

Theses of the Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**Relations between the Varangian-Rus' and the
steppic people during the Viking Age (ninth–mid-
eleventh century)**

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Debrecen, 2019

I. Objectives of the dissertation and the delineation of the research topic

The dissertation discusses the relationship between early medieval Scandinavians known as Vikings and steppe nomadic people during the 9th–mid-11th centuries. Since no comprehensive study has been conducted on the topic previously, it is worth explaining shortly how I came across the theme as it has consequences on the overall view and the main thesis of the dissertation.

Throughout my historical studies, I was focusing on early medieval Scandinavia. However, I have realized that although surrounded by great interest among Anglophone and Scandinavian scholars, the Eastern European actions of the Vikings do not get enough scholarly attention. From the other end, in Hungary, there are only a handful of (mostly young) scholars who are dealing with Scandinavian – or specifically 'Viking' – history. Therefore, my interest slowly turned towards the Eastern connections of the Scandinavians, more specifically towards their relations with the steppe. These connections are largely unexplored in Western historiography, and studying them can contribute significantly to our understanding of steppic and Hungarian history as well. However, these historical connections are viewed through a 'Scandinavian filter' throughout the dissertation. This means that although the dissertation touches on important points of early 'Russian' history as well, it discusses the early history of the Rus' and the steppe from an alternative, 'Scandinavian' point of view. The goal was therefore not to write a new bold thesis on the history of the 9–10th century steppe or the Kievan Rus', as it would have required a team of researchers. The discourse, therefore, is concentrated on aspects of steppic history which has relevance for Viking studies and thus, the steppe in the present work is viewed through the eyes of a 'Scandinavist'. In this regard, the dissertation fills in a serious gap; experts of medieval Scandinavia have not looked at the steppe from this point of view as they mostly lack the educational background for steppic (and Hungarian) history and the knowledge of languages which a Hungarian student is usually equipped with.

During the early Middle Ages, Scandinavia and Eastern Europe maintained close ties in political, economic and cultural terms. Parallels developments in the two regions were discernible too: in both places, it was around the same time that Christianization and state formation processes were carried out roughly along similar patterns. Later on, literacy also developed along the same lines in the Christian monarchies of Northern- and Eastern Europe. These parallels have been also noticed by previous research. There were also analogous events between the two territories prior to the first millennium: the pagan Magyars and Vikings similarly threatened Western Europe in the 9–10th centuries.

Apart from the parallel developments, Scandinavia and Eastern were also in direct contact with each other in the period. Vikings, who were exploring the Eastern sphere of the continent from Scandinavia and were labelled as Rus' or Varangians in contemporary documents, entered into contact with numerous people and cultures along the way. The most significant achievement of the Varangian-Rus – as it is held by researchers – was the establishment of the Kievan Rus', the first Slavic state regarded as the embryo of present-day Ukraine, Belorussia and Russia. The debate around the scale and role of the Scandinavian involvement in the establishment of the 'first Slavic state', however did not last without serious debates in Russian and international scholarship and is mostly known as the 'Normanist controversy'. Regrettably, the contacts of the Rus' with other cultures than the Slavs did not engage much attention from researchers. This is especially true for the bonds that the Rus' maintained with the steppe dwellers. There are several reasons why these relations remained unexplored. On the one hand, traditionally, national historiographies mostly deal with their own historical past. In our case this means the scholars of the Scandinavian and the Eastern European countries between whom the collaborations are usually stuck in the first phase due to language barriers. This does not mean that there were no common projects, but in the countries of the ex-Soviet Union – where the Vikings were present – it was hard to access materials from Scandinavia or Western Europe. Alternatively the different methodological background caused disturbances between researchers. On the other hand, scholars of the steppe and the Vikings are usually uninterested about each other's fields as naturally they gain different linguistic-historical training. The omission, however, might derive from simple disinterest: Viking scholars are mostly focusing on the Western expansion of the Scandinavians and thus the Eastern sphere remains neglected. This is unfortunate since according to the archaeological material, it seems likely that the Eastern presence of the Vikings surpasses the West in numbers remarkably.

