

COMPETING NARRATIVES BETWEEN NOMADIC PEOPLE AND THEIR
SEDENTARY NEIGHBOURS

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Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours

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The Eastern Magyars of the Muslim Sources in the 10th Century

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The Magyar chapter of the lost geographical work of al-Jayhānī (first decades of the 10th century) is one of the main sources on early Magyar/Hungarian history, and a reconstruction of earlier versions of this account has been made from the works of Ibn Rusta, Gardīzī, al-Bakrī and al-Marwazī (Göckenjan, Zimonyi 2001; Zimonyi 2016). The first part of the Magyar chapter is about the eastern abode of the Magyars:

Ibn Rusta: Between the country of the Pechenegs and the *ʿsk.l* (Ask.l) who belong to the Bulghārs, lies the first border from among the borders of the Hungarians.

Gardīzī: Between the country of the Bulghārs and the country of the *ʿsk.l* who also belong to the Bulghārs, lies the border of the Hungarians.

Al-Bakrī: They live between the country of the Pechenegs and the *ʿsk.l* who belong to the Bulghārs (Zimonyi 2016: 67).

Later in the work there is another description of an abode of the Magyars. According to this, the Magyars lived on the shore of the Rūm Sea between two rivers called the Danube and the Ātil (Zimonyi 2016: 202–3). As for this territory, the consensus is that it was the land of the Magyars north of the Black Sea. The interpretation of the relationship between these two passages is the theme of this paper. There are basically two views: that two separate abodes of the Magyars are being described or that they constitute one long continuous area. Supposing that they are separate the chronology must be determined: were they two consecutive or simultaneous abodes?

Minorsky, commenting on the *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam*, noted how jumbled the geographical concept of the Jayhānī tradition represented by Ibn Rusta, Gardīzī and al-Bakrī is about the abodes of the Magyars. The author “mechanically strings together the information referring to two different territories and most probably derived from different sources (...) as if the Uralian territory stretched without interruption down to the Black Sea” (Minorsky 1937: 319). Kristó emphasized that the Magyars lived north of the Black Sea in the second half of the 9th century, but suggested: “Since we believe that the Pechenegs’ settlement area was east of the Volga around 880, we have come to the conclusion that the Hungarian area of settlement even in the 870s could have reached like a corridor to the Volga and

there the narrowing northeastern border may have been in contact with the lands of the Volga Bulghārs (ʿskl) and the Pechenegs. It cannot be ruled out that, through the corridor from the region of Belaia to Etelköz, linguistically Finno-Ugrian (namely Hungarian) and Turkic speaking Volga Bulghār and Bashkir groups both continued to arrive in the southern territories, even after 830.” (Kristó 1996: 170).

Czeplédy analysed the expression first boundary (*awwalu ḥaddin*) in Muslim geographical literature and, citing numerous examples, stated that its pair is *āhiru ḥaddin* ‘last border’ and that these two terms denoted the two extreme boundaries of one country in a geographical sense. As there is another reference to a border of the Magyars in the text of al-Jayhānī: “One border of their country reaches the Sea of Rūm” (Zimonyi 2016: 202–203), the pair can be reconstructed. Based on these linguistic and contextual points of view, Czeplédy concluded that the text represents a description of only one land of the Magyars. He noted, however, that the geographical information given by al-Jayhānī contradicts this concept, as he states that the Khazars lived on the lower reaches of the Volga, that north of them were the Burtas and that even further north along the Volga were the Volga Bulghārs, so that virtually no direct contact would have been possible : between the eastern and western extremes of the supposed Magyar territory. To resolve the contradiction, Czeplédy suggested that although the first boundary mentioned by al-Jayhānī or in his source clearly meant the eastern land of the Magyars, known as the ancient Bashkir homeland and which bordered the Pechenegs, al-Jayhānī thought that this area was connected with the other country of the Magyars despite the geographic lessons of the sources he epitomized, or from which he excerpted while ambiguously omitting information due to abbreviation (Czeplédy 1943: 293–299).

If we assume that the passages talk about two areas, we can basically categorize the relevant interpretations around three concepts.

