

Ármin Vámbéry's Concept about Hungarian Prehistory in Light of Recent Research

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Abstract: Early Hungarian history played a predominant role in Vámbéry's oeuvre. The paper focuses on the concept of Vámbéry concerning the formation of the Hungarian people. Vámbéry emphasised three elements in defining the ethnic group: language, anthropology, and Völkerpsychologie. Vámbéry's views on anthropology and national characteristics are outdated, but his concept of the formation of the Hungarians from Ugric speaking groups among the Huns and Avars plus the Turkic speaking tribes of Árpád who conquered the Carpathian Basin in 895, is reflected in several recent works in slightly different forms. Vámbéry's suggestions about the contact among the Turkic, Slavic, and Finno-ugric speaking groups must be reconsidered and reevaluate. Vámbéry's studies contain several new ideas that are worth reading even today: the difference between language and people or the comparison of the historical results of the Old Turkic and Slavic loanwords in Hungarian.

Keywords: Ármin Vámbéry, Hungarian early history, ethnogenesis, nation-characterology, double conquests

Özet: Erken Macar tarihi Vámbéry'nin eserlerinde önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Bu çalışma Vámbéry'nin Macar halkının oluşumu ile ilgili genel düşüncelerinin üzerinde durmaktadır. Vámbéry etnik grup kavramını tanımlarken üç unsuru vurgular: dil, antropoloji ve kültürel psikoloji (Völkerpsychologie). Vámbéry'nin antropoloji ve ulusal özelliklerle ilgili düşünceleri günümüzde artık geçerliliğini yitirmiş olmakla birlikte, Macar halkının Hun ve Avarlar içinde Ugor dillerini konuşan halklarla 895 yılında Karpat havzasını fetheden ve Türk dili konuşan

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Árpád kabilelerinden meydana geldiğini kabul eden düşüncesi çeşitli güncel çalışmalarda farklı şekillerde yansıtılmaya devam etmektedir. Vámbéry'nin Türk, Slav ve Fin-Ugor kavimleri arasında bir temas olduğunu ileri süren fikirleri yeniden düşünülmeli ve değerlendirilmelidir. Vámbéry'nin çalışmaları, dil ve kavim arasındaki fark, Macarcadaki eski Türkçe ve Slavca ödünç kelimelerin tarihî sonuçlarının karşılaştırılması gibi halen geçerliliğini koruyan ve günümüzde de okunması gereken birtakım yeni düşünceleri de içermektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Ármin Vámbéry, eski Macar tarihi, etnogenezi, halk ruhunun genel karakterleri, ikili yurt kurma

Vámbéry published his work “The formation and growth of Hungarians” in 1895, reviewing the concepts of the early history of the Hungarians.¹ He did not substantially change his ideas in his last published summary in 1914.² I focus on the relevance of Vámbéry's results today in this study. Vámbéry's work of Hungarian prehistory has been recently discussed by István Vásáry and Mihály Dobrovits.³

Before outlining the basic features of the concept, we face the problem of analogies. Vámbéry began his book with a metaphor. He demonstrated the process of ethnogenesis with a pebble that comes from a mountain brook to the river valley captivating various relative and foreign geological elements.⁴ An analogy from the field of natural sciences is always effective because it suggests that appropriate methods can provide the same exactness. The science in this way can be used as a kind of reference. This attitude is still alive and many scientists dealing with early history use similar analogies. Bálint Csanád refers to Patrick Geary's idea

¹ I quote this book from the version reedited in Dunaszerdahely: Vámbéry Ármin, *A magyarság keletkezése és gyarapodása* [The formation and growth of Hungarians]. Budapest 1895 = Dunaszerdahely 2003.

² Vámbéry Ármin, *A magyarság bölcsőjénél*. [At the Cradle of the Hungarians]. Budapest 1914 (reedited Dunaszerdahely 2003).

³ Vásáry István, “Vámbéry és a magyar őstörténet [Vámbéry and the Hungarian Prehistory]”. In: Vásáry István, *Magyar őshazák és magyar őstörténészek* [Hungarian Urheim and Hungarian Prehistorians]. Budapest 2008, 191-196; Dobrovits Mihály, Utószó [Epilog]. In: Vámbéry Ármin, *A magyarság keletkezése és gyarapodása*. Dunaszerdahely 2003, 371-393.

