

Ritual and Symbolic Communication in Medieval Hungary under the Árpád Dynasty

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Dušan Zupka draws on the rich scholarship of medieval rituals and symbolic communication produced by medievalists working mainly on western European material, and endeavours to show that the same types of ritual communication existed in Árpád-age Hungary. In the introduction, he provides a good overview of the scholarship first in the humanities (mentioning Catherine Bell, Jack Goody and others), and then in medieval studies, mainly focusing on German- and English-language literature. Chapters then discuss ‘rituals of power and symbols of monarchy’ (inauguration rituals, coronation and crown wearing, girding with a sword, and rituals emphasizing royal majesty); rituals of reconciliation in the settlement of disputes internally and with foreign rulers, the *adventus regis*, and greeting rituals during meetings between rulers. Reflections on ritual communication as a coherent system close the book. As the topics show, the volume is above all about royalty, rather than medieval society as a whole.

Each chapter starts with a short summary of the topic’s existing scholarship on medieval Europe generally, which is then followed by the analysis of the Hungarian cases. Often there is not very much, and a few times, next to nothing, on the given topic in the Hungarian sources. For example, the section on court festivities and royal majesty (pp. 55–61) offers only one case of gift-giving based on Hungarian sources, while another Hungarian account is relevant to depictions of strengthening royal power, but is unrelated to court festivities. The incorporation of ‘rituals and rules of public communication’ (p. 184) from experiences abroad by kings of Hungary is not substantiated, merely asserted. It is, of course, a logical possibility; but concrete evidence seems not to exist beyond the fact of these rulers’ foreign travels and ties.

Throughout, existing scholarship on the Hungarian material is incorporated patchily. Hungarian medievalists have produced vast amounts of work on each of the individual components drawn together in this book. Yet that rich scholarship mostly appears only via translations into western languages, and very few works in Hungarian are used; even when their titles appear in the bibliography, it is rare for arguments drawn from work in Hungarian to feature in the analysis. While Hungarian historians on the whole are quite good at publishing their work at least in article form in western languages, crucial books in Hungarian should have been consulted. Thus, for example, Ágnes Kurcz’s book on chivalry ([1](#)) is not used at all, even though it

discusses girding with a sword. Another example is András Mez's book *Patrocíniumok a középkori Magyarországon*.⁽²⁾ It gives detailed information on church dedications and offers a clue as to why St Martin may have been substituted for St George at Mogyoród (Zupka mentions this on p. 67, n. 131 as a mere error): it may have been in literary imitation of the foundation of Pannonhalma. Why does a footnote (p. 64, n. 120) mention only modern Slovak editions of the hagiographic literature on medieval Hungarian kings, when a voluminous literature, including excellent editions of the original Latin texts (and English translations) exists?

Elsewhere, arguments from the literature are repeated without critical evaluation, which results in speculation, presented as fact. For example, the claim that the 'royal crown remained in Orseolo's hands' (p. 90) after the battle of Ménf? cannot be substantiated, and was a mere hypothesis of Deér. The interpretation is based on the discrepancy between two sources: Bonizo of Sutri mentioned only the lance, while Gregory VII mentioned both crown and lance as sent to Rome by Henry III. We can build many hypotheses, but cannot affirm that Bonizo is definitely giving us the historical truth. It is less than helpful to omit the detailed discussion of the medieval source-base, and relay the modern hypothesis as a statement about reality. On the other hand, the assertion that the lance 'rather than being merely part of the royal insignia' 'was a symbol of the German monarch's military victory' (p. 90) is entirely misleading, since this is one of the rare cases when very good contemporary numismatic and pictorial evidence shows that the lance was one of the main pieces of the royal regalia under Stephen I.

The author clearly signals his own aims in the book: 'to provide deeper insight into the complex of ritual communication and deconstruct its logic and structure while, at the same time, interpreting its significance and the role it played in medieval European society. Equal emphasis will be placed upon and attention paid to the way rituals were depicted in contemporary sources, and to the way they were interpreted and used by medieval authors ... This study will therefore focus on the role of rituals in political events in conjunction with the way these events were depicted in contemporary texts' (p. 3).

There are two fundamental methodological problems here, given the nature of the Hungarian source material. The vast majority of cases analysed in the book can only be known from one single source, usually one that was written centuries after the purported events it depicts. Even when some of the basic political events themselves can be known from other, more contemporary texts, the only source for the supposed associated rituals is usually a single, much later chronicle, very often the Illuminated Chronicle, and a few times, the so-called Hungarian-Polish Chronicle. This means that it is impossible, outside the realm of guesswork, to compare ritual events with their depiction and interpretation, since all we have is one, late textual account; information about the supposed ritual event is provided by the same author who also supplies the depiction and interpretation.

