

The Cult of Saint Stephen

Story: *The article is based on the lecture of Dr. István Gedai, a historian and numismatist at the Hungarian National Museum. Dr. István Gedai is a member of the Hungarian Historical Society of Zurich. The venue of the lecture: Budapest District V: Arany János Street 10.*

The ancestors of the House of Árpád had a grand prince rank even before the Hungarian conquest. The 7 leaders of the conquering Hungarians (Álmos, Előd, Ond, Kond, Tas, Huba, Töhötöm) had control over 7 separate tribes, whose unity was sealed by the blood treaty. In the 100 years after the Hungarian conquest, blood relations still dominated in Hungarian society, then in the X. and XI. centuries, territorially organized administration became more authoritative. We need to know about Christianity in the Carpathian Basin that its seeds were sown very early. According to many, there were already Christians among the Avars and other peoples who merged into the Hungarians, who probably converted to this religion under the influence of the Franks and the Byzantines. The schism occurred only in 1054, when the formerly unified religion was divided into Eastern and Western Christianity. Grand Prince Géza, Stephen's father, had not yet been baptized, but he had already called Bavarian missionaries to the country, named as St. Adalbert, St. Astrik and St. Sebastian priests. Géza encouraged the spread of Christianity, with the aim of stabilizing the country's foreign policy situation. Géza sought peace with the country's neighbours, largely through dynastic marriages, by giving his descendants to the heirs of neighbouring grand princes. In 972, he sent truce-bearers to Quedlinburg, the court of Otto I., so that he could also secure peace diplomatically. Géza paid great attention to inheritance, thinking not according to the principle of seniority, but of primogeniture. According to the principle of primogeniture, the grand prince's first-born child has the throne, which is a traditional European order of succession. According to the principle of seniority, the throne belongs to the grand prince's eldest relative, who would have been Michael, but after his death, the right of seniority had already passed to Koppány. The principle of seniority was the traditional Hungarian order of inheritance, which has lived in the public consciousness since ancient times. Géza's firstborn son, Vajk, had to fight Koppány because of the clash of these inheritance orders. In 997 Vajk was baptized and took the name St. Stephen. After defeating Koppány, he also fought victorious battles against the oligarchs of different territories, as a result of which he managed to unite the territories of the Carpathian Basin both politically and administratively. Stephen ruled with a strong hand, united the country, and abolished the power of the various provincial lords. On 25th December 1000, or 1st January 1001, he crowned himself as the king of Hungary. He asked for the crown from the pope and not from the German-Roman emperor Otto I., thus avoiding the country becoming a vassal of the German-Roman Empire. From the west, peace was secured with the German-Roman Empire because Gizella, Stephen's wife, was of Bavarian descent. He also managed to establish peaceful relations with Poles, Byzantines and Pechenegs. Stephen's grandmother was a Pecheneg princess, so he did not have to fear an attack from the east. Stephen started to establish an independent Hungarian church organization, which was important because he avoided foreign influence in the country. The king founded two archbishopric dioceses in Kalocsa and Esztergom, and established eight bishoprics in Veszprém, Pécs, Győr, Eger, Vác, Csanád, Bihar and Gyulafehérvár. The royal law ordered the people of ten villages to jointly build a temple with two plots of land and the cattle on it to be provided by the caretakers. He introduced tithes to supply the priests, which was paid by the common people. Temple clothes and altar covers were provided by the king, while priests and books were provided by the bishop. Stephen also enacted rudimentary laws that mostly protected private property and various ecclesiastical, secular, and common goods. The king also had excellent relations with the German-Roman Empire and Byzantium. Accompanied by Queen Gizella, Saxon knights had already arrived in Hungary, and later they enriched the army of the Hungarian king.

Stephen already had a crusader order founded by himself, which was rare in the era and in Europe too. In his days, he was considered an avant-garde ruler and used the title Rex, i.e. the Ruler, with the inscription Stephanus Rex on the coins he minted. Our King St. Stephen was a responsible ruler, in his admonitions to his son he also mentioned that no one should pledge the country to anyone, and well-meaning strangers should be received just as fairly as if we were accepting a relative or friend. The king's attention was later diverted to find a worthy party for his son, and his choice fell on a Byzantine princess of a name hitherto unknown. István also founded a Greek Nunnery in the Veszprém Valley to teach the candidate princess and the Basilian nuns who came with her. However, the early death of Prince Imre prevented the wedding with the princess, so their children could not be born either. Prince Imre died young on 2nd September 1031, allegedly wounded to death by a wild boar in a forest near his estate on Igfa. After that, István never became the old again; he could not process the tragedy spiritually. The issue of inheritance was also of growing concern, and only those who were relatives of the Árpád House could be considered followers of the throne. His choice fell on Péter Orseolo, the son of the Doge of Venice, who later put Hungary in great danger; of course István could not have known this in advance. Our King Stephen was the strong ruler who placed Hungary on a strong foundation and also stabilized foreign and domestic relations. King Stephen laid the foundations of the country's legislation, which later served as an example to King St. Ladislaus, who has a great deal of respect among Hungarians even today. The canonization of István, Imre, Bishop Gellért and two hermit monks in November 1083 is connected to the name of our King St. Ladislaus. The legacy of King St. Stephen is a serious cornerstone of Hungarian national identity. The respect for the ruler has now been kept awake by the heralds of new ages in the souls of the people for more than 1,000 years. After World War II, the traditional respect of the Árpád House and the Hungarian historical rulers in general was unfairly pushed into the background. The political line from 1945 to 1989 and their followers denied all national symbols, prominent figures and tried to banish them from history books and even from folk consciousness. Despite all of these, the cult of the kings of the House of Árpád also came to life in the 20th century as a phoenix in the public consciousness. The rehabilitation of our national symbols did not take place until after 1989, which marked another milestone in our written history. Myths and legends are also an integral part of the Hungarian spirituality, from which we can always draw new strength and, of course, they also have an identity-forming role. We must return to the pure sources of our history so that the old stories can once again shine in a clear light in the memory of the Hungarian people even in the XXI. century as well.

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It can be found on the following website in Hungarian: <http://www.kodolanyi.hu/kv/cikk/szent-istvan-kultusza-359>