From the other side, the ignorance of the topic derived from political motives. The 'anti-Normanist' Russian and Ukrainian researchers tried to minimize the role of the Scandinavians in the history of the Kievan Rus' and identified the people of Rus' as appearing in the sources as purely Slavic. This prevented any further study of possible nomadic-Viking interference.

The history writing of the last decades also did not devote attention to the phenomenon, and studies addressing the problem were only focusing on a distinctive part of these relations separated from the overall picture. For instance, there have been multiple attempts at localizing the so-called Rus Khaganate, the first Rus political formation. Or, the trade between the Rus' and the Khazars and Volga Bulgars were treated within the framework of Viking-Islamic

connections, despite the fact that in spite of their Muslim bonds, both the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars were steppic people of Turkic origin.

The question, therefore, is ripe for a new overview which creates a new viewpoint, that is inspects the Rus-nomadic relations as Scandinavian-nomadic ones and at the same time also attempts to present a synthesis. The main aim of the dissertation is to provide a comprehensive picture about the relationships of the Scandinavian world with the steppic people in the fields of trade, warfare, culture and communication. Although we naturally have to leave place for hostilities as well in a comprehensive study, the Scandinavian-steppic co-operation will be emphasized within all the aforementioned categories.

The chronological boundaries are conveniently set in the Viking Age, usually dated from the 9th to the mid-11th centuries. The reason for this is that the Scandinavian presence in Eastern Europe is discernible since the mid-8th century and presumably the end of that century (or the beginning of the 9th) is the starting date of their contacts with the nomads. After the mid-11th century, however, as the Northern states integrate within the system of Europe, the Scandinavians 'Viking lifestyle' cease to exist. Their presence in Eastern Europe also seem to vanish by this time; their groups being active there mostly returned home or became assimilated within the local Slavs. The chronological framework of the Viking Age, therefore, will be only superseded in exceptional cases in the present study.

The timeframe of the research also delineates which steppic tribes will feature in the dissertation. We have the first evidence for Viking-nomadic contacts in the 9th century. At this time, several nomadic tribes were dwelling along the major rivers of today's European Russia of whom especially the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars gained importance in regards to 9–10th century Viking history along the River Volga. Besides them, inhabitants of the South-Russian steppe, namely the Magyars from the mid-9th century and the Pechenegs from the 10th maintained close contacts with the Rus strongholds of the mid-Dnieper region. These four steppic tribes are the main subjects of the investigation. Occasionally other people, such as the Oghuz', the Burtas' and the Bashkirs, will also fall under examination, however due to the fragmented nature of the source material, to a lesser extent. Due to the abovementioned Scandinavian assimilation in the Kievan Rus', the tribe of the Cumans who inhabited the South-Russian steppe from the mid-11th century will obviously fall out of the scope of the dissertation (with the exception of a single source).

In addition, the Viking-Hungarian relations should be highlighted as originally these would not fall under the official Viking-nomadic contacts apart from a short, 50-year phase, since the Magyars soon gave up their nomadic lifestyle after moving into the Carpathian Basin at the end

of the 9th century. This in itself, however, is no adequate reason not to discuss Scandinavian/Rus-Hungarian relations as those still fall within the epoch of the Viking Age. The fact that from all nomadic tribes only the Magyars established a long-lasting state which exists to this day, this peculiarity does not exclude this case from the examination but rather instigates us to treat it with special attention. As a Hungarian researcher dealing with universal history we feel it our obligation to explore the foreign connections of the country at any case. Therefore, the Scandinavian-Hungarian relations also deserved a place in the investigation.

With the present choice of topic I also aimed to connect two far-away scholarly milieus. In Hungary, since the outstanding works of Mihály Kmoskó, it is a well-established method to reveal certain parts of Hungarian history which are inadequately addressed by contemporary sources, with analogies. As a part of this, researchers tend to study other contemporaries of the 9–10th century Magyars too in order to get a better understanding of Hungarian history. The Rus' were definitely one of these partners of the Magyars in the period, however, in spite of this, they did not receive the deserved attention; they were merely studied in Hungary from the viewpoint of Slavic-Hungarian relations.

