

EAST CENTRAL EUROPE:  
BETWEEN THE BALTIC AND THE ADRIATIC

OSTMITTELEUROPA: ZWISCHEN OSTSEE UND ADRIA

VOLUME / BAND 2

ISSUE / HEFT 1



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The University of Debrecen  
Faculty of Humanities  
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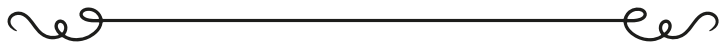
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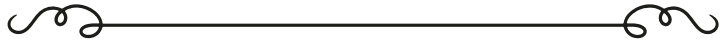
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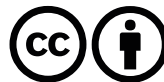
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## Dániel, Bihari, *A Tatárjárás - Magyarország élet-halál harca* (The Mongol Invasion: Hungary's Struggle for Survival) Budapest, Mandiner Kiadó, 2025.

ISBN 978-963-341-306-7

Nearly eight centuries ago, the Kingdom of Hungary experienced the most devastating catastrophe in its history up to that point, when the Mongol Empire – the largest contiguous land empire ever to have existed – invaded the Carpathian Basin from multiple directions, defeated the royal army, and laid waste to a substantial portion of the country. In Hungarian historical discourse, the defeat at Muhi is regarded as commensurate with the tragedies of the Treaty of Trianon and the Battle of Mohács (it is even alluded to in the national anthem), and consequently a wide range of questions, assumptions, and misconceptions continue to surround it. Did King Béla IV of Hungary lose the Battle of Muhi because of the intrigues of rebellious barons? Did the Hungarian army effectively condemn itself by constructing a wagon fort? Did the Mongol forces withdraw so unexpectedly from Hungary due to the death of Great Khan Ögedei Khan?

Published under the auspices of the news portal 24.hu, the interview volume *The Mongol Invasion: Hungary's Struggle for Survival* provides thorough and scholarly answers to these recurring questions. The journalist Dániel Bihari has reworked a series of interviews conducted with members of the research group *The Mongol Invasion of Hungary and the Eurasian Context of the Mongol Conquest* (2018–2024), as well as with independent scholars, into a cohesive volume. The volume was prepared with the editorial collaboration of archaeologist József Laszlovszky (Central European University) and the historian Balázs Nagy (Eötvös Loránd University), and is supplemented with excerpts from the scholarly literature and primary sources, as well as more than 150 colour illustrations, maps, and figures.

The volume is divided into five major units, organised according to a loosely chronological principle. In the first part, the reader traverses a broad spatial and temporal horizon, from the emergence of the Mongol Empire to the defeat at Muhi. Through the account of the historian János B. Szabó (Budapesti Történeti Múzeum), we are introduced to the Mongols' great western campaign (1236–1242), during which they swept across the Rus' principalities, which – owing to the lack of coordinated defence – fell one after another. The invasion of Hungary thus constituted merely the final phase of this campaign.

The historian Attila Bárány (University of Debrecen) acquaints us with the diplomatic efforts of King Béla IV of Hungary, emphasising that the absence of Western assistance was not due to any failure on the Hungarian side. The king dispatched numerous high-ranking envoys to the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor, yet these missions proved unsuccessful, as Pope Gregory IX and Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor, were at that time engaged in warfare against one another in Italy. Consequently, the Hungarians were compelled to confront alone the most advanced and disciplined military force of the age. Among the Mongols, as the archaeologist Gergely Csiky (HUN-REN) explains, men were trained in riding and archery from early childhood, and regularly took part in large-scale hunting exercises known as encirclement hunts. As he explains: "... scouts first surveyed the game population of a given area, after which the army assembled and formed a circle spanning tens or even hundreds of kilometres in circumference, enclosing it. As the circle gradually contracted, the hunt itself was initiated by the khan, and upon its conclusion, feasts lasting several days were held."

Contemporary accounts, seemingly employing literary exaggeration, described the devastation of the country in terms that historians long approached with scepticism. In recent decades, however, archaeological excavations conducted along the routes of motorway construction across the Great Hungarian Plain have brought to light striking new evidence, prompting a reassessment of this earlier scepticism. In the volume, József Laszlovszky and Balázs Nagy recount the excavation of a destroyed Árpád-period dwelling near Cegléd, in which the remains of a family were discovered under harrowing circumstances:

"A mother who hid her two children, aged approximately ten to twelve, inside the oven, then attempted to squeeze in beside them herself. [...] She may have hoped that by concealing themselves within the oven they could survive the attack unnoticed by the Mongol warriors, but only the upper part

of her body could fit inside. Thus mother and children lay side by side for eight hundred years, after the Mongols set the house alight above them, and all three perished there.”