Secondly, a rather cavalier attitude of mentioning, but dismissing or not drawing any consequences from, concerns about the dating of textual evidence occurs regularly, for example regarding the hagiographical Life of St Gerard (Gellért) and several chronicles. One cannot use the narrative sources uncritically, and assume that, for example, a 14th-century composition provides reliable accounts of 11th- and 12th-century (alleged) events. Zupka suggests that 'Even if individual details of a surviving account may not have adhered strictly to the facts, the way they depicted the ritual framework within which the events occurred certainly had to conform to contemporary custom'. Only thus 'could their authors have expected to be believed by their readers' (p. 181). This common-sense approach that medieval people knew about these rituals, therefore textual representations could not diverge very much from reality is not a firm enough basis for scholarship: the potential 14th-century audience at the Angevin royal court cannot be taken as a yardstick to measure 11th-century events. A 14th-century author may indeed present a story that is plausible to his contemporary audience. Yet that story is no basis at all for inferences about supposed rituals surrounding events that took place centuries before.

A critical evaluation of the primary sources should have been central to this study. Zupka claims that 'one of the main sources for the Árpád era is the Hungarian Chronicle preserved in its 14th-century version, known

as the *Chronica Hungarorum* or the *Illuminated Chronicle*. The composition, dating and reliability of this source is much debated. However, it is generally recognized by both Hungarian and non-Hungarian historiography that it relies on older versions, which are considered to be a trustworthy source for the 11th and 12th centuries also' (p. 4–5). This text constitutes Zupka's main primary source, and therefore the 'trustworthiness' of the text for earlier centuries would be a key question, to be investigated rather than assumed. First of all, different compositions from the 14th century, divided into two families of chronicles (the family of the *Chronicle of Buda* and that of the *Illuminated Chronicle*) exist, with somewhat different versions of the text; details of authorship are debated in scholarship.⁽³⁾ Secondly, the now mostly antiquated research tradition on the 14th-century chronicle compositions badly needs revision. Assumptions about the 14th-century text incorporating material written earlier in many instances rest on nothing more than wishful thinking. The 14th-century chronicles were created in the context of the Angevin takeover of royal power in Hungary, rather than as trustworthy records of the Árpád era.

Further, as its name suggests, the text of the *Illuminated Chronicle* is accompanied by lavish images. Yet these images are unfortunately used as mere illustrations in this book, rather than as source material to be analysed, although they often convey their own interpretation of events they depict. Compare, for example, the text cited on p. 124 with the image on p. 125 of the *adventus* of Henry IV and Solomon. While the text of the *Chronicle* (and the commentary by Zupka) stresses the welcome afforded to Solomon by the clergy and people, the illuminator instead emphasized the army's arrival, with no clerics or people in sight, depicting Henry's grasp on Solomon's wrist as he leads Solomon into the city, while in his other hand holding the crown that is to be Solomon's; in addition, Henry and his army wear armour, while Solomon does not. The image suggests a negative interpretation that Solomon is a mere underling, whose position is entirely based on Henry's goodwill. In any case, these images are not illustrations for Árpád-era history, but statements about the past in an Angevin context.

The so-called Hungarian-Polish *Chronicle* is also used as a 'reliable' source; a mere mention, buried in a footnote (p. 150, n. 33) divulges that there is any 'controversy about the reliability' of this work, without giving any details. Such a formulation is an understatement. Of this *Chronicle*'s critical edition by Béla Karácsonyi and (contested) analysis by Ryszard Grzesik (*Kronika węgiersko-polska: Z dziejów polsko-węgierskich kontaktów kulturalnych w średniowieczu* ⁽⁴⁾), only the first appears in the bibliography, and neither are used to inform Zupka's analysis. (Nor are recent articles by Lesław Spychała or Judit Csáková cited). It should be mentioned that the *chronicle*'s dating (perhaps the 1230s, or the second half of the 13th century) and authorship continue to be debated. The 'reliability' of the *chronicle* is such that it borrows from the hagiographical *Life* of Stephen, and fanciful inventions of its author abound. The medieval writer invented a Polish mother for Stephen I, and turned Levente, Peter and Béla into the sons of Stephen I by an invented first wife who predeceased him. (In reality, Stephen died without any surviving male heir, and these supposed 'sons' were Stephen's nephew Peter Orseolo, while the other two, who were indeed brothers, were members of another branch of the dynasty, Stephen's first cousins once removed.) According to the *chronicler*, Stephen's childless widow hatched an evil plot to give the throne to her own brother. To enumerate the problems with the short *chronicle* would produce a longer text than the original medieval one. In light of all this, one may well query the confident assertion that Stephen I and Bolesław I's 'ceremonial meeting combined with reconciliation is well known from the following account in the Hungarian-Polish *Chronicle*' (p. 148). By no means can the account (narrated in detail as a real event by Zupka) be taken as a truthful representation of events at the very beginning of the 11th century; it is merely a description of a supposed meeting and the ritual that, in the eyes of the 13th-century author, would have been correct for such a meeting.