In Viking studies, it is still no customary yet to employ the events of Rus history as an analogy to illuminate or compare developments in the Western sphere of the Viking World. The same goes for studying steppe history which could provide a better understanding of the world the 'Eastern Vikings' became part of. Nevertheless, to understand the Viking World better, this is an unavoidable step. Although Scandinavians were linked by common language and descent during the Viking Age from modern day America to Uzbekistan, it is also evident that there were considerable differences between the territories which the Vikings inhabited. In the light of this, the goal of the dissertation was not merely to 'pull in' the hitherto neglected 'Viking perspective' into the examination of the steppic people, but also to comment on a question more relevant to international Viking studies, namely how one Viking differed from the other?

II. The applied methodology

The methodology of the dissertation is adjusted separately to the various source types which are utilized in the investigation. The source base consists of Icelandic sagas, Muslim travel narratives and Slavic, Byzantine and Latin chronicles. Due to the miscellaneous nature of the genres and the source languages, all source types are handled according to specific source critical methods by paying attention to conventions of history writing, authorial distortions, literary borrowings and manuscript divergencies. A couple of words should be said about the way how we read this diverse material. The miscellaneous nature of the source material places obstacles in the way of

the researcher. There is no scholar, who can read all the diverse source languages these source were written on (Old Norse, Old Church Slavonic, Arabic, Persian, Greek, Latin) or could handle these sources in the same depth. However, I believe the topic has a huge scientific merit and thus these shortcomings must be overcome as much as possible. Nevertheless, semantic studies or linguistic questions are rarely pursued in the dissertation, the aim was more to synthesize the material and set up a basic narrative of the Viking-nomadic relations.

The basic narrative does not merely mean a sequence of political events, but rather the longer lasting cultural consequences of these relations. This is carried out in the dissertation in an interdisciplinary manner by utilizing the results of historical, archaeological, anthropological or linguistic sciences. Obviously no hierarchy was set up between the disciplines. If questions came up where the data from different disciplines did not come to consensus, the question was marked as unsolvable or the credit was taken away from one type of evidence based on source critical considerations.

Besides interdisciplinarity, the other methodological feature of the dissertation was the comparative approach. The presence of the Eastern Vikings within the territory of various power centres in the East makes these territories comparable in terms of commerce, warfare or culture as regards to the effects of the milieu on the Vikings. Geographical categories were given as the basis of the comparison and thus the circumstances of the Vikings' presence in Hungary, the Kievan Rus', Byzantium, Volga Bulgharia and Khazaria is compared in the dissertation.

III. Scientific achievements of the dissertation

As opposed to the traditional view of Russian historiography that the 'forest and the steppe' were at constant war with each other, our survey revealed that this was not always the case through the epoch of the Middle Ages. In the early history of the Kievan Rus' – during the 9–10th centuries – people of Scandinavian origin called the Varangian-Rus', who settled in present-day Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, maintained mostly peaceful connections with the inhabitants of the steppe. Although conflicts between the 'nomads of the sea' and the 'nomads of steppe' definitely happened from time to time, it rarely went beyond small-scale raids, trespassing each other's territories in danger or fighting over trade routes.

Scandinavian interactions with the local inhabitants of the Eastern regions included complicated and changing trade relations, various aspects of warfare, and colonisation resulting in varying degrees of co-habitation. Although the Slavic, Balto-Finnic and the Byzantine relations are better attested in the preserved source material, the steppe dwellers representing (or

dominated by) Turkic cultures were just as frequent partners of the Scandinavian merchants, mercenaries, plunderers and settlers in the 9th–mid-11th centuries.

Tribes of the Khazar Khaganate, and those dwelling along the Volga, such as the Alans, Bashkirs, Oghuz' and most importantly the Volga Bulgars had close ties with the Scandinavian incomers. In the steppe zone south of Kiev, the migrating Magyar and Pecheneg tribes maintained contact with the newly established Varangian-Rus strongholds in the Middle Dnieper area from the mid- and late-9th century. These relations continued even throughout the 10th century, when the Magyars settled in the Carpathian Basin.