⁴ Vámbéry, *A magyarság keletkezése és gyarapodása*, 5.

in connection with the formation of the Hungarian people: "the ethnogenesis is not a stream, which leads from the source to the ocean, however, its name is the same in several countries it passes, as due to the inlet rivers the composition of the water by the river mouth cannot be comparable with that of the source."⁵

It is a common expectation among historians that science can provide data that make it possible to determine the Hungarian ethnogenesis. Earlier the blood tests, and currently the results of DNA tests, seem to bring about breakthroughs in the study of ethnogenesis. Unfortunately, it has become clear that although the results of these tests can give valuable data on the population of an area and can determine kinship relations in cemeteries, they provide no indication about determining the ethnic origin.

Therefore, when the formation or ethnogenesis of a people is modelled by a pebble from a mountain river or a system of river, there is a basic difficulty. History is a reflection of contemporary or later authors about a set of events, which are studied by historians today. Patrick Geary emphasised in his study that: "As long as we recognize the essential double subjectivity that characterizes the human sciences, as long as we recognize that as a result both the worlds that our subjects create and our analyses of these worlds are situational, malleable and limited, then we can indeed learn from each other. Neither anthropologists nor historians are simply describing societies as they are or as they were: we are attempting to describe societies as our witnesses within them thought they should be, and we do this for our own society, not those of the participants, past or present."⁶ When using the analogy of a stone or a river, we should take into consideration the sociological aspect of the problem. Thus, we have to pose the question: what do the pebble and the river think about themselves?

⁵ Bálint Csanád, *Az ethnosz a kora középkorban [Ethnos in early Middle Ages]: Századok* 140 (2006), 277-347, see 295.

⁶ Geary, Patrick, *Power and Ethnicity History and Anthropology. History and Anthropology*, 2014 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2014.933106>, 9.

Vámbéry emphasised three elements in defining the ethnic group: language, anthropology, and Völkerpsychology. He stated that anthropological research is more important than the study of language, but it also has its limitations. The most reliable data can be derived from folk psychology or folk spirit.

According to Vámbéry, different ethnic groups mix with each other throughout history, so only mixed peoples have existed. The Hungarians are one of these groups. Vámbéry noted: "There is not the smallest doubt about the Finno-Ugric origin, but throughout the history the Magyars melted among kindred folk elements and they are now mixture of different ethnic groups."⁷ Vámbéry indicated in his work published in 1914 that his concept about the mixed peoples, including the Hungarians, was not welcomed in public opinion.⁸ Today, we do not use this term mixed people, but in essence we are talking about the development of Hungarians' different ethnic elements, which form a part of the process of ethnogenesis.

Vámbéry emphasised that the pure and homogenous Hungarian people or nation in the early or medieval period was reflected in the medieval Hungarian chronicles and, in some respects, held the view that a similar idea may emerge in connection with the language. The Hungarian chronicles described the conquest of the Carpathian Basin in 895 as a glorious landtaking, but they were written in the 13th-14th centuries, i.e. 300-400 years later, so their historical value is debatable.⁹ György Györffy studied data on the view of early history in the Latin chronicles of the Hungarian Kingdom. According to Györffy, the chronicle literature can be used only after a careful and critical approach and when their data are corroborated by contemporary Greek, Latin, or Muslim authors, i.e. the Hungarian chapters of Constantine Porphyrogenitus and the Jayhani tradition.¹⁰ Vámbéry was correct when he denied the image of the

⁷ Vámbéry, *A magyarság keletkezése és gyarapodása*, 9.

⁸ Vámbéry, *A magyarság bölcsőjénél*, 7.

⁹ Vámbéry, *A magyarság keletkezése és gyarapodása*, 29.

¹⁰ Györffy György, *Krónikáink és a magyar őstörténet*. [Hungarian Chronicles and Hungarian Prehistory] (1948) Régi kérdések – új válaszok [New Answers to Old Questions]. Budapest 1993, 3-4.

chronicles regarding the glorious conquest of a homogenous people, as reflected in the minds of medieval authors.

