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in the *Gesta Hungarorum* of the Anonymous Hungarian Notary
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**GO THE DISTANCE:
CONCEPTS OF MIGRATION AND ORIGIN IN THE
GESTA HUNGARORUM OF THE ANONYMOUS
HUNGARIAN NOTARY**

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At the end of the twelfth century, an anonymous writer sat down to fulfil a promise he had made to his friend, an individual addressed only as ‘the venerable N’, to establish

the genealogy of the kings of Hungary and of their noblemen: how the seven leading persons, who are called the Hetumoger, came down from the Scythian land . . . and why the people coming forth from the Scythian land are called Hungarians in the speech of foreigners but Magyars in their own.¹

These Magyars, he furthermore claimed, had got their name from Magog, son of Japheth, the first king of Scythia, from whose line the famous King Attila was also descended.² In a few sentences across the first couple of chapters of this text, the *Gesta Hungarorum*, the author thus created an origin story for the Hungarians that invoked the biblical figures of Gog and Magog, classical texts by writers fascinated with the ‘other’ peoples of antiquity (such as the nomadic Scythians), and early medieval history, along with the first traces of Hungarian ethnogenesis. What is more, all parts of this origin narrative prominently feature implicit and explicit references to the movement of peoples. Legends of migration played a key role in the development of the identity of the Hungarians in the *Gesta* and in the many texts that followed it. So much so that the descent from Scythia remained part of the Hungarian national consciousness until well into the

¹ Anonymous (Notary of King Béla), *Gesta Hungarorum / The Deeds of the Hungarians*, ed. and trans. Martyn Rady and László Veszprémy, & Master Roger, *Epistola in miserabile carmen super destructione Regni Hungarie per tartaros facta / Epistle to the Sorrowful Lament upon the Destruction of the Kingdom of Hungary by the Tatars*, ed. and trans. János M. Bak and Martyn Rady (Budapest, 2010), 2–3, hereafter cited as GH.

² GH, 6–7.

nineteenth century.³ How then did the concept of migration come to be such an evocative part of this elaborate origin story? This article seeks to answer this question by exploring the Hungarian origin story presented in the *Gesta* in the light of Alheydis Plassmann's model of the medieval migration motif.⁴ Applying this framework to the *Gesta Hungarorum* enables a deeper understanding of the structure of the Hungarian migration myth and reveals the careful and deliberate choices the author made in order to create a story that has continued to fascinate audiences and scholars both in and outside Hungary from the medieval period through to the present day.

The Gesta Hungarorum and the Genre of Origo Gentis

The *Gesta Hungarorum* is a prime example of the centrality of movement in medieval origin stories because the whole narrative paints the outline of a complex and complete journey, from the ancestors' departure from their homeland to their arrival at their new settlement. Regrettably, this text has received less attention in English-language scholarship than the later, longer thirteenth-century chronicle of the same name by Simon of Kéza.⁵ The *Gesta* written by the Anonymous Notary, however, is the oldest extant Hungarian origin narrative written in Latin, which was the most common language for these types of

³ Alexander John Sager, 'Van Ôstrit Allenthalbin: Images of Eastern Europe in Medieval German and Hungarian Literary Culture, 1050-1300' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Cornell University, 2000).

⁴ Alheydis Plassmann, 'Das Wanderungsmotiv als Gründungsmythos in den frühmittelalterlichen *Origines gentium*', in Michael Bernes, Matthias Becher, and Elke Brüggem (eds.), *Gründungsmythen Europas im Mittelalter* (Göttingen, 2013), 61-77.

⁵ It is significant that Simon of Kéza's text was the first to be published as a critical edition with an English translation in the Central European Medieval Texts series in 1999, whereas the CEMT edition of the *Gesta Hungarorum* only came out in 2010. See Simon of Kéza, *Gesta Hungarorum / The Deeds of the Hungarians*, ed. and trans. László Veszprémy and Frank Schaer (Budapest, 1999). For more information on Simon of Kéza and his influence on Hungarian national history writing, see Norbert Kersken, *Geschichtsschreibung im Europa der 'nationes': Nationalgeschichtliche Gesamtdarstellungen im Mittelalter* (Cologne, 1995), 662-70.