According to Pauler, the Magyar territory mentioned in connection with the first border can be identified with Bashkiria, the ancient homeland of the Magyars before their migration to the western regions of the eastern European steppe (Pauler 1900: 243–244). But Czeplédy has refuted the interpretation of first border as meaning the first/earlier land. The term *ḥadd* originally meant the extreme point of something, and its plural form often meant area. As first border is in the singular however, the meaning of first land can be ruled out, so the interpretation of earlier homeland i.e. Bashkiria is not correct (Czeplédy 1943: 296–297, 299). Furthermore, the chapters on Eastern Europe in the Jayhānī tradition were compiled on the basis of the answers to a questionnaire which were gathered from diplomats and merchants some decades before the conquest of the Carpathian Basin (895), so the account is not a historical narrative in contrast to the 38th, Hungarian chapter of Constantine Porphyrogennitus’ *De administrando imperio* entitled ‘Of the genealogy of the nation of the Turks, and whence they are descended’ (DAI: 170).

preserving their original name *Savartoi*, while the majority moved back to their former residence where they came to be known as Turks (DAI: 170–173; Várady 1989: 22–58).

Kristó and Makk came to a similar position. Between 840 and 854 the Magyars lived under Khazar rule in their abode west of the Don, from where they were totally or partly relocated to the Volga region on the eastern edge of the Khazar Khaganate. Here they were attacked and defeated by the Kangars/Pechenegs shortly before 854 (Kristó, Makk 2001: 46, 63). Accordingly, the Magyars, or at least a part of them, may have lived east of the Volga between the Volga Bulghārs and the Pechenegs in the 840s or 870s, during which time Muslim merchants and diplomats could have made contact with them, and gathered the information that is later reflected in the records.

Data on a Magyar group living in the vicinity of the Volga Bulghārs from the beginning of the 10th century is certainly available. Presumably, the so-called 'Eastern' Magyars/Hungarians lived there from the end of the 9th century. According to Fodor, archaeological material pertaining to this group can be found at the Bolšije Tiganj Cemetery (Fodor 1977: 109–114; 1982: 51–52). The Hungarian Dominican Julian visited these Magyars in 1235 in the Volga-Kama region just before the Mongol conquest and called their territory Magna Hungaria (SRH II: 535–542; Göckenjan, Sweeney 1985: 69–91; Göckenjan 1977: 125–145). However, it is still disputed when the split-up took place and whether the Eastern Magyars had been in this place for a long period of time or whether they came to this region from the south. The monk Julian and the eastern Hungarians understood each other in 1235, and they knew that the Western Hungarians were descended from them, and that they were their brothers.¹ These data suggest that the split-up must have occurred in the 9th century, otherwise the communication between Julian and the Eastern Magyars would not have been possible.

Nevertheless, if the first border of the Magyars east of the Volga refers to a part of Magyar territory, this information is valid after 895, when the majority of the Magyars had conquered the Carpathian Basin, so al-Jayhānī may have added it to

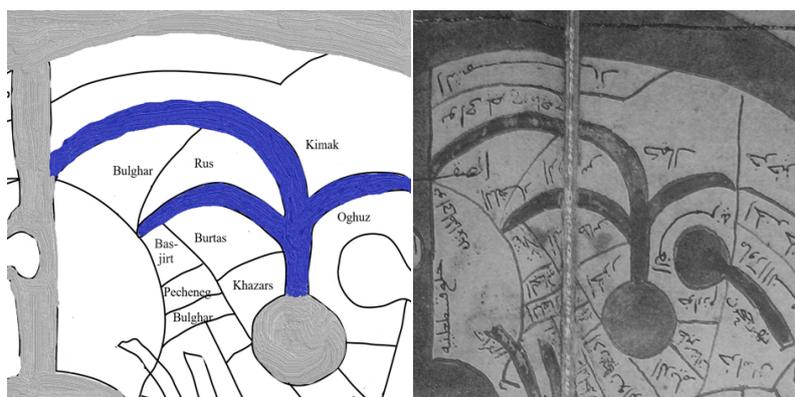
1 ... , et de rege et regno Ungarorum Christianorum fratrum ipsorum fideliter perquirentes, et quecumque volebat, tam de fide, quam de aliis eis proponere, diligentissime audiebant, quia omnino habent Ungaricum idioma, et intelligebant eum, et ipse eos. ... Sciunt enim per relationes antiquorum, quod isti Ungari ab ipsis descenderant; set ubi essent, ignorabant. (SRH II: 540). "... und fragten ihn voll Vertrauen aus über den König und das Königreich der christlichen Ungarn, ihrer Brüder. Was er ihnen auch über den Glauben und über andere Angelegenheiten vortrug, das hörten sie beflissen, da sie ja die ungarische Sprache benutzen; und sie verstanden ihn und er sie... Sie wissen freilich aus der Überlieferung der Alten, dass jene Ungarn von ihnen abstammen; aber wo jene wohnten, wussten sie nicht." (Göckenjan, Sweeney 1985: 79) "and asked him with confidence about the king and the kingdom of Christian Hungarians, their brothers. Whatever he told them about faith and other matters, they listened carefully, since they use the Hungarian language; and they understood him, and he understood them. ... They knew with certainty from the tradition of the ancients that those Hungarians descended from them; but where those lived, they did not know."