Vámbéry's most debated concept is the question of linguistic kinship.¹¹ Vámbéry was defeated in the so-called Ugric-Turkic debate, as it was proved that the Hungarian language does not belong to the Turkic languages. His opponents successfully explained that the Hungarian language is one of the Finno-Ugric languages. In 1896, Vámbéry already recognised the fact that Hungarian is Finno-Ugric, but he denied the idea that language kinship is identical to ethnic kinship.¹² However, Vámbéry suggested that Hungarian is a mixed Turkic Finno-Ugric language as a reminder of his earlier concept.

Three basic methods are used when comparing languages in modern linguistics: 1. the family tree model, establishing the degree of kinship among languages; 2. contact linguistics, which deals with linguistic interactions, which can be contact or areal phenomenon of a long-term effect of geographic unity between the two languages; 3. language typology, which deals with the general characteristics and linguistic universals that cannot be explained either from contact or affinity. The three methodological approaches are equivalent and accepted in comparative linguistics.¹³ Contrary to Vámbéry's opinion, the Hungarian language belongs to the Finno-Ugric branch of languages; the Turkic loanwords in Hungarian were the consequence of interactions, which can be studied by the method of contact linguistics.

It is widely accepted in the scientific literature and in public opinion that if the Hungarian language belongs to the Finno-Ugric language family, then the Hungarians are Finno-Ugrians. In that case, the affinity of

¹¹ Pusztay János, *Az „ugor-török háború” után. Fejezetek a magyar nyelvhasználat történetéből.* [After the Ugric-Turkic war. Chapters from the comparative studies on the Hungarian]. Budapest 1977; Sinkovics Balázs, Vámbéry és a magyar-török rokonság [Vámbéry and the Hungarian-Turkic Affinity]: *Acta Historica* CXII, Szeged 2002, 89-98.

¹² Vámbéry, *A magyarság keletkezése és gyarapodása*, 7.

¹³ Bakró-Nagy Marianne, Módszerek a nyelvi őstörténet kutatásában: az ugor példa [Methods in the study of linguistic prehistory: the example of Ugric]. In: *Magyar Őstörténet. Tudomány és hagyományörzés* [Hungarian Prehistory and preservation of traditions]. Szerk. Sudár Balázs et alia. Budapest 2014, 193-198.

languages is identified with the kinship of peoples. In reality, Vámbéry drew the conclusion that it is not possible to confuse linguistic kinship with the affinity of peoples. Before studying this issue, the question of linguistic reconstruction must be taken into consideration. Ancient and Old Hungarian can be reconstructed from the achievements of Finno-Ugric comparative linguistics and with the help of the research regarding the different layers of loanwords. Linguists argue that the reconstructed language is a scientific model and is not a real language.

Returning to the relationship between language and ethnicity, it is clear that the concepts of linguistic affinity, contact linguistics, and language typology are three accepted methods in historical linguistics. Anyone who denies the validity of comparative linguistics and cannot accept the thesis that the Hungarian language is of the Finno-Ugric language family, refuses to recognise the results of linguistics at all. However, the extension of the linguistic relationship to ethnic kinship, as Vámbéry stated, is nonsense.

An ethnic group consisting of hundreds of thousands of people is an out (big) group in the sociological point of view, whose members do not know each other personally. It's we-consciousness is formed and guaranteed by the belief of the common ancestor, the notion of a common culture and language, and the long-term political framework. The crucial element in the development of identity is the projection of the idea of a group with real kinship ties to the larger out-group, where there are no longer any personal relationships among the members of the community, so it is obvious that the relationship is completely fictitious.¹⁴ Thus, the ethno-sociological meaning of kinship between two ethnic groups is conceptually impossible. In spite of this, it is written that the Hungarians are a Finno-Ugric people, instead of the Hungarian language being a Finno-Ugric language. This is not only a Hungarian phenomenon. Indo-European, Germanic, Slavic, and Turkic peoples did not exist at all; the correct term are Indo-European, Germanic, Slavic, and Turkish speaking

¹⁴ Szűcs Jenő, *A magyar nemzeti tudat kialakulása* [The development of the Hungarian national identity]. Szerk. Zimonyi I. Budapest 1997.

peoples. In this respect Vámbéry was right to say that the history of a language and that of a people cannot be mixed.