texts in the Middle Ages. Most scholars agree that the chronicle was written sometime after 1192, though it is difficult to be sure because the author only identified himself with an initial, 'P', and by mentioning that he was a notary to a king by the name of Béla, of which there were no fewer than four during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁶

The text belongs to the genre of the so-called *origo gentis* narratives written throughout the Middle Ages. These myths of origin were, as Alexander John Sager has put it, 'narratives of diaspora and migration', meant to create a sense of community for their audience both as members of a distinct people and as part of the wider Christian world.⁷ This desire to place populations within the medieval *Christianitas* is why *origo gentis* stories became particularly popular during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when newly Christianized peoples like the Hungarians started writing their own histories.⁸ The intended readers of these texts were often the ruling elite, both ecclesiastical and secular, who found in the narratives validations of their claims to lands and titles. The Hungarian Notary, for example, often emphasized this by explaining that certain nobles had received their possessions from the ninth-century leader Árpád and that 'their descendants have . . . been worthy to keep these lands till now.'⁹ Although often presented as authentic reports of historical events by their authors, the value of the *origines gentium* to the modern historian lies more in their imagined presentation of the past than in any factual information.

Within the narratives of *origines gentium*, a migration story could be a particularly useful topos with which to locate a *gens* in the universal historical landscape and link its history with events from biblical and classical literature. Especially if a people had not been mentioned

⁶ GH, pp. xxi-xxii.

⁷ Sager, 'Van Ôstrit Allenthalbin', 8.

⁸ Alheydis Plassmann, *Origo Gentis: Identitäts- und Legitimitätsstiftung in früh- und hochmittelalterlichen Herkunftserzählungen* (Berlin, 2006); Magali Coumert, *Origines des peuples: Les récits du Haut Moyen Âge occidental (550-850)* (Turnhout, 2007); Susan Reynolds, 'Medieval *origines gentium* and the Community of the Realm', *History*, 68/224 (1983), 375-90; R. W. Southern, 'Presidential Address: Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society: Fifth Series*, 20-3 (1970-3).

⁹ GH, 48. For more on the *causa scribendi* and the audience of the *Gesta Hungarorum*, see GH, p. xxv.

in the established historical tradition, an explanation had to be found for where they had come from and how they had ended up in their present home. A migration motif, as Plassmann called it, can be found in many *origo gentis* stories and can be broken down into three different elements: where the departure took place spatially, what the journey looked like, and how the arrival was depicted.¹⁰

The Place of Origin

Taking each of these elements in turn, let us return now to the text of the *Gesta Hungarorum* and its descriptions of the Scythian homeland of the Hungarians. Locations such as Scythia, Troy, and Scandinavia were attractive places of origin to medieval people because, as Walter Pohl has explained, they were located on the European periphery and were 'known above all from legends and long reputed as places of emigration.'¹¹ In fact, many of the traditional choices of homeland dated back to antiquity. Troy is perhaps the most famous example. The classical writer Vergil used it as the original home of the Romans, and the story was so influential that in the seventh century Fredegar, the writer of the first Frankish origin story, appropriated the city and made its exiles into the ancestors of the Franks too.¹² The Bible was also a reliable source for the origins of peoples. Claiming ancestry from Noah and his son Japheth proved especially popular in the Middle Ages, as it indicated a genealogical relationship with the chosen people, as well as a geographical descent from biblical lands in the distant past. More often than not, however, writers combined biblical, classical, and early medieval legends to create their own ancestry myths. The use of Scythia, a classical concept, in the *Gesta Hungarorum* alongside a lineage traced back to the biblical Magog and Japheth is therefore not unusual. What is worth exploring, however, is the way Scythia was described by the Anonymous Notary and the reason why it was designated as the Hungarians' homeland in the first place.

¹⁰ Plassmann, 'Das Wanderungsmotiv', 63.

¹¹ Walter Pohl, 'Narratives of Origin and Migration in Early Medieval Europe: Problems of Interpretation', *Medieval History Journal*, 21/2 (2018), 192–221, at 194.

¹² Reynolds, 'Medieval *origines gentium*', 376.

