



Focusing on Scythian and Hunnic Ethics: The Dilemma of Early Hungarian Historiography

Bence Fehér

ABSTRACT: The antique sources on the Scythians and Huns vary on the topic of morals. Part of them is idealizing and another part gives a picture of an immoral people. The pre-modern Hungarian identity was based on the supposition that the Hungarians were direct descendants of Huns. Consequently, the Hungarian historians of the 17th–18th centuries faced a serious contradiction between the pro-Hun traditions and the anti-Hun antique sources. The greatest Hungarian historians of the 17th and early 18th centuries, Otrókosi Fóris and Bél eliminated this contradiction by source criticism, finding out the weak points in Jordanes' and Ammian's narratives, and using recent parallels of folklore. [source criticism, antique sources, folklore, pre-modern historiography]

The antique sources on the Scythians greatly vary on the topic of Scythian morals, part of them seeking to give a realistic account and part of them highly idealizing. The

Nomadic Studies, Issue 31: Nomads, Ethics, and Intercultural Dialogue. © Copyright 2024. This work is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/). Published by the International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations under the auspices of UNESCO.

‘idealizing’ trend reached its summit in the late antique compendium of Justin, who made the Scythians examples of righteousness and temperance – according to him, they gained a worldwide empire even through these virtues: ‘Justice is practised due to the character of the people, not to the laws. ... Moral temperance gave them righteousness because they did not wish for anything that is another’s, ... Would that others had the same temperance and abstinence! ... Asia was tributary to them 1500 years.’ (Justin, II 2–3.)¹

That is kind of a mythical ‘golden age’ *topos* of Justin, but in the Middle Ages he was held as one of the greatest historians, and his *topoi* were generally accepted literally. On the contrary, the late antique descriptions of the Huns tended to give a picture of an immoral people. The corpus of antique literary mentions of the Huns is replete of hostile remarks born mostly from fear. The most radical of them is probably Ammian’s whose remarks include the following: ‘The Hun people ... surpass all degrees of savageness’ (Ammian, XXXI 2,1.), ‘they are infidel and unstable in the days of peace ... wholly ignorant what honesty or dishonesty is, obscurely bending their words, retained by no respect for any religion or superstition.’ (Ammian, XXXI 2,11.)² It is hard to say whether these authors denied morality from the nomads only because they did not know them properly or because they were hostile to them but had some knowledge that they misinterpreted.

Practically, Priscus rhetor (who based on personal experiences) was the only one who sought to give a realistic picture of the customs and ethics of the Huns,³ but Jordanes, who greatly exploited his descriptions, neglected these, or added slandering interpolations, and he gave credit to Gothic folklore (if it was folklore and not his malevolent invention) which tended to find the mythical Evil Principle in the Huns.⁴

¹ 2 Iustitia gentis ingenis culta, non legibus. ... Haec continentia illis morum quoque iustitiam edidit, nihil alienum concupiscentibus. ... Atque utinam reliquis mortalibus similis moderatio abstinentiaque alieni foret! 3 ... His igitur Asia per mille quingentos annos vectigalis fuit. (All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.)

² 31,2,1. Hunorum gens ... omnem modum feritatis excedit. 31,2,11. Per indutias infidi inconstantes ... quid honestum inhonestumve sit penitus ignorantes, flexiloqui et obscuri, nullius religionis vel superstitionis reverentia aliquando districti.

³ Prisci Fragmenta (Historia Byzantiace). In HGM p. 275–352., especially frgg. 3., 5–19., 23., 33., 37–39. (Henceforward HGM.)

⁴ It is evident from Jordanes’ aethiology of the Huns (*Getica*, 24,121–122.), where he tries to persuade that the Huns are descendants of evil demons – claiming that he based on a Gothic

What were the main topics of the antique historians, by which they judged the ‘savage’ or ‘barbarous’ nature of nomadic peoples? Lack or existence of religion; hospitality; piety against parents and/or children; the natural or artificial nature of clothing and food (where they mostly over-esteemed the sophisticated ways of sedentary peoples and did not understand the practical values of nomadic lifestyle at all); and, perhaps most of all, *temperance* as a chief virtue (in food, beverages, warfare, sexuality etc.). Those few authors who observed temperance in the nomads found that they had superior ethics, those who observed excesses, thought the nomads were only savages. The Huns’ much-dreaded excesses in warfare made them a chief evil to Ammian.