Archaeological evidence has also been found for determined resistance on the part of villages in the Great Hungarian Plain. Near the present-day settlement of Szank, in the Kiskunság region, the remains of a destroyed Árpád-period church reveal that the inhabitants of several villages constructed improvised earthworks around it. They chose to fight – and the conquerors put all of them to death.

The second unit addresses Hungary’s year-long, desperate struggle, during which the king was rescued from the battlefield through the coordinated and self-sacrificing efforts of his subjects, enabling him to organise resistance from Zagreb. The reader learns that the well-structured defence of Transdanubia posed a formidable challenge to the Mongols, who were only able to cross the Danube owing to the exceptionally severe winter of 1241–1242, when the river froze over.

The historian Dorottya Uhrin (Eötvös Loránd University) challenges the widespread assumption that Batu Khan abandoned Hungary in March 1242 upon receiving news of the death of Great Khan Ögedei Khan, allegedly in order to participate in the election of a new khan as a leading candidate. First, Batu’s claim to the supreme title was far from secure, owing to the uncertain lineage of his father. Moreover, Ögedei died on 11 December 1241, and, as Uhrin explains, “... even if a courier had been dispatched at dawn on the day following the Great Khan’s death, it would only have been theoretically possible for him to have reached Transdanubia by 31 March. This is, however, unlikely, since court intrigues may have concealed the news of the Great Khan’s death for days. The assembly to elect a new khan could only have been convened in 1243–1244.” According to the emerging scholarly consensus, therefore, Batu did not abandon the conquest of Hungary on account of the Great Khan’s death.

The third and fourth thematic units address the short- and medium-term consequences of the invasion. The contributions repeatedly emphasise the exceptional statesmanship of King Béla IV of Hungary, an assessment grounded in his thorough reconsideration of earlier policies in the aftermath of the Mongol incursion. During the remaining twenty-eight years of his reign, he consistently focused on preparing the kingdom for a potential future invasion.

In Chapter 27, József Laszlovszky and Balázs Nagy draw attention to the particularly valuable insights that may be gained from the excavation of a village destroyed during the invasion. Under normal circumstances, the remains of contemporary dwellings yield relatively few valuable artefacts, as their inhabitants would typically carry such possessions with them to a new home. In situations, however, where flight was more urgent than the preservation of valuables, houses were destroyed and preserved in a state closely reflecting their everyday use, thereby offering a uniquely rich source of information for researchers.

The final section provides an overview of the memory of the Mongol invasion. The Mongolist and historian Ágnes Birtalan (Eötvös Loránd University) argues that the invasion produced a form of cultural post-traumatic stress within Hungarian society, the effects of which endured for centuries, preserving the memory both of the great invasion itself and of subsequent incursions. One of the most widely known elements of popular legend is the characterisation of the “Tatars” as “dog-headed.” The depiction of a dangerous enemy as monstrous is, of course, readily understandable, particularly in light of the Mongols’ unusually brutal conduct towards conquered populations. Birtalan, however, adds a further dimension to this explanation, suggesting that the association of the Mongols with dogs may also derive from their spoken language: “(...) like Hungarian, Mongolian places stress on the first syllable of the word – indeed, in several dialects even more strongly so. To an untrained ear, Mongolian speech could indeed have resembled the barking or yelping of dogs.”

The research group has presented its new findings in specialist journals such as *Hadtörténeti Közlemények*, as well as in university lectures, yet it has also sought to engage the widest possible audience in scholarly discourse. The interview series published by 24.hu may be interpreted in this light, attracting a substantial readership on a weekly and monthly basis. In response to this considerable public interest, the award-winning science journalist Dániel Bihari compiled the 28 popular-science articles into a single volume.