It was the Anonymous Notary's main source, the ninth-century German abbot Regino of Prüm, who first described the Hungarians as a people who, 'unheard of in previous centuries, because they were not named [in the sources], emerged from the Scythian kingdoms' in 889.¹³ Regino gave the Hungarians a Scythian ancestry seemingly because he could not find any information on their actual origins. Scythia, therefore, was less an actual place and more a type of literary topos – one that brought with it a variety of characteristics. The Anonymous Hungarian Notary, for example, copied Regino's assertion that the people living in Scythia had never been ruled by an emperor.¹⁴ This independence was a crucial point in *origo gentis* legends. The Normans claimed Scandinavia as their ancestral homeland precisely because it had never been part of the Roman Empire. The Scandinavians could therefore be portrayed as a mighty people who had been able to maintain their independence against the military power of the Romans.¹⁵

Scythia as a topos had a similar type of history. It was Herodotus, the fifth-century BCE father of history, who first mentioned Scythia in his *Histories*, where he presented its inhabitants as a model of otherness to contrast with his main subject, the Greeks. The Scythians, who lived on the Pontic Steppe between the seventh and third centuries BCE, were a nomadic people, constantly moving from place to place. The Greeks, on the other hand, took great pride in their cities and their life-long attachment to one area.¹⁶ In other words, the Scythians provided a counterpoint against which the Greeks could set their own identity. This is why Scythia is described in classical literature as 'a distant land . . . on the edges of the world.'¹⁷ Though Herodotus was not read by medieval writers, his description of Scythia set a precedent

¹³ Simon MacLean (trans.), *History and Politics in Late Carolingian and Ottonian Europe: The Chronicle of Regino of Prüm and Adalbert of Magdeburg* (Manchester, 2009), 202. ¹⁴ GH, 6–7.

¹⁵ On the Scandinavian ancestry of the Normans and the significance of independence, see Robert W. Rix, *The Barbarian North in Medieval Imagination: Ethnicity, Legend, and Literature* (New York, 2015).

¹⁶ François Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Berkeley, 1988), 11.

¹⁷ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, trans. David Grene (Chicago, 1956), 416–17. Cited in Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 13.

and was mediated through a variety of authors from antiquity to the early Middle Ages. Thus we see that the *Gesta's* idea of the Scythians as an independent people echoes Herodotus' notion of nomads without a home or a ruler.

Next to political independence, antiquity was another particularly sought-after characteristic in *origines gentium*, and this was provided to the Scythians by Marcus Junianus Justinus Frontinus, commonly known as Justin, a Roman historian from the second or third century CE. He wrote extensively about Scythia in his *Epitome*, an abridgement of the earlier writer Pompeius Trogus' *Philippic Histories*. In Justin's work, the Scythians were opposed to the Egyptians rather than the Greeks, and through a complicated set of scenarios describing the inception of the world, he argued that Scythia was older than Egypt.¹⁸ Justin's direct influence, mediated through Regino of Prüm, can be found in the *Gesta Hungarorum's* first chapter, where the author relates that 'the Scythians are a more ancient people.'¹⁹ The word that stands out here is 'more', which does not make sense in the context of the *Gesta*, where there is no comparison with other peoples. It does make sense, however, as an invocation of Justin, who made this claim immediately after his discussion of the Egyptians.²⁰

The classical writers had thus established the Scythians as highly desirable ancestors by emphasizing their independence and antiquity, and it was then up to medieval historians to claim them as their own. Yet by late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, the role of Scythia had to be reframed in light of the rise of Christianity. Rather than appearing as uncivilized, in contrast to the intellectual societies of antiquity, the Scythians became exemplars of innocent pagans living in ignorance until they discovered the true religion. For example, the fifth-century writer Orosius attributed Scythian origins to the Goths, thereby transferring the Christian-like characteristics of the former to the latter, which gave the Goths a kind of innate Christianity that helped them make peace with the Romans. Drawing on Judaeo-Christian tradition, he equated the Goths with the Getae—a people often seen as descendants of the biblical Gog and Magog, the sons of Japheth and grandsons

¹⁸ Marcus Junianus Justinus, *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus*, ed. and trans. John Selby Watson (London, 1853), 2.1.

¹⁹ GH, 6–7.