In other words, pre-modern European historiography did not and would not know nomadic ethics, but – with a few exceptions – they condemned the whole nomadic culture as something lacking ethics. On the contrary, Hungary was in an intermediate position because the memory of ethnic continuity with antique nomadic peoples such as Scythians and Huns was part of the Hungarian traditions. Hungarians, or rather the last wave of the Hungarian ethnic groups, the so-called Seven Hungarians settled in the Carpathian Basin at the very end of the 9th century, and they became a European-style sedentary people by the 12th century at the latest. The first extant Hungarian *gestas* and chronicles originate from the 13th century and speak of the old tradition that Hungarians were remnants of the Huns,⁵ and that remained the mainstream *topos* of Hungarian historiography until the 19th century. The common Hungarian identity was based on two

folk tradition. In addition, his statements sometimes surpass even Ammian’s hostility, for example *Getica* 24,121.: ‘Hunorum gens omni ferocitate atrocior.’ (The people of Huns is more savage than every ferocity.) *Getica* 24,128.: ‘Hi vero sub hominum figura vivunt beluina saevitia.’ (They live in a human form, but with bestial cruelty.)

⁵ The so-called ‘Anonymous’ or Magister P. composed a *Gesta Hungarorum* (its dating to the years after the death of King Béla III, 1192, is not unanimously, sed widely accepted) which calls the Hungarian royal dynasty descendants of King Attila. It is doubtful, however, whether in his opinion only the royal family was of Hunnic blood or the whole people. Supposedly his contemporary, Calanus bishop of Pécs composed a *vita Attilae*, based on a wide circle of antique sources, which shows his enormous interest in the topic but does not contain any element of the specific Hungarian ‘Hunnic cycle’. Simon of Kéza’s *Chronica* (about 1285) already claimed that the whole *gens Hungarica* was descendant of the Huns, and described the later widely known ‘Hunnic cycle’ as historical facts. Allegedly Simon of Kéza based on a primary chronicle from the 11th century, but it did not survive and therefore we cannot decide, whether the Hunnic cycle was part of it already or it was Simon’s innovation/adaptation from popular traditions.

suppositions: that the Scythians and Huns were essentially *the same* people and that the Hungarians were direct descendants of Huns. Thus, the traditions lead back the Hungarian life-style and morals to the legendary past, together with the memories of the old nomadic lifestyle. It caused an inherent contradiction for the early Hungarian historiographers when confronted with the antique authors' fables on the amorality of the Huns. The starting point of Humanism and the Reformation was mostly that 'all must be based on antique sources', but in such a situation, it caused nonsense: whoever of the Hungarians started from it, he had to confess that his national traditions were simply lies. When Hungarian historians first began to use scientific methods in the 17th–18th centuries, this contradiction contributed much to a shift to modern source critics. (And in this period, the question of ethics was not a mere additional ornament of history because the 17th century was the golden age of Hungarian Protestantism, which emphasized the *ethical* side of history.) They still relied on antique authors, but they had to interpret them critically and examine whether the authors understood the encircling world or not, whether they took down historical facts or myths. Which of them was more creditable: Justin on the 'uncorrupted' virtue of the Scythians, or Ammian?

The greatest of the Hungarian historians of the 17th and early 18th centuries faced this question to its full extent: for example, Ferenc Otrókocsi Fóris⁶ and Mathias Bél.⁷ Let us see a few examples. Otrókocsi Fóris supposed that Ammian's invectives on the Huns were due to misinterpretation: 'he blamed the Huns that they had no religion or

⁶ Ferenc Otrókocsi Fóris (1648–1718) Calvinist theologian, historian, and linguist. His main work on the topic: *Origines Hungaricae*, Strik, Franequerae, 1693.

⁷ Matthias Bél (1684–1749) Lutheran theologian, historian. His main work, *Notitia Hungariae novae geographico-historica* was written in the first decades of the 18th century, but in the author's life, only four volumes appeared (*Notitia Hungariae novae geographico-historica* I. Van Ghelen, Viennae, 1735., II. Van Ghelen, Viennae, 1736., III. Van Ghelen, Viennae, 1737., IV. Van Ghelen, Viennae, 1742.; the manuscript volumes are being edited in the current years (*Notitia Hungariae novae historico geographica, comitatuum ineditorum* tomi I–V., Institutum Historicum Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae – Archivum Hungariae Regnicolaris, Budapestini, 2011–2018.). This work focuses mostly on geographical and ethnographical descriptions and the history of the sedentary era of Hungary (that is, the 2nd millennium AD), but the history of nomadism (Hungaria vetus, 'the Old Hungary') was part of the author's original work plan. Regrettably, it was never realized save for a preliminary report: *Hungariae veteris et novae prodromus*. Monath, Norimbergae, 1723., and another preliminary report on the pre-Christian writing system of the Hungarian language: *De vetere litteratura Hunno-Scythica exercitatio*. Monath, Lipsiae, 1718.