Even though armed conflicts between the Varangian-Rus' and the various Turks were no less common, the focus in the present study was on the brighter side of these relations, i. e. on co-operation. Besides the extensive trade connections, this also involved the spheres of warfare and certain cultural transfers resulting from longer co-habitation. The latter was a consequence of the first two (often interconnected) aspects, whilst those prerequisite was most probably the ability of developing well-functioning and effective communication between the partners. This thematic, rather than chronological or politically orientated division of the topic (such as discussing the Scandinavian relations with each tribes respectively), should be attributed to the nature of the fragmentary and sometimes quite taciturn – or from a critical point of view problematic – source material. Thus, many of the findings either cannot be evidently linked to precise historical events, or they are more of a suggestive nature than firm evidence. Nevertheless, certain tendencies, on which I have tried to shed lights on, evidently existed. The decisive interactions of the Varangian-Rus' with the steppe nomadic tribes can be touched upon in features of religious and everyday customs, trade, warfare and communication. The findings can be summarized as follows:

I. *Commerce*. It was the lucrative mercantile potential of the Volga area that drew Scandinavian traders to Eastern Europe. Islamic dirhems and oriental fashion was communicated here to Scandinavian merchants through intermediaries of Turkic ethnicity in exchange for furs, slaves and weapons. A sophisticated and well-organized system developed here, characterized by the establishment of temporary dwellings, regulations and secure supplies of food.

As opposed to the peacefulness of the Volga-trade route, the Dnieper area was less secure due to the changing political relations of the Rus' with the nomads of the steppe. Political enmities resulted in raids, aiming to take prisoners and products from each other. In more peaceful times, the traditional nomadic merchandises, mostly animals were supplied to the sedentary Rus' for metal utensils, jewellery and weapons or other products of the forest belt. The Carpathian Basin might have provided another sought after resource: salt, which could have been traded with the

Magyars on land route between Kiev and the Upper-Tisza region. Other commodities could have been exchanged in foreign markets which were visited by both the Rus' and the Magyars in the 10th century.

II. *Warfare*. It was also argued that Viking mercenaries showed a high rate of assimilation in Eastern Europe as they often adapted quickly to local circumstances. In all the places where their presence as hired-warriors is assumed (Byzantium, Kievan Rus', Khazaria, Volga Bulgharia, Hungary, Poland) – either as auxiliaries or retinue members –, written sources testify that alongside mercenaries of Scandinavian ethnic backgrounds, people of Turkic origin also took service at the same time. Similarly to retainers migrating between courts elsewhere in the Viking World and transmitting knowledge, fashion and material cultural, courts in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe could also have become first hand cultural transfer zones for Scandinavian retainers. Here, Turkic warriors had an effect on the Varangian-Rus retainers in a military-cultural sense. During common guard duties and joint military campaigns, Turkic nomadic warfare techniques were introduced to the Scandinavians. While Vikings originally preferred to fight on foot in closed combat, some textual and archaeological evidence suggests that 'Eastern Vikings' became accustomed to fighting alongside an ally of horsemen and that some of their groups might have acquired nomadic fighting habits including archery or mounted warfare.

Co-operation can also be touched upon to some extent in material culture. A few Viking weapons with typical Eastern embellishments and nomadic weapons with Nordic decorations found in Eastern Europe also imply that ties between some groups might have been quite close.

III. *Culture*. The cultural impact these Turkic economic and military co-operations inflicted upon the Rus' were decisive and triggered changes in their identity. In the middle of the 10th century, Scandinavian analogues of certain features of pagan Rus rituals were still discernible. The prevalence of waterfront locations, holy trees, human and animal sacrifices (especially cocks), the use of weapons and other grave goods suggest that Scandinavians had not yet been fully assimilated in the 10th century. Although these elements were also similar to the habits of the Slavs, contextual evidence hints that a decisive number of the participants in these rituals came from Scandinavian ethno-religious backgrounds. However, changes in ritual practices took place, which gave rise to parallel variations of rites and concepts practiced (perhaps universally) in the steppe and the forest-steppe belts by other ethnic groups as well.