²⁰ See Rady's explanation in GH, 6, n. 4.

of Noah, whose base was said to be in the lands of Scythia.²¹ Many subsequent medieval authors ascribed a Scythian heritage to previously pagan peoples, and so the Hungarians came to claim this ancestry too. The Anonymous Notary used this Gothic-Christian ancestry himself when he noted that the Hungarians, who were called Magyars in their own language, were named after Magog.²² This stands in line with a wider medieval tradition in *origines gentium* of using etymology to link people to a heroic ancestor, an event, or a place. Names had specific meanings which could explain the characteristics of the *gens* or, as is the case here, could be interpreted as harbouring some type of divine purpose.²³

Here it may be useful to pause for a moment and note that even though the Hungarian origin narrative was informed by many classical and religious works of literature, the influence of oral traditions cannot be wholly disregarded. As Pohl has rightly pointed out, it would be wrong to assume that pagan peoples like the Goths or the Hungarians 'completely forgot their indigenous traditions as soon as they entered the Roman Empire'.²⁴ Indeed, in the middle of the tenth century, as historians have found, the historical consciousness of the Hungarians still relied very much on an oral tradition which celebrated the conquest of the country by the previous generation. Only after their Christianization in the eleventh century did they feel the need for a wider history, following a more general tendency among recently converted peoples to create their own *origines gentium*.²⁵ An increased anxiety over using 'authentic' accounts of historical events

²¹ A. H. Merrills, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2005), 61.

²² According to Rady, Anonymous is the only Hungarian chronicler to have made this connection. See GH, 7, n. 7.

²³ Alheydis Plassmann, 'Intentionale Deutungen von *Gentes*-Namen', in Frank Hentschel and Marie Winkel Müller (eds.), *'Nationes', 'Gentes' und die Musik im Mittelalter* (Berlin, 2014), 53–4. See also Plassmann, *Origo gentis*, 18–24 and 362–77. More broadly on the topic of etymology and peoples, see Arno Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel: Geschichte der Meinungen über Ursprung und Vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker*, 6 vols. (Stuttgart, 1957–63).

²⁴ Pohl, 'Narratives of Origin and Migration', 200.

²⁵ János Harmatta, 'Éruditio, tradition orale et réalité géographique: Le récit sur l'Exode des Hongrois chez Anonyme', *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 27 (1979), 285–303, at 289.

made people like the Anonymous Notary determined to use scriptural and classical sources to inform their narratives instead of relying on folk tales.²⁶ To show his earnestness in this pursuit, Anonymous asserted that he had written his text to make sure that anyone interested in learning about the Hungarian past would not need to turn to 'false stories of peasants and the gabbling song of minstrels.'²⁷ Despite this adamant statement, however, it is highly likely that some oral origin stories circulating among the various leading families made their way into the Anonymous Notary's narrative.²⁸

What is clear is the number of cultural references he applied retrospectively to the early Hungarians. For example, he claimed that the Scythians lived in felt tents and that, when they left their homeland, they crossed the river Etil (the modern-day Volga) 'sitting on leather bags in the pagan manner.'²⁹ As Martyn Rady mentions, these may have been customs that Anonymous had witnessed among his countrymen as late as the twelfth century.³⁰ Attributing these pagan habits to the Scythians perhaps made it easier for a contemporary audience to identify themselves with these distant ancestors. The fact that Anonymous describes many of the early Hungarians' pagan behaviours in a positive light is quite unusual, especially compared to contemporaries such as Cosmas of Prague. Part of the reason might be a lack of alternatives, because there was so little information on Hungarian prehistory (that is, before the conversion) available to a writer of the twelfth century. Anonymous navigated this vacuum by claiming that the Hungarians had been led by God and the Holy Spirit from the beginning.³¹ What the writer tried to do was create a continuity between the pagan past and the Christian present. Hence

²⁶ For more on this general trend in Europe in the twelfth century, see Paul Magdalino (ed.), *The Perception of the Past in Twelfth-Century Europe* (London, 1992).
²⁷ GH, 4–5.

²⁸ For a more detailed exploration of Anonymous' possible local sources, see GH, p. xxix.

²⁹ GH, 8–9 and 20–1.

³⁰ See Rady's notes, GH, 9, n. 5 and 20, n. 3.