superstition because they did not have any idols or pagan rites' (1693, p. 97).⁸ First, that is the Protestant theologian's concept on virtue: when the pagan Ammian spoke of religion, he meant superstition,⁹ so the accusation of 'irreligious behaviour' shows the original purity of religious thought; secondly, it is a typical baroque theological concept of the 'original monotheism' of the native peoples. But he did not restrict himself to theological/logical deductions, he compared the sources too, and it was with the intense exploitation of a wide circle of antique sources, that he attributed some moral superiority to the Huns, thus refuting Ammian and Jordanes. The temperance of Huns was justified by Herodot's words about Scythians, the moral integrity of King Attila with Priskos Rhetor's data:¹⁰ 'You cannot find these things, that are opposed to the sane reason, modesty and temperance, in the feasts of Attila's courts. ... Herodot writes so: Scythians blame the Greeks for the habit of carousals.' (Otrokocsi, 1693, p. 123–124.)¹¹ He went so far as to say: '[Attila] deserved to be numbered among the moral philosophers of the Heathens'. (Otrokocsi, 1693, p. 125.)¹²

Paradoxically, these scholars gave unrestricted credit to the most unreliable, but to some extent pro-nomadic late antique descriptions (as that of Justin),¹³ but they also knew and esteemed the far more reliable ancient geographic sources (Strabo,¹⁴ Mela¹⁵

⁸ ... quod Hunni & alii Scythæ aliorum Ethnicorum simulacra & ritus non habuissent, accusat illos, quod nullius Religionis vel superstitionis reverentia districti fuerint.

⁹ Naturally Ammian used the word *superstitio* together with *religio*, but clearly with a different meaning, and the two together give the meaning of what is religion for a modern scholar.

¹⁰ Meaning the story of Attila's temperance in Priscus frg. 8. (HGM p. 316–317.) It is curious that the account of the Huns' peaceful everyday life which Onegesius' freedman gave (ibid. p. 306.), did not receive any attention.

¹¹ Haec ... rationi sanæ, modestiæ & temperantiæ adversa, non experiris in tot conviviis Aulæ Athilianæ ... Sic scribit Herodotus: Scythæ Grecis probro dant bacchandi consuetudinem. – By the way, it seems to be an apocryphal Herodot's locus, absent from the modern editions.

¹² ... ut merito, inter aliquos saltem Gentilium Morales Philosophos connumerari, ob virtutes debeat.

¹³ Bél, 1718, p. 4.: 'alia Scythicae integritatis, ex Iustino, collaudatio' (another praise of the moral integrity of Scythians, from Justin).

¹⁴ Bél, 1723, p. 4.: 'In primis laudat integritatem Scytharum Strabo ... contra quam in hodiernis moribus fieri consuevit.' (Strabo praises the moral integrity of Scythians ... contrary to what used to happen according to modern morals.) Probably referring to Strabo, *Geographica*, VII 3,7.

¹⁵ Bél, 1723, p. 49. refers to Pomponius Mela, *De chorographia*, II 18. Otrokocsi does not use them for argumentation, although he mentions Strabo over 20 times in his etymologies.

etc.), or for example Bél found Lukian's *Toxaris*, as a source on the 'un-corrupted' ethics of the Scythians.¹⁶

An evident stumbling-block was Ammian's rigid assertion that the Huns had *no religion*. As Matthias Bél observed it is in open contradiction with the Attila legend recorded by Priscus frg. 8. (HGM p. 314.): that in his time a cowherd found Ares' sword and gave it to the king, which contributed much to his royal power.¹⁷ That was a contemporary story for Priscus, but Otrokocsi (1693, p. 50–52.) and Bél (1723, p. 49.)¹⁸ observed that it was in a good accord with much older notes of Herodot and Mela,¹⁹ that the Scythian chief god (with an interpretatio Graeca, Ares) was venerated through swords, not idols. That is a piece of quite a modern source criticism, which proves that Priscus' data about the Hunnic religious beliefs preserve a common old nomadic ritual – and the coup-de-mercy to Ammian is, that Bél (1723, p. 50.) finds, that he knew the same ritual existing among the Alans but denied it to the Huns.²⁰

¹⁶ Bél, 1723, p. 6.: 'Erant in primis, in colenda amicitiae fide insignes, quod ex Toxari Luciani docetur.' (They were especially famous for preserving friendship, which may be taught from Lukian's *Toxaris*.)

