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## THE MONGOLS IN TRANSDANUBIA (FEBRUARY 1242)

**Abstract:** On the first day of February 1242, the Mongol army crossed the frozen Danube and advanced into the western regions of the Kingdom of Hungary, marking the final phase of their invasion of Central Europe. Drawing on a wide range of written sources and archaeological evidence, this article critically reassesses key aspects of this Mongol campaign, challenging prevailing misconceptions and offering new insights into the scale and strategic objectives of their operations in Transdanubia. Contrary to the frequently repeated opinion that the Mongols' abrupt cessation of military activity in the region was prompted by news of Great Khan Ögödei's death, this was not the case. The study argues that the Transdanubian campaign was a limited military undertaking, primarily intended to facilitate the Mongols' principal war aim: the capture of King Béla IV of Hungary.

**Keywords:** Mongol invasion, Kingdom of Hungary, Transdanubia, Béla IV, Kadan, Székesfehérvár, Esztergom, Pannonhalma, Pécs, Mongol withdrawal.

**Анстракт:** Првог дана фебруара 1242. године, монголска војска прешла је залеђени Дунав и упала у западне крајеве Краљевине Угарске. Била је то завршна фаза њихове инвазије на Средњу Европу. Ослањајући се на широк спектар писаних извора и археолошких сазнања, овај чланак критички преиспитује кључне аспекте монголске војне кампање, доводећи у питање устаљене претпоставке и нудећи нове увиде у размере и стратешке циљеве њихових дејстава у тзв. Задунављу. Насупрот често понављаном мишљењу да је изненадни престанак монголских војних операција у региону био изазван вешћу о смрти великог кана Огедеја, то свакако није био случај. Сагласно закључцима у овој студији, монголска кампања у Задунављу била је војна операција ограниченог дмета, првенствено усмерена на остварење главног монголског ратног циља – заробљавање угарског краља Беле IV.

**Кључне речи:** Монголска инвазија, Угарска краљевина, Задунавље, Бела IV, Кадан, Секешфехервар, Естергом, Панонхалма, Печуј, монголско повлачење.

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“In that year (1241), the Kingdom of Hungary, which had existed for 350 years, was destroyed by the Tatars.”<sup>1</sup> These words, penned by Abbot Hermann of the Bavarian monastery of Niederaltaich, a contemporary witness to the Mongol invasion, vividly capture the scale of the nomadic onslaught, widely regarded as the most devastating military and demographic catastrophe in the history of medieval Hungary. Even according to the conservative modern estimates, the kingdom lost approximately 15–20% of its population during the invasion and its immediate aftermath. The extent of the destruction was so profound that its consequences reverberated for decades.<sup>2</sup>

The Mongol invasion of Hungary and the neighboring lands marked the final stage of their infamous western campaign (1236–1243). Following the conquest of Volga Bulgaria, the peoples of the Pontic steppes, and the subjugation of the Rus’ principalities, the Mongol army, led by Batu, the grandson of Chinggis Khan, together with the renowned general Sübütai, launched an invasion of Central Europe in early 1241 after brief but meticulous preparations. Likely numbering around 40,000 men,<sup>3</sup> the invaders advanced in several columns. The right wing, commanded by the Mongol princes Orda and Baidar, launched an offensive against the Polish territories of Kraków and Sandomierz in February 1241 and secured a decisive victory over Henry II of Silesia and his allies at the Battle of Legnica on 9 April.<sup>4</sup> The central force, led

<sup>1</sup> *Hermannii