³¹ László Veszprémy, 'More paganism: Reflections on the Pagan and Christian Past in the *Gesta Hungarorum* of the Hungarian Anonymous Notary', in Ildar 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), 183–201, at 201.

every part of the Hungarian migration, from leaving Scythia to fighting with local lords and taking lands, was clothed in a veil of divine providence. This not only showed that the Hungarians had God's support in their quest for a new homeland, but also afforded them a kind of innate Christianity, making their later official conversion a logical consequence rather than a radical break with their past.³² This became a particularly important theme when the Scythians set out on their journey for a new land.

Leaving the Homeland

Anonymous' chapter on Scythia ends with the reason why the Hungarians left this land: 'although spacious enough, it was still insufficient to sustain or hold the host of peoples begotten there.'³³ As Rady has mentioned, there are many medieval historical texts that present the problem of overpopulation as an incentive to leave a place of origin. The *Gesta*, via Regino, quotes from Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum*, which applies the same justification to the movement of the Goths, amongst others.³⁴ The Anonymous Notary wrote that the leaders of the Hungarians, upon making the decision to leave, agreed to 'seek for themselves the land of Pannonia that they had heard from rumor had been the land of King Attila, from whose line Prince Álmos [the leader of the Hungarians] . . . descended.'³⁵ Anonymous was peculiar in that, unlike other chroniclers, he did not make any clear connections between the Huns and the Hungarians. Any link between the Hun Attila and the Hungarian Álmos in the *Gesta* came from the fact that they were both descendants of the first king of the Scythians: Magog, son of Japheth, one of the three sons of Noah. Throughout the text, however, this kinship relation remains a little ambiguous and it seems, as László Veszprémy has suggested, that the author involved Attila only at certain stages of the journey and within the pagan framework when he remembered that associations with the legendary king would make more sense, but not

³² Veszprémy, 'More paganism', 185-9 and 200-1.

³³ GH, 10-11.

³⁴ Cited in GH, 11, n. 2.

³⁵ GH, 16-7.

at others where divine support and Christian heritage were more important.³⁶

Certainly, the theme of a people inhabiting a land previously settled by its ancestors carried biblical connotations, as it was inspired by the story of Moses and the Israelites wandering towards the land promised to them by God. God told Moses that he should lead his people out of Egypt to the land of the 'Canaanite, and Hittite, and Amorite, and Perizzite, and Hivite, and Jebusite.'³⁷ The Canaanites were the tribe descended from Canaan, son of Ham, another son of Noah. The land where this tribe lived had been promised to Abraham a few hundred years earlier, so there were a number of genealogical lines that connected the Israelites to those who had settled the Promised Land previously.³⁸ The Israelites thus travelled to a place where one of their ancestors had lived before. In the *Gesta*, the Hungarians followed this same pattern, as the author claimed that they migrated to land that had previously been conquered by Attila, the Hungarians' distant Hunnish relative. In chapter twenty, Anonymous makes the link even more explicit by casting the Hungarian Prince Álmos and his son Árpád as the sons of Israel to whom Moses had promised that '[e]very place that your foot shall tread upon shall be yours.'³⁹ According to the narrative, the Hungarian leaders and their companions fulfilled this prophecy because whatever territory they (and their alleged Hunnish ancestors) had conquered, they and their descendants had held until the present day. This suggested continuity could have also helped to legitimize claims to land that may have been disputed in Anonymous' time, when references to legendary ancestors became more widespread in other texts too. After 1200, for example, genealogical claims became increasingly important in the documents of many of the leading Hungarian families.⁴⁰

³⁶ Veszprémy, 'More paganism', 194.

³⁷ Exod. 3:17. Bible quotations are taken from Swift Edgar and Angela M. Kinney (eds.), *The Vulgate Bible: Douay-Rheims Translation*, 6 vols. in 7 parts (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

³⁸ Gen. 15.

³⁹ GH, 54–5 and Deut. 11:24.

⁴⁰ GH, p. xxv.