¹⁷ Ἐσεσθαι δ' οὐκ εἰς μακρὰν τῆς παρούσης αὐτῷ δυνάμεως ἀύξεισιν σημαίνει καὶ τοῦτο τὸν θεὸν τὸ τοῦ Ἄρεος ἀναφάναντα ξίφος. ... ἐν τοῖς πάλαι ἀφανισθῆναι χρόνοις, εἴτα διὰ βοῶς εὐρεθῆναι. 'In a short time, his power will grow: because the appearance of Ares' sword foretells that ... which disappeared in the old times, and then was found through a cow.' The story was told in detail by Jordanes, *Getica*, 35,183.: 'His confidence grew as *the sword of Mars* was found that was always held sacred by the Scythians. The historian Priscus says that it was found in such an occasion: as a cowherd saw that a little cow was hobbling and he did not find the reason for the wound, anxiously followed the bleeding footprints and arrived to a sword, on which the grazing cow had trodden, dug it up and brought it to Attila. Presented with this gift, as he was magnanimous, he thought that he was installed as the emperor of the world, and the ability of wars was left to him through *Mars' sword*.'

¹⁸ Bél adds a locus of Dionysius Halicarnassensis too, however, this locus is not serious proof for his concept. Thus, it shows only Bél's thorough knowledge of antique sources.

¹⁹ Cf. Herodot, *Historiai*, IV 62,2.: ἐπὶ τούτου δὴ τοῦ σηκοῦ ἀκινάκης σιδήρεος ἴδρυται ἀρχαῖος ἐκάστοισι, καὶ τοῦτ' ἐστὶ τοῦ Ἄρεος τὸ ἄγαλμα. Mela, *De chorographia*, II 18.: 'Mars is god of all, to him swords and tents are dedicated instead of idols.'

²⁰ Cf. Ammian, XXXI 2,11: 'nec templum apud eos [Alanos] visitur aut delubrum, ne tugurium quidem culmo tectum cerni usquam potest, sed gladius barbarico ritu humi figitur nudus, eumque ut Martem, regionum, quas circumcircant, praesulem verecundius colunt.' (No temple can be seen among them [= Alans], no sanctuary, not even a thatched hut, but a naked sword is stuck in the ground, according to barbarous rites, and it is devoutly venerated as Mars, the overlord of all regions where they nomadize.) It is not useless to quote Bél's words, how he

Thus, the notion of ethnic continuity induced the Hungarian historians to compare and criticize the antique sources. West European scientists were also stimulated by non-scientific, ethnic reasons – but they thought themselves to be descendants of such peoples who were hostile to the nomads. German historiography, although it was in a leading position in this century, was not forced to take the same steps: they held the *Getica* of Jordanes as a par excellence authority, together with its anti-Hun views. They never thought that Jordanes *had not understood* Nomadic peoples; nor that if they compared him with earlier authors, the major part of his statements would be refuted – as, for example, Bél found that Jordanes incorporated earlier stories about the Getae into his Gothic data, and consequently they are not reliable.²¹ And although Jordanes mentioned contemporary (that is, 6th century) folklore tales, the German historians did not think it useful to find recent parallels for the nomadic way of life, ethics and beliefs. So these Hungarian scientists were the first ones who used recent parallels of folklore, trying to identify the remnants of Scythian and Hunnic ethics in contemporary Hungarian customs.²² The antique descriptions of the Huns' dressing mostly emphasized its wild, simple and vile features – in lack of understanding, of course, because they could not imagine its practical nature in the nomadic life. (Ammian says the Huns were clothed only in 'furs of forest mice'.²³ Now Bél found a locus in Seneca, where he had said the same thing about Scythians, but in a positive context: 'greater part of the Scythians is clothed in the furs of foxes and rodents – since these are soft and impermeable to the wind',²⁴ and held it *ethically* better than the luxurious, but unpractical Roman clothes. He also observed that

criticizes Ammian: 'Ita vero Ammianus de Alanis ... Habes hic descriptum penitus Scytharum colendi Martis ritum; cur ergo non Hunnorum etiam?' (However, Ammian speaks about the Alans so. Here you see written the rite of the cult of Mars perfectly, so why does it not belong to the Huns too?)

²¹ Bél, 1723, p. 32. 'Jornandes ... sane res Gothorum multis fabulis contaminavit, et cum Geticis male miscuit ...' (Jordanes [= Jornandes] indeed spoiled the history of Goths with many tales, and he badly mixed them with that of Getas ...) Cf. Jordanes, *Getica*, 10, 61–66., where he mentions King Darius' war with the *Goths*.