Vámbéry estimated anthropology more than linguistics, which is probably due to his debates and fiasco in the field of linguistics. The study of external physical features is not regarded as being of crucial importance to defining ethnicity in anthropology, but rather one should focus on the characteristics of the population in a given area. The new methods, blood and DNA tests, have eventually opened new perspectives; however, a definition of ethnicity cannot be expected from these investigations.¹⁵

According to Vámbéry, the spirit is the most important factor in determining the people: "the body of our nation was formed from different elements, but the spirit which has inoculated and sustained, all the time has remained Hungarian."¹⁶ Vámbéry characterised the national spirit with the following seven features: 1. dignity, seriousness; 2. cleverness; 3. decorum, noble behavior; 4. aristocratic pride; 5. love of freedom; 6. patriotism; 7. national pride.¹⁷ Vámbéry attempted to determine the substance of the Hungarians with the help of nation-characterology. However, the characteristic features of a nation are obviously the result of the state of a national culture in a certain period. Vámbéry's career coincided with the boom of a national movement and the economic recovery of the second half of the 19th century, and the nation's good perspectives are echoed in these features. In the late 19th century and in the 20th century, the research of folk psychology went in two directions. The Hungarian nation-characterology became the basic theme for historians after the tragic peace treaties closed the First and Second World Wars. Social psychology started to use stereotypes and comparative

¹⁵ Bálint Csanád, *Genetika és (magyar) őstörténet: a közös kutatás kezdeténél* [Genetics and Hungarian Prehistory: the Beginning of a common study]: *Magyar Tudomány* (2008)169:(10), 1166-1169.

¹⁶ Vámbéry, *A magyarság keletkezése és gyarapodása*, 222.

¹⁷ Vámbéry, *A magyarság keletkezése és gyarapodása*, 358-364.

cultural psychology in the description of communities, in particular regarding nations.¹⁸

Vámbéry set up a specific historical construct, from which he deduced the general characteristics of the Hungarian folk spirit. In his view, the Finno-Ugric peoples are characterised by the pursuit of education and a peaceful way of life, whereas the Turks were warriors, conquerors, and world-conquerors who played a significant historical role. Accordingly, the Hungarians are the heirs of the Turkic people in a spiritual respect. After the First World War, Joseph Deér revived the same idea, borrowing it from Germany. The three key elements were: 1. nomadic way of life, 2. *Überschichtung*, 3. king by the grace of God.¹⁹ Jenő Szűcs refuted Deér's theory.²⁰ It is not possible to determine the general character of a nation or ethnic group, as some features can be considered to be valid only for shorter historical periods.²¹

Vámbéry's approach becomes even more disturbing when he identifies the Turks with the nomads. The nomadic lifestyle of the Eurasian steppe was formed and spread and represented an autonomous economic, social and political system. The Scythians are regarded as the first traditional nomads. The first vast empire was created by Hiung-nu in the 2nd century B.C. The Turks founded a nomadic empire in Eurasia, extending from Mongolia to the Crimea in the middle of the 6th century. The Khazar Khaganate was their successor state in Eastern Europe. The nomadic empires were built largely on similar patterns. The decisive period of the formation of the Hungarian tribal confederation was the 6th-9th centuries. Hungarian polity evolved under nomadic samples. As the nomadic empires of the age were created by Turkic speaking peoples (*ellig kaganlig bodun*), the nomadic characteristics of the Hungarian tribal confederacy

¹⁸ Hunyadi György, *A nemzeti karakter talányos pszichológiája* [The Enigmatic Psychology of National Character]. In: *Nemzet-karakterológiák* [National Characterologies]. Budapest 2001, 7-50.

¹⁹ Deér József, *Pogány magyarság, keresztény magyarság* [Pagan Hungarians, Christian Hungarians]. Budapest 1938, 5-34.

²⁰ Szűcs, *A magyar nemzeti tudat kialakulása*, 102-103.

²¹ Szűcs Jenő, *Nemzet és történelem* [Nation and History]. Budapest 1984, 173-178, 283-326.

were classified as Turks in the contemporary literature and this tradition survived in Hungarian historiography. This concept is incorrect, because a linguistic term is used for way of life and a polity. It is absurd, as if we presented the Hungarian people between 1948 and 1990 as Russian, since the economic, social, and political systems of Hungary followed the Soviet pattern and the Soviet system was dominated by the Russians.