On the Move

When it came to the actual journey of the Hungarians, Moses and the Israelites once again provided the inspiration. Like them, when the Hungarians first started their travels, they wandered through empty regions, never coming across ‘the way of a city for their habitation’.⁴¹ Here, the author invokes Psalm 106, which deals with the theme of divine salvation and describes God guiding the Israelites to the Promised Land despite their transgressions. This reference emphasized that God was also leading the Hungarians on their journey from their homeland to a new, better place. In the same section, Anonymous wrote that after wandering for many days the Hungarians swam across the river Etil in the same ‘pagan way’ as the Scythians, as I have mentioned above. The river is thus not just a physical feature of the landscape, but also marks the departure from the Scythian lands and cultural heritage. It was a threshold not just between land and water, but between civilized and uncivilized – Christian and non-Christian.⁴² It was this transition that physically put the Hungarians on the path of Christianity, a notion which is amplified by the Anonymous Notary’s efforts to cast the Hungarians as the Israelites reincarnate.

After crossing the Etil, the Hungarians came into the land of the Rus’, which they decided to conquer. The princes of the Rus’ were initially afraid of them, the *Gesta* insisted, because ‘they had heard that Prince Álmos . . . was of the line of King Attila, to whom their forefathers had annually paid tribute.’⁴³ Here we can see in action what I have mentioned above, namely that Anonymous had to emphasize the Hungarians’ kinship with Attila because he was aware that this was the more authentic and more impressive choice. The memory of

⁴¹ GH, 20–1. Cf. Ps. 106:4.

⁴² The notion of rivers as dividing lines can be traced back to classical literature. Vergil’s *Aeneid*, for example, describes the Styx, a river in the Underworld which divided the world of the living from the world of the dead; Vergil, *Aeneid*, vi. 439. Anonymous would have taken these models not directly from Vergil or other classical sources, but rather from ‘popular readings’ and possibly from Dares’ *Excidium Troie*; see Rady’s remarks in GH, pp. xxii–xxiii and xxix.

⁴³ GH, 22–3.

the great warrior king and his dominion over the ancestors of the Rus' was a more convincing argument for their fearful attitude and eventual submission than the Hungarians being recipients of the grace of God. Divine grace was never far away, however, and it was actually the combined fear of the Hungarians' descent from Attila and the fact that 'divine grace was in them' that later made another people, the Slavs, surrender to the Hungarians without battle.⁴⁴ Though the fear the Hungarians instilled in many people, which helped them conquer many towns and regions, derived from Attila, it remained important to the author of the *Gesta* to stress that all of these successes were only possible because God was with them.

Another notable echo of Old Testament symbolism in the *Gesta* is the first sighting – the 'in-Sicht-Nahme'⁴⁵ – of the promised land from the top of a mountain. When the Hungarians eventually arrived in Pannonia, Prince Árpád and his company rested at the castle of Ung for a couple of days. While there, he and his men, 'seeing the fertility of the land and the abundance of all beasts and the fullness of the fishes in the rivers Tisza and Bodrog, loved the land more than can be said.'⁴⁶ Again, this passage is reminiscent of biblical narratives, in this case Deuteronomy 34:1: 'Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab upon Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah over against Jericho, and the Lord shewed him all the land of Gilead as far as Dan.' The 'in-Sicht-Nahme' in the *Gesta* thus portrays the Hungarian leader – this time Árpád instead of his father Álmos – as resembling Moses viewing the Promised Land. The castle of Ung was furthermore significant because, according to Anonymous, it gave the Hungarians their name. It was their first resting place when they entered Pannonia after conquering the Slavs, and this was why the peoples around them started calling their leader 'the Prince of Hungary and his men Hungarians'.⁴⁷ There is a similar instance of the 'in-Sicht-Nahme' further on in the narrative, when three of the Hungarian warriors climbed a high mountain and from the top could see 'as far as . . . the human eye the land on all sides from the summit of the mountain, [and they] loved it more than can be said.'⁴⁸ Another naming took place there,

⁴⁴ GH, 72–3.

⁴⁵ Kersken, *Geschichtsschreibung*, 645.

⁴⁶ GH, 39.

⁴⁷ GH, 12–13.