²² Already Otrókocsi (1693, p. 66.) supposed that Jazygians (West Sarmatians) were akin to Hungarians, their similar hospitality shows it. Bél's argumentation shows a far wider horizon (1723, p. 37., 40–41., 42., the last locus using not a Hungarian but a Tatar parallel).

²³ Ammian, XXXI 2,5.: 'indumentis operiuntur ... ex pellibus silvestrium murum consarcinatis'.

²⁴ Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 90.: 'hodieque magna Scytharum pars tergis vulpium induitur ac murum, quae tactu mollia et impenetrabilia ventis sunt.'

Roman and Greek phrases were not real equivalents for the original wording of the nomadic peoples, and tried to find the recent Hungarian customs and things which were potential descendants of the Hunnic ones, and consequently, their Hungarian names had to render better the original Hunnic ideas. Thus he began to use the parallels of the Hungarian folklore. For example, let us remain in the world of furs: ‘Doubtless, the Hungarians have some kind of hat up to now, which is equal to the Huns’ *galerus*.²⁵ They sew sheep furs together (mostly black fleeces) that it can loosely cover the head, and the top of this fur-cap bends down, almost hitting their shoulders. If it is not encircled with felt it is called *keucsma* in the vernacular, if felt is added it is called *kolpag*.²⁶ The reasoning is correct, the 18th century Hungarian fur and felt hats were in all probability remnants of the older Hungarian nomadic culture.²⁷

Thus, living traditions found their way into former speculative and purely philological investigations of a different culture. That was the first attempt of European historiography, to acquire active knowledge of nomadic cultural values, and acknowledge them without preconditions; contrary to the contemporary West European historiography which stuck to its former starting point that Nomads should be judged (and condemned) from the viewpoint of Western sedentary peoples.

REFERENCES

- Ammianus, Marcellinus. (1935–1940). *Rerum gestarum libri* (Ed. transl. J. C. Rolfe). Harvard University Press; Heinemann.
- Bél (1723). M. Belius, *Hungariae veteris et novae prodromus*. Monath.
- Calanus, Juvencius Coelius. (1502). Vita Attilae. In *Plutarchi vitae nuper quam diligentissime recognitae quibus tres virorum illustrium vitae aditae fuerunt & in fine voluminis apositae*

²⁵ The meaning of the Latin word of Ammian is a little dubious.

²⁶ Bél, 1723, p. 41.

²⁷ The word *kolpag* shows an evident nomadic origin too (cf. Tatar *qalpaq*, Turkish, Kyrgyz *kalpak*). The form *kolpag* was recorded by Bél, but it must have been a rare dialectal variation; the common Hungarian uses *kalpag*, and the same form was recorded already in the 17th century, before Bél’s time: see TESz II, 1970, p. 330. However, since the earliest known examples are from the 17th century, it cannot be decided whether the word (and the fur-cap type) goes back to the Hungarian conquest, 9th century, or only to the immigration of the Turkic-speaking Cuman tribes, 13th century.

- (Ed. H. Squarzacicus). Doninus Pincius. p. 143–146. <https://doi.org/10.3931/e-rara-70243>
- Herodotus. (1920). [*Historiae.*] *With an English translation.* (Ed. transl. A. D. Godley). Harvard University Press.
- HGM (1870). L. Dindorf (Ed.), *Historici Graeci minores Vol I.* Teubner.
- Jordanes. (1997). *Getica* (Ed. A. Nordin). Atlantis.
- Justin. (1990). *Epitoma rerum Philippicarum* (Ed. M-P. Arnaud-Lindet). Les Belles Lettres.
- Lukian. (1936). *Toxaris vel amicitia* (Ed. transl. A. M. Harmon). Harvard University Press; Heinemann.
- Magister P. (1932). *Gesta Hungarorum* (Ed. L. Juhász). Bibliotheca Scriptorum Medii Recentisque Aevorum.
- Mela, Pomponius. (1971). *De Chorographia Libri Tres.* (Ed. G. Ranstand). Teubner.
- Otrokocsi (1693). F. Otrokocsi Foris, *Origines Hungaricae.* Strik (Franequerae).
- Simon de Kéza. (1999). *Gesta Hungarorum* (Ed. transl. L. Veszprémy; F. Schaer). EDU Press.
- Strabo. (1877). *Geographika* (Ed. A. Meineke). Teubner.
- TESz II (1970). L. Benkő (Ed.), *A magyar nyelv történeti-etimológiai szótára Vol II.* Akadémiai Kiadó. [Historical-etymological Dictionary of the Hungarian Language]