while the other one lived some time already further to the West, on the right bank of the Dnieper.

Although Turkic *Bars* and *Bibrech/Bibrege* have the same meaning it is not sure whether they were names of two different persons or perhaps just one person, it is clear that they were used respectively in both languages by a mixed, Kipchak-Alan population, the army of which alliance went even in battle together against the Mongols in 1222.

I intend to elaborate here another *Membrok* just to avoid any misunderstanding. Another *Membrok* occurs in an English chivalric romance, *The Kyng of Tars*, i.e. the king of Tarsus, whose beautiful daughter was forced to marry a Muslim leader, the Soudan, i.e. Sultan. Its manuscripts³¹ (one in Edinburgh, one in Bodleiana and one in the British Library) are from the 14th century. The text is translated from French or Latin. One of the Sarazzen vassals of the Sultan is *Membrok/Menbrok/Memaroc*, a cowardly pagan.³² Can *Memaroc* and thereof

27 Persian *bābr* ‘tiger’, Tajik *babr* ‘leopard’, Dari *babr* ‘lion’ < Pra-Iranian **babru-*, **babra-*, names of animals with a yellowish colour, also in the Pamir (Edel’man 2009: 51, 145).

28 Cf. the pseudonym Babrak Karmal, Afgan politician born in 1929.

29 Kovács 2017: 63–64.

30 Bogácsi-Szabó – Kalmár – Csányi – Tomory – Czibula 2005.

31 Edinburgh Nat. Lib. Of Scotland, Vernon Oxford, Bodleiana, Simeon, London British Libr. Cf. Davis 2009.

32 Warton I, 1774: 131–136; Ritson II, 1802: 198, 202; <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/chandler-the-king-of-tars>.

Membrok stand for Mamluk? The names of the other personages in the romance are similarly misspelled, e.g. Merkel stands for Carmel and Mahoun for Mohamed. Unfortunately the Latin or French original of the English translation has not survived the centuries, so it is impossible to find out any more about these names. Still, knowing the connections between France, Italy and the Muslim world in the 13th century, (when the original of the 14th century copy was probably written), it is possible that *Membrok* meant Mamluk here. The Mamluks were actually Kipchaks from the Pontic area, exactly where our *Membrok* lived in the same period. It is possible that this name of a social group with ethnic and religious connotations was known and used by the copyist in the Vatican when referring to this pagan chieftain, who just converted to Christianity. In any case, it is not connected to the name of our Cuman chieftain.

The presence of the Kipchaks on the Balkans and in Hungary is well-known, but now *Bars* and *Bibrech/Bibrege* witness about the Alan – Kipchak past of this territory, just outside of Transylvania, a fact which was less documented by linguistic material earlier.

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