⁴⁸ GH, 44–5.

though this time it was the mountain that received the name of one of the warriors, Tarcal. This is part of a more general trend in the narrative whereby Anonymous attempted to clarify the toponymy of Hungary and the surrounding area by connecting them to fictional people and events.⁴⁹

The attentive reader may have noticed the repeated use of the phrase ‘loved it more than can be said’. Anonymous repeats it a number of times throughout the text, and it too is derived from the Bible—in this instance Genesis 27, which tells the story of how Jacob tricked his father Isaac into blessing him instead of his brother Esau. In the Vulgate, this phrase was translated as bewilderment rather than love, which would work equally well in communicating the awe the Hungarians felt in viewing their new land.⁵⁰ Maybe taking this phrase from Genesis was another way for Anonymous to create a connection between the Hungarians and the Israelites, as Isaac was famously the grandfather of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Finally, there is one more aspect to the depiction of the Hungarians’ arrival in Pannonia that is worth investigating. Chapter fourteen, which describes the scene at the castle of Ung, also marks a sudden shift in the narrative that sees the leadership of the Hungarians pass from Álmos to his son Árpád. In the previous chapter, Anonymous mentions that Álmos crowned his son as his successor while he, the father, was still alive. According to Rady, this practice was not uncommon and was still happening in Hungary close to Anonymous’ lifetime.⁵¹ What is strange, however, is that in the next chapter the narrative continues with Árpád as the leader, but there is no mention of his father’s death in the meantime. *The Hungarian Chronicle*, a fourteenth-century compilation of Hungarian history composed of information possibly predating the *Gesta*, reports that Álmos died in Transylvania and never entered Pannonia.⁵² This may itself have carried further biblical connotations in relation to Moses dying just after seeing the Promised Land and not having the chance to enter with

⁴⁹ See Rady’s explanation of the *Gesta* as a ‘toponymic romance’; GH, p. xxvii.

⁵⁰ Gen. 27:33.

⁵¹ GH, 36–7 and 37, n. 3.

⁵² The relationship between the *Gesta* and this so-called *Hungarian Chronicle* is further explored in C. A. Macartney, *Studies on Early Hungarian and Pontic History*, ed. Lóránt Czigány and László Péter (Farnham, 1999), 65–560.

his fellow Israelites.⁵³ Though this final biblical allusion would have strengthened his narrative even further, Anonymous did not include it, so the reason behind this lack of any description of Álmos' death in the *Gesta* remains a mystery.

Conclusions

The Hungarian origin story is the culmination of more than a millennium of intellectual mixing of ethnography and historiography, incorporating elements from biblical history, Greek and Roman literature, and stories from the early medieval past. Although Anonymous was a notary at court, not a monk with direct access to a monastic library, the themes and topoi he used to underpin his narrative were varied and made the *Gesta Hungarorum* a worthy first attempt at an official history of the Hungarians. Though for a long time it was thought that the *Gesta* had been all but forgotten very soon after it was written, research from the 1970s has shown that Simon of Kéza's late thirteenth-century chronicle borrowed extensively from it. Simon's version of events was recycled in the fourteenth-century *National Chronicle* and later histories, but ironically, it was the episodes he omitted that drew renewed attention to Anonymous' *Gesta* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The *Gesta's* emphasis on the relationship between Álmos and his son Árpád and their nobles, for example, became what László Veszprémy has called 'symbols of a mythical medieval Hungarian constitutional system.'⁵⁴

For modern historians, literary tools may be useful for understanding how medieval writers constructed their narratives and conceived of the past of the peoples for whom they set out to write, and, more broadly, how they operated in their societal as well as their intellectual environment. By looking at typical topoi, for example, we can see what kinds of sources were deemed worth imitating, while direct

⁵³ Deut. 34.

⁵⁴ László Veszprémy, 'Christian Identity versus Heathendom: Hungarian Chroniclers Facing the Pagan/Nomadic Past and the Present', in Walter Pohl, Veronika Wieser, and Francesco Borri (eds.), *Historiography and Identity V: The Emergence of New Peoples and Polities in Europe, 1000–1300* (Turnhout, 2022), 305–20, at 314.

quotations from or indirect allusions to those sources tell us something about the transmission of ideas and the circulation of documents. Although Anonymous himself does not seem to have had access to a large repository of texts, he was still able to create a narrative that conformed to the standards of the time because of the ideas he had become familiar with through his education (he mentions in the introduction that he had copied Dares Phrygius' story of Troy while in school).⁵⁵ In his work at court he probably continued to engage with literary traditions through travel and his social network. Perhaps 'N', the friend mentioned in his introduction and described as a man 'steeped in the knowledge of letters', provided the Notary with some of the popular readings that we encounter in the *Gesta*.⁵⁶