According to the prehistoric concept of Vámbéry, the Turkic-Ugric population of the Huns and Avars wandered into the Carpathian Basin and the Finno-Ugric element prevailed. The Magyars, by contrast, were Turkic speaking and they changed language in the Carpathian Basin. After the death of Vámbéry, however, the view prevailed that the formation of Hungarians took place in the Volga region and on the Eastern European steppe in the 5th-9th centuries. The Magyars of Árpád spoke a Finno-Ugric language, which shows significant Turkic influences.²²

However, the concept of the landtaking of Finno-Ugric speaking communities before Árpád's conquest of the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century has arised again. The theory of the archaeologist, László Gyula, is widely known as the double conquests. He suggested that the major Hungarian population moved to the Carpathian Basin in the late Avar period, around 680.²³ More recently, Béla Szőke Miklós proposed that the Hungarians were present between the Danube and the Tisza rivers in the second half of the 9th century.²⁴ Thus, Vámbéry's idea that the

²² Fodor István, *Verecke híres útján. A magyar nép őstörténete és a honfoglalás*. Budapest 1975. English translation: *In Search of a New Homeland*. Budapest 1982; Fodor István, *Őstörténetünk és honfoglalás* [Hungarian Prehistory and the Conquest]. Budapest, Kossuth Kiadó, 2009; Kristó Gyula, *Hungarian History in the Ninth Century*. Szeged 1996; Kristó Gyula, Makk Ferenc, *A kilencedik és tizedik század története* [The History of the 9th and 10th Centuries]. Magyar Századok [Hungarian Centuries]. Pannonica Kiadó. 2001; Róna-Tas András, *A honfoglaló magyar nép*. Budapest 1996; English translation: Róna-Tas András, *Hungarians and Europe in the early Middle Ages*. Budapest 1999.

²³ László Gyula, *Kettős honfoglalás* [Double Conquest]. Budapest 1978.

²⁴ Szőke Béla Miklós, "A Kárpát-medence a Karoling-korban és a magyar honfoglalás" [The Carpathian Basin in Carolingian Age and the Hungarian Conquest]. In: *Magyar Őstörténet. Tudomány és hagyományörzés* [Hungarian Prehistory and preservation of traditions]. Szerk. Sudár Balázs et alia. Budapest 2014, 31-42, see 36-38.

Finno-Ugric Hungarians had already moved into the Carpathian Basin before 895 re-emerges.

Amazingly, the antithesis of Vámbéry's concept has appeared recently in the literature. The reason behind it can be easily reconstructed: if the the Hungarians left the Volga region only in the 830s and moved to the Black Sea, approximately 60 years remain to copy the Turkic words in the steppe region before the conquest in 895. Gyula Kristó and following him, Attila Türk, stressed that the majority of the Turkic loanwords in the Hungarian language were copied in the Carpathian Basin. This implies that there was a strong Turkic speaking element in the Carpathian Basin in the 9th century.

Vámbéry raised the question of the Slavic-speaking population in the Carpathian Basin. The appearance of Slavic speaking communities in the Avar period is well-attested. The Hungarian-Slavic language contact started in the 8th-9th centuries; it intensified in the Carpathian Basin.²⁵ The vocabulary of the Slavic loanwords reflects the Christianization and development of a new type of state. The vocabulary of the Turkic loanwords in Hungarian with those of the Slavic loanwords are worthy of comparison from a historical perspective.

Vámbéry's views on anthropology and national characteristics are outdated, but his concept of the formation of the Hungarians from Ugric speaking groups among the Huns and Avars plus the Turkic speaking tribes of Árpád who conquered the Carpathian Basin in 895, is reflected in several recent works in slightly different forms. Vámbéry's suggestions about the contact among the Turkic, Slavic, and Finno-Ugric speaking groups must be reconsidered and reevaluated.

In summary, we can conclude that Vámbéry's studies contain several new ideas that are worth reading even today, including the difference between a language and a people, or the comparison of the historical results of the old Turkic and Slavic loanwords in Hungarian.

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Zoltán András, "A magyar-szláv nyelvi kapcsolatok" [Hungarian-Slavic language contacts]. In: *Magyar Őstörténet. Tudomány és hagyományörzés* [Hungarian Prehistory and preservation of traditions]. Szerk. Sudár Balázs et alia. Budapest 2014, 205-210.