The acknowledgement in the conclusion that 'it is the ritual patterns of symbolic communication, rather than the historical authenticity of individual events that lend themselves to examination' (p. 181) sits oddly with repeated affirmations in the book that suggest the veracity of the accounts. Thus, for example, 'King Solomon also underwent a genuine *Festkrönung*' (p. 44) or 'The meeting that took place in 1001 in Esztergom and was recorded in the Hungarian-Polish *Chronicle*' (p. 71), or the pretender Boris 'made use of emotional techniques' (p. 114). Engagement with questions of authenticity and the justification of the study

of ritual even lead to a puzzling comparison in the conclusion: ‘Historians commonly cite sources brimming with accounts of miracles without questioning their credibility’ (p. 181). Most medievalists who study hagiography today are not exactly prone to credulity in terms of the ‘reality’ of the miracles. Trying to assess authenticity, it should not be assumed (as it is for example on p. 163) that eyewitnesses necessarily produce reliable accounts.

Where one can compare different accounts (the sources themselves are external to Hungary), one can see the different emphases of the authors, such as the accounts in the *Historia Ierosolimitana* and the *Historia Vie Hierosolimitane* on the encounter between Godfrey of Bouillon and King Coloman as the armies travelled towards their destination during the first crusade (pp. 164–6). Trying to create a smooth narrative from sources that are often contradictory is not a good idea. Thus on p. 93 we find a narrative of Pope Leo IX’s intervention that omits material coming from a conflicting contemporary account; details for those interested can be found in Béla Zsolt Szakács, ‘Leo IX, Hungary and early reform architecture’ [\(5\)](#)

There are other anachronisms in the use of toponyms. Cities that are in the modern state of Slovakia are given their modern Slovak name, at best with an indication of historical names in the first instance when the town appears in the text, but not always. This even results in bizarre contradictions between the text and the material in the notes: we learn that Pope Leo IX arrived in Bratislava, based on two medieval sources, one of which calls the city Poson, and the other, Preslawaspurch (p. 93). Why is a name, Bratislava, created in the 19th century and in official use since the 20th, used for a medieval town? Moreover, such a choice of terminology is inconsistent when it comes to other towns that are not in modern Slovakia. Thus we learn that the *Regestrum Varadinense* comes from Oradea (p. 63), the Romanian name of historical Varadinum, Várad, Großwardein, but on p. 43, Marosvár’s modern name is given as Csanád (Nagycsanád, today Cenad, Romania). More puzzling is a distinction between Hungarian and Magyar found in the conclusion; ‘throughout Hungarian and later specifically Magyar history’ (p. 191). One would not say ‘throughout French and later specifically Français history’, and this is the equivalent. It would, of course, be entirely appropriate to emphasize that the historical kingdom of Hungary consisted of a large variety of people, speaking different languages, and was very different from the modern Hungarian state, which is presumably what the author was trying to say.

Taking the sources as reliable narratives, and fitting their stories into a generic framework composed of research on medieval European rituals in the end obfuscates both the specificity of some of the Hungarian material, and the historical interest of the texts. Stories such as a crown wearing, where a rival for the throne places the crown on a king’s head, or the choice between sword and crown proposed to a potential heir to the throne, should be analysed for the ways in which they deviate from general patterns of rituals, rather than be taken as a confirmation of what we already know. Ultimately, the historical questions about the purpose and meaning of the representations in these medieval sources are largely left unanswered in the book.

Notes

1. Ágnes Kurcz, *Lovagi kultúra Magyarországon a 13-14. században* (Budapest, 1988). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. András Mez?, *Patrocíniumok a középkori Magyarországon* (Budapest, 2003). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For an English summary of the issues, see my chapter ‘Historical Writing in Central Europe (Bohemia, Hungary, Poland), c.950–1400’ in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, vol 2., 400-1400, eds. Sarah Foot and Chase F. Robinson (Oxford, 2012), pp. 312–27. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Ryszard Grzesik, *Kronika w?giersko-polska: Z dziejów polsko-w?gierskich kontaktów kulturalnych w ?redniowieczu*, (Pozna?, 1999). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Béla Zsolt Szakács, ‘Leo IX, Hungary and early reform architecture’, *La Reliquia del sangue di Cristo: Mantova, l’Italia e l’Europa al tempo di Leone IX*, ed. G. M. Cantarella and A. Calzona (Verona, 2012), pp. 561–72. [Back to \(5\)](#)

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/254493>