Classical and biblical sources were of great importance to the medieval authors of *origines gentium*, who sought not only to adapt these models but also to emulate their style. At the same time, however, medieval authors shaped their work to meet their readers' expectations and understanding of their past. The most important purpose of an origin story was to resonate with its audience. Indeed, it is important to remember Plassmann's caution that the use of a particular topos was far less significant for the function of the narrative than the overall effect of the actual origins and further history of the *gens*.⁵⁷ After all, as Nancy Partner has noted in her seminal work on history writing in twelfth-century England, medieval readers of historical treatises were not looking for a dry overview of dates and facts. Instead, they wanted to be amused 'with scenes of great triumphs and failures, inside information about princes both secular and ecclesiastical, . . . scandalous gossip, tales of exotic places, and, of course, accounts of exemplary lives and evidences of God's continuing interest in human affairs.'⁵⁸

What then was the purpose of a migration story in an *origo gentis*, and how did it contribute to a common understanding of a nation's origins? One of the most important functions was that of identity building, and this identity can be split into several different

⁵⁵ GH, 2-3.

⁵⁶ GH, 2-3 and pp. xix, xxii-iii. ⁵⁷ Plassmann, 'Das Wandermotiv', 63.

⁵⁸ Nancy F. Partner, *Serious Entertainments: The Writing of History in Twelfth-Century England* (Chicago, 1977), 2.

categories. A sense of belonging to a community is perhaps the one that comes most immediately to mind. The Anonymous Notary's text was called the *Deeds of the Hungarians*, after all, and it sought to establish the Hungarians firmly as a nation. Following long-standing Christian tradition, written histories consolidated existing groups in that they described those groups as historical units. Certainly, the lack of such sources seems to have caused great anxiety. This is potently displayed by the Anonymous Notary's use of imagined people and events to make up for the absence of sources on the more remote Hungarian past. While before conversion one's historical consciousness could have pertained solely to one's own kin or clan, under the influence of Christianity a sense of being part of a wider Christian society became more prevalent. The Hungarians very much needed to locate themselves within the *Christianitas*, and this could well be seen as one of the motives for writing the *Gesta*. The migration narrative was particularly useful in this community-building project because it described the ancestors of the Hungarians as members of a biblical group: the Scythian descendants of Magog who decided to settle in Pannonia.

This biblical heritage brings us to another aspect of identity, that of religion. Although the *Gesta* only ever discusses the Hungarian pagan past, it is set in a firmly Christian framework. The Hungarians' predestination as a Christian people feeds into the migration narrative by emulating the journey of Moses and the Israelites, and is also made explicit in the biblical genealogy of the first Hungarian leader Árpád. By claiming divine support for their victories, the Anonymous Notary further softened the line between pre- and post-conversion Hungarians and confirmed that the grace of God had been with them from the very beginning. Finally, while the Scythian and biblical identifications were powerful and carved out a place for the Hungarians in universal Christian history, it was the suggested links to their desired homeland that gave them their unique Hungarian identity. These links were forged through genealogical association with the legendary Hunnish King Attila and confirmed by the names of places such as mountains. These toponymic explanations in particular would have been recognizable to a thirteenth-century reader and would have helped them claim their own place in the historical landscape.

Movement was thus a key factor in most *origines gentium*. First, it explained where and how a people originated, locating them spatially as well as historically, and making them part of a larger Christian tradition. Second, it showed the development of a given group through the encounters they had during their travels, contrasting them with other peoples and showcasing examples of their customs and achievements. Finally, the people's settlement created a link between them and the land they inhabited, reinforcing their unique identity and confirming their claims to the area. Mobility had positive connotations and was essential for nation building, especially for those peoples who could not find their ancestors in the established classical and biblical traditions. Throughout the *Gesta Hungarorum*, the people of Hungary are cast as Scythians, Magog's kin, Attila's warriors, and more. But it was their journey, from their departure from Scythia to their travels through foreign lands and their arrival in their preordained homeland, that made them true Hungarians.

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