The tradition and respect of St. Stephen

Dr. István Gedai (retired Director-General of the Hungarian National Museum) presentation about the respect of St. Stephen

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The ancestors of the Árpád-dynasty already had a princely rank even before the conquest of the Carpathian Basin. The seven chieftains of the conqueror Hungarians (Álmos, Előd, Ond, Kond, Tas, Huba and Töhötöm) had seven separate tribes, whose union was sealed with a blood oath. In Hungarian society, for 100 years after the conquest the blood relations were dominant, but then in the 10th and 11th Centuries due to St. Stephen’s developments the territory based administration system became authoritative.

It’s important to know about Christianity in the Carpathian Basin, that its seeds were planted much before St. Stephen’s kingdom. According to many historians, there were Christians among the Avars merged to Hungarians too, who were witnessed to by the Frankish and the Byzantines. The evidence of this fact is, that some Bavarian sources from the 8th -9th Centuries mention Christian temples in Hungary. It’s possible that there were no big differences between the liturgies of Christian groups living together, because the schism happened only in 1054. Grand Prince Géza (Stephen’s father) was not baptised yet, but he had already called Bavarian missionary priests to the country (St. Adalbert, St. Astrik, St. Sebastian). Géza was a precursor to the spreading of Christianity, but it was more for stabilizing the country’s foreign policies. Géza wanted to make peace with the neighbour countries – he did so with dinastical marriages (he made his daughters marry the sons of neighbouring princes) and with legates presenting peace (in 972 he sent legates to Quedlinburg, to the court of Otto I.). Géza was very focused on inheritance. He was a follower of the principle of primogeniture, not the principle of seniority. Primogeniture means: the firstborn child inherits the throne, which is the European way of inheritance. Seniority means: the oldest relative of the prince gets the throne. Due to this it should have been Michael (the oldest relative), but after his death the oldest member of the dinasty was Koppány. So the two traditions of inheritance caused conflicts, that’s why Stephen and Koppány fought later.

In 997 Vajk was baptised, he got his baptismal name: Stephen. After he won over Koppány he had wars against Transylvanian Gyula as well. Gyula surrendered, so Stephen got the support of the country’s eastern part too. During the reign of Stephen the religion in Transylvania was Byzantine Christianity, but it’s important to mention that the believers were Hungarian people, just like Ajtony, the oligarch of Temes-region. Stephen united the country, he liquidated the power of the oligarchs. He was crowned on 25 December 1000, 1 January 1001. He received the crown from the pope, not from the Holy Roman Emperor, Otto I., in so doing he avoided the country becoming a vassal of the Emperor. Peace was provided from the west, because Stephen’s wife, Giselle was from Bavaria. They also made
peace with the Polish, the Byzantines and the Pechenegs, since Stephen’s grandmother was a Pecheneg princess. Stephen began to deal with the church organisations in order to avoid the foreign influences. 8 bishoprics and 2 archbishoprics (dioceses in Pécs, Eger, Gyulafehérvár, Kalocsa, Csanád, Bihar and Vác) were established during the reign of our first king. He ordered that every ten villages had to build a church. To support the priests he legislated a law, called tenth. In connection to his reign he made laws about protecting property rights. He had good relationship with the Holy Roman Empire and the Byzantium. Together with his wife, Giselle, Saxon knights came to Hungary to join his army. He also established a crusade kinghood, which was exceptionally uncommon in Europe at those times. He used the title Rex (monarch), on his coins minted by him as Stephanus Rex. He was considered to be an “avantgarde” king, already at his age. His son, Emeric was married to a Greek princess, for the girl’s attendants he established a Greek Catholic nunnery in Veszprémvölgy.

St. Stephen was a responsible king, in his admonitions to his son, Emeric he points out, that the country shouldn’t fall into the hands of foreigners. But well-intentioned foreigners should get the same hospitality as a relative or a friend. Prince Emeric died in 1031, at a very young age, killed by a boar at hunting. Boars are mentioned more times in Hungarian history (see Miklós Zrínyi). After Emeric’s death choosing an heir caused problem for Stephen, because he could only choose from relative monarchs. Finally he chose Peter Orseolo, the Venetian doge’s son, who eventually brought Hungary into trouble – of course Stephen couldn’t have precieved this. Stephen is considered to be a very important statesman, he put the Hungarian state on powerful bases, he stabilized the foreign policies and the national conditions too. His legislative activity was also very important, a good sample for St. Ladislaus later. During the rein of Ladislaus Stephen, Emeric, Bishop Gellért and two hermits were canonized. He was respected for over 1000 years, and even through cultural changes his respect stayed alive in people’s souls. The traditions and respect of St. Stephen was vividly alive even in the 20th Century – in 1938 the respect of St. Stephen was codified. After the Trianon contract his name was often connected with the revisionist pursuits, because he was the greatest symbol of the historical Hungary.

After the Second World War real Hungarian history was unfairly dimished along with the traditions of Stephen and the Árpád dynasty also. The communist system (between 1945 and 1989) wanted to erase all national symbols from people’s souls, and internationalism became major. The rehabilitation of Hungarian national symbols happened only in 1989, after the political regime’s change – that was a new milestone in their history. Since then Hungarians could go back to their real national values, and that could come to life in the souls of Hungarians.

At the end of the presentation István Gedai told St. Stephen is a very significant part of the Hungarian national identity. There’s hardly any Hungarian poets without patriotic poems dedicated to or about St. Stephen.