Fortunately, a number of contemporary narrative sources on the Mongol invasion of Hungary have survived, including works by Thomas of Split and Rogerius, which the author cites extensively from the 2003 volume *Tatárjárás*, edited by Balázs Nagy, itself a rich collection of translated sources. One of the principal strengths of the book lies in its incorporation of further materials, such as *The Secret History of the Mongols*, the reports

of the Dominican friar Friar Julian, the canonisation proceedings of Margaret of Hungary, and the charters of King Béla IV of Hungary.

Short italicised passages at the beginning and end of each chapter provide cohesion, offering summaries or posing questions that are addressed in subsequent sections. This reader-friendly approach is further reflected in the rich and colourful visual material – images, maps, and explanatory diagrams – as well as in the fluent, accessible prose and engaging chapter titles, all of which encourage sustained reading. Although the interval between the preparation of individual articles and the involvement of thirteen experts occasionally results in the repetition of certain pieces of information, this is justified from a narrative perspective; indeed, such reiteration may serve to reinforce the reader's retention of the material.

Throughout, the volume repeatedly emphasises the heroic struggle of the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Hungary against the invaders, as well as the suffering they were compelled to endure. At the same time, it avoids exaggeration: the scale of destruction is differentiated regionally, and the limits of Hungarian resistance are clearly delineated, bearing in mind that the most formidable and extensive military power of the age had descended upon the country. In this way, the book constructs a balanced narrative in which Hungarians are not merely passive victims of the Mongol invasion but active and, at times, effective agents in their own defence, while the Mongols themselves are not depicted as an irresistible force of nature, but rather as an army confronted with difficulties and, not infrequently, uncertainty.

This interpretative balance renders the volume both engaging and intellectually stimulating. *The Mongol Invasion: Hungary's Struggle for Survival*, a work of scholarly popularisation, may well fall on fertile ground, as Hungarian historical films and television series have experienced something of a renaissance in recent years, accompanied by the growing popularity of history-themed podcasts featuring expert contributors across social media platforms. The interested reader is thus presented with a carefully edited, accessible, yet nuanced account of the Mongol invasion.

## **EAST CENTRAL EUROPE: BETWEEN THE BALTIC AND THE ADRIATIC OSTMITTELEUROPA: ZWISCHEN OSTSEE UND ADRIA**

### **Aims and Scope**

The East Central Europe: Between the Baltic and the Adriatic (ECE) is a peer-reviewed academic journal published by the Institute of History at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Debrecen. As its title suggests, the journal focuses on the history of Central Europe, covering the region between the Baltic and Adriatic Seas. This region was for centuries a crossroads and meeting point where diverse ethnic groups, religions, traditions, and political entities interacted in unique ways. In addition to studies directly examining the history of the region, the editors welcome methodologically and/or theoretically relevant contributions for the analysis of historical processes.

The journal seeks to create an interdisciplinary platform to facilitate dialogue and disseminate new research on the region, whose findings are often limited in international scholarship due to language barriers and the influence of national narratives. To support this goal, ECE is an open-access journal, published at least once annually, available in both print and online formats.

### **Zielsetzung**

Ostmitteleuropa: Zwischen Ostsee und Adria (ECE) ist eine begutachtete wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift, die vom Historischen Institut der Philosophischen Fakultät der Universität Debrecen herausgegeben wird. Wie der Titel schon andeutet, konzentriert sich die Zeitschrift auf die Geschichte Mitteleuropas, insbesondere auf das Gebiet zwischen Ostsee und Adria. Diese Region war über Jahrhunderte ein Schnittpunkt und Begegnungsraum, in dem unterschiedliche ethnische Gruppen, Religionen, Traditionen und politische Einheiten auf einzigartige Weise interagierten. Neben Studien, die Geschichte der Region direkt untersuchen, erwarten die Herausgeber methodisch und/oder theoretisch relevante Beiträge zur Analyse historischer Prozesse.

Die Zeitschrift möchte eine interdisziplinäre Plattform schaffen, um den Dialog zu fördern und neue Forschungsergebnisse über die Region zu verbreiten, deren Ergebnisse aufgrund von Sprachbarrieren und der Prägung durch nationale Narrative international nur begrenzt bekannt sind. Zur Unterstützung dieses Ziels ist ECE eine Open-Access-Zeitschrift, die mindestens einmal jährlich erscheint und sowohl in gedruckter als auch in digitaler Form verfügbar ist.

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