the Magyar Chapter in the first decades of the 10th century contrary to the other data which indicated an earlier (880s or even earlier) (Zimonyi 2016: 81) presence of the Magyars in this area.

The Balkhī tradition has preserved the first report about two separate abodes of the Hungarians called Basjirt. Al-Balkhī was one of the most prominent figures in cartography in Muslim geography who drew maps and also wrote commentaries on them. He died in 934. His work was supplemented and corrected by al-Iṣṭakhrī whose compendium was later (968–988) revised and reworked by Ibn Ḥawqal (Tibbetts 1992: 108–136; GAS XIV: 189–231).

The collection of maps contains twenty maps including a world-map and one of the Khazar Sea, i.e. Caspian Sea. The Magyars (here called Basjirt) are described in the comments to the Khazar Sea in the works of al-Iṣṭakhrī and Ibn Ḥawqal: “The Basjirt are of two kinds. The one is at the extremity of the Ghuzz country behind the Bulghār. It is said that their total numbers amount to about 2,000 men, in strong position among woods where none can reach them. They obey the Bulghārs. The other Basjirt border on the Pechenegs. They and the Pechenegs are Turks bordering on Rūm (Byzantium).” (BGA I: 225; BGA II²: 396; Dunlop 1954: 98). This account can be interpreted from a historical point of view as referring to the situation of the 10th century, as the Eastern Magyars bordered the Ghuz, i.e. the Oghuz who had conquered the territory of the Pechenegs in the mid-890s. The Pechenegs moved westward and settled in the territory north of the Black Sea forcing the Magyars to occupy the Carpathian Basin. The vicinity of the Pechenegs and Magyars would also point towards the historical context of the 10th century (Czeglédy 1943: 290). Al-Balkhī was the first geographer to mention the eastern and western lands of the Magyars and he was also the first theorist of the concept of Bashkir-Magyar kinship, adapting the name Basjirt/Bashkir for the Magyars/Hungarians.

Al-Balkhī knew al-Jayhānī personally, as is stated in the work of al-Nadīm’s *Fihrist*: “Then Abū ‘Alī al-Jayhānī, the vizier of Naṣr ibn Aḥmad, had slave girls with whom he used to favor me, but when I dictated my book ‘Offerings and Sacrifices,’ he withheld them from me.” (Dodge 1970: 303). It can be concluded that al-Jayhānī may have had the books of al-Balkhī at his disposal, including his collection of maps.



Fragment of Ibn Ḥawqal's map of the Earth. MS: Library of Topkapi Saray Ref. A 3346. Date 1086. A copy of a map from ca. 980.

Among other things, this information gave me the idea to study maps of the Balkhī tradition. The earliest Muslim manuscript which preserves these maps is the geographical work of Ibn Ḥawqal at the Topkapi Saray Library (Istanbul) (A3346), dated to 1086. The original map was from circa 980. A facsimile of the map of the Earth is included in GAS (XII: 32) and a hand-drawn copy in the second and revised critical edition of Ibn Ḥawqal's work (BGA II²: 7; Zimonyi 2016: 208–211). My colleague Richard Szántó drew the European part of this map. The Earth is surrounded by the Ocean. The Sea of Rūm, i.e. the Mediterranean coming from the Ocean, Andalusia, Italy and various parts of Greece are on the northern coast from west to east. There is a channel starting from the north-eastern part of the Mediterranean, which is called the strait of Constantinople, as Constantinople, the capital of the land of Rūm (Byzantine Empire) is on its western bank. Then the channel crosses the land of the Ṣaḡālība (Slavs) and the land of Gog and Magog and finally it flows into the Ocean. East of the Sea of Rūm (Mediterranean) is another sea, called the Khazar Sea (Caspian Sea). The river Ātil flows into it from the north. The river has three upper branches. The eastern one forms the border between the Kimeks and the Oghuz. The central branch takes its origin from the strait of Constantinople and flows eastward, then turning southward until it reaches the main river. Its first section is the border between the regions of Gog and Magog and the lands of Bulghār and Rūs, and the second section divides the land of Rūs from that of the Kimek. The western branch is the border first between the lands of the Bulghār and Basjirt and then between the Rūs and Burtās regions.