The universal features and striking similarities among contemporary pagan religions helped the Rus' mentally adapt to specific practices and beliefs. In the case of the Slavs, the long co-habitation assured the merge of these cultures on a religious level (for instance the identification of Nordic gods with their Slavic counterparts, and later of course by adopting Christianity).

However, the ongoing interaction between the Rus' and Turkic nomadic tribes also seems to have influenced Rus' ritual behaviour both on the level of practicalities and beliefs. Scandinavians operating in Eastern Europe were not completely unfamiliar with the practical side of these customs, due to the interconnectedness of religions in the Viking Age North, among which Sámi and Finno-Ugric shamanic traditions resembled the habits of the Turkic tribes encountered in Russia.

The Viking Rus' were highly pragmatic people who not only embraced new perspectives, but also adopted local fashions and replaced their genuine objects with local material culture (especially when necessary). Such flexibility in handling objects in a ritual context definitely could have supported the development of miscellaneous practices.

IV. *Communication.* These influences presuppose the existence of fluent communication between the two groups. Apart from hostile aggression, even the most primitive ways of exchanging goods required a general understanding or awareness of the transactions by both parties. It can be stated that despite the distance between the two language groups, communication between Old Norse and Turkic speakers might have been smoother during the 9–11th centuries than previously assumed. Even though loanwords are not discernible between Old Norse and any of the Turkic languages, it has to be noted that several of these Turkic languages are unknown to us, or we possess only a few words from their vocabulary. Regardless of this, the historical situation demanded that speakers of Old Norse and many of the Turkic or Finno-Ugric languages should understand each other fluently. Due to the extensive military and commercial contacts, as well as the occasional co-habitation in various parts of the 'Eastern Way' that Scandinavians travelled around from the 8th century onwards, communication channels between the two ethnic groups developed gradually, but – depending on the level of assimilation of each group – also co-existed.

During the course of the 9th century, the first and foremost communicative channels were provided by interpreters, most probably Slavs who understood the Scandinavians and also the other inhabitants of the region. By the next century, however, the majority of the Scandinavian community in Russia became bilingual which must have resulted in easier communication with the Turks along the Volga and the Dnieper. Turkic groups living alongside the major rivers also practiced the Slavic language which became the 'new' intermediary between the Rus' and the various Turkic tribes. With the course of time, Scandinavian groups spending considerable time in the vicinity or company of various groups with Turkic cultural backgrounds, possibly felt the need to transmit or acknowledge some notions in the vernacular(s). Since according to the written sources, both Vikings and nomads of Turkic origin demonstrated outstanding skills in

acquiring foreign languages, it seems probable that Scandinavians could also learn local languages other than Slavic in Eastern Europe, or that a few 'Turks' were able to assimilate within the Norsemen.

V. *International aspects*. The *austrvegr* united three (or if we count Byzantium, four) different worlds from Scandinavia, through the Slavic lands to the edge of the Turkic sphere. As an intermediary stage of Scandinavian, Slavic and Turkic interaction, Eastern Europe and most importantly the Kievan Rus', brought together the Scandinavian and Turkic regions which seem to have been in tighter connection with each other than previously thought. This is demonstrable in all examined contexts of trade, warfare, religion, customs and communication. Based on all this, it would perhaps prove fruitful for future research to concentrate on these relations in the case of material culture which could shed lights on more specific spheres of interaction.

VI. *Hungarian aspects*. Hungarian-Viking relations can be sorted to two distinctive phases: one preceding and one following the conquest of the Carpathian Basin (895). From the 10th century onwards, the evidence is more abundant, however we can also gain glimpses of the 9th century conditions by comparing the fragmented contemporary data with analogies. During both periods, commercial, military and diplomatic relations were sustained between the Varangian-Rus' and the Magyars, and later the between the Hungarian Kingdom and the Kievan Rus' and Scandinavia. The sources hint towards contact zones between the parties in the following places: commerce is documented in the slave market of Cherson in the Crimea, the Kiev–Upper-Tisza-region trade route, and the Bulgarian and Czech fairs (Pereyaslavets, Prague); joint military presence or undertakings are documented in Kievan campaigns, in the Hungarian and Kievan court due to the exchange of bodyguards, and the Byzantine court. Diplomatic intercourse could occur in the Hungarian court (Walgard) or at the meeting of Quedlinburg. Political connections also belong here such as the retinue members who arrive with foreign princesses (Prince Imre, Andrew I), or the *insignias* like the Saint Stephen sword which was probably manufactured by the Jelling dynasty. A more informal side of Hungarian-Scandinavian relations is when individuals of Hungarian origin co-habit a place with Scandinavians (e.g. Tyrkir, Turchin or Ugrin).