It seems remarkable that the regions of the map beyond the Byzantine Empire which had no direct contact with the Islamic world are described either incompletely or inaccurately. For example, the Black Sea is absent from the map, and Central and Western Europe is represented under the name of the land of

Rūm. This means that the geographical position of peoples including the Magyars, i.e. Basjirt, and the Bulghārs on the Danube (*Bulghār*) south to the Pechenegs, is uncertain. Their territories ought to have been drawn west of the strait of Constantinople as they lived in the Carpathian Basin or the Balkans respectively in the 10th century. As they are depicted east of the Byzantine Empire, these Muslim geographers made no distinction between the regions of the south Russian steppe north of the Black Sea and its western neighbouring lands such as the Carpathian Basin and Balkan regions. There is an inaccuracy in the representation of Rūs: heading north along the Ātil the Khazars, Burtās and the Volga Bulghārs lived there and the Rūs land was to the west and northwest of the Volga Bulghārs, nevertheless the Rūs are portrayed east of the Volga Bulghārs on the map.

The Magyars are called Basjirt on the map and their northern neighbours are the Bulghārs, who can be identified with the Volga Bulghārs, while the Pechenegs border them on the south. South of the Pechenegs are the Bulghārs on the Danube. The term *Bulghār* appears twice on the map. This map must have been the source of al-Jayhānī's information, as the Basjirt were between the Volga Bulghārs and the Pechenegs. Al-Jayhānī corrected his previous information stating that the first border of the Magyars was between the Ask.l tribe of the Volga Bulghārs and the Pechenegs. This assumption faces serious difficulties: on the one hand, it should be assumed that al-Jayhānī identified the Magyars whom he called M.j.f.r with the Basjirt, another designation for the Magyars in the Balkhī tradition. On the other hand, the map of al-Balkhī should contain details which are preserved only in the revised work of Ibn Ḥawqal.

As an analogy, the entry *Bāshghird* in the Geographical Dictionary of Yāqūt can be used. Yāqūt (Jacut I: 468–471) recorded two other forms of this name: *Bāshjird* and *Bāshqird*. He described their country as being between Constantinople and *Bulghār*. He then quoted Ibn Faḍlān's description of the *Bāshghird* who were the wickedest of the Turks, living between the Pechenegs, a group remaining east of the Volga, and the Volga *Bulghār*, in 922. Most of the Pechenegs migrated west, to the territory of the Magyars circa 895. Afterwards, Yāqūt reported that he met some of the *Bāshghird* in Aleppo towards the end of the 1210s. He noted that their other name is *Hunkar*, i.e. Hungarians. At the end of the entry, Yāqūt referred to al-Iṣṭakhri and copied the data about the list of distances, quoting their name as *Bāshjird*. The method applied by Yāqūt can be well reconstructed. Under the heading of *Bāshghird*, he quoted in detail Ibn Faḍlān's description of the *Bāshghird* from 922. They were regarded as Turks living east of the Volga. Yāqūt obtained his information personally from the Muslims of the Hungarian Kingdom in the early 13th century, and he considered them (*Bāshghird*) to be the same as the people of Hungary (*Hunkar*). The connecting link may have been the work of al-Iṣṭakhri, who knew about two types of Basjirts, one living east of the Volga and the other in the western region in the vicinity of Byzantium, information which is omitted by Yāqūt. Thus, Yāqūt combined the information of Ibn Faḍlān with his own data, collected three hundred

years later, but he still used al-Iṣṭakhri's identification of the two abodes of the Magyars.

In conclusion, the account at the beginning of the Jayhānī tradition concerning the first border of the Magyars between the Ask.l tribe of the Bulghārs and the Pechenegs is one piece of information the origins and chronology of which seemed quite uncertain. The assumption that this information was ultimately compiled by al-Jayhānī on the basis of a map of al-Balkhī at the beginning of the 10th century, i.e. after the Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian Basin, may explain why al-Jayhānī inserted the passage on the first border of the Magyars into the beginning of the Magyar chapter.

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