A cardinal question in the dissertation was the presence of Scandinavian retinue members in Hungary. This was especially intriguing for two reasons. Firstly, international Viking studies did not really take this territory into consideration previously when talking about the Viking diaspora. Secondly, we wanted to make the results of Hungarian scholarship to come to accordance and when possible supplement it with new data. The Scandinavian retinue/bodyguard of the first Hungarian rulers was built on dubious hypotheses. Interpretations taken from different disciplines were to validate the theory, however, a comprehensive examination revealed that they

often contradict each other. The scant literary sources, the institution's chronology, the linguistic and toponymic evidence and the archaeological data only match on a small-scale. Based on this, it is not likely that Scandinavian retainers were employed in Hungary in high numbers, although the possibility for Slavicized Rus' could be present as border guards or 'doorkeepers' especially from the 12th century. The earlier retinue organized by Géza and Saint Stephen seems to be an institution organized along Western European and steppe nomadic patterns and was led by German knights. A multinational retinue including Vikings, dwelling with its lord and maintained by feasts and plunder did not likely exist. However, due to the itinerary nature of Hungarian kingship, Scandinavian warriors of some number could follow the king *en route* or provide him with lodgings and defence in prepared 'military stations' along the borders. The large number of Rus retainers is not confirmed, especially if we compare the archaeological material with international examples, such as the Polish or the Russian material. Therefore, I found it most important to highlight that although the historical possibility was always there for Scandinavian warriors to seek employment in the Hungarian court during the Viking Age, we should not assume a continuity in the history of the institution (i.e. the continuous Scandinavian presence in the bodyguard like in the case of the Russian *druzhinas*), but rather it is better to assume the Vikings' presence in Hungary in connection with certain short periods or concrete events which are unfortunately less documented.

Individual cases, for instance, could occur not only in the times of Géza and Saint Stephen, but also in the following periods. Geographically close analogies – like that of the Czech case – supports the idea that Scandinavian individuals could serve in Hungary during the Viking Age. A late example of this could be preserved in two 14th-century sources, the Icelandic *Örvar Odds saga* and the Latin Hungarian chronicle, the *Chronicon Pictum*. None of these sources were studied previously in relation to this phenomenon either in Hungary or abroad. Therefore, we turned to these sources with special care in the dissertation (the relevant passage of *Örvar Odds saga* appears for the first time in Hungarian translation in the dissertation). My argument is that it is not impossible that both sources (of course independently of each other) preserved the memory of Scandinavian soldiers serving in Hungary in the late Viking Age. The traditions developed differently in Hungary and the North and gave inspirations to the literary formation of a mythical Scandinavian hero, whilst its reminiscences were preserved in the Hungarian chronicles of later times.



Registry number: DEENK/305/2019.PL
Subject: PhD Publikációs Lista

Candidate: Csete Katona
Neptun ID: DBDVSP
Doctoral School: Doctoral School of History and Ethnology
MTMT ID: 10053101

List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (2)

1. **Katona, C.:** Viking és nomád eredetű kísérettagok a 9-11. századi kelet-európai udvarokban.
In: Micae mediaevales VII. : Fiala történészek dolgozatai a középkori Magyarországról és Európáról. Szerk.: Farkas Csaba, Ribi András, Veres Kristóf György, ELTE BTK
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9789632849737
2. **Katona, C.:** Határvédő falak a korai középkorban.
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7. **Katona, C.:** Fusion of cultures in tenth century Rus rituals.
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Informational/educational articles (1)

16. **Katona, C.:** Viking testőrségek.

Határtalan Régészet. 2 (1), 56-59, 2017. ISSN: 2416-3074.

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

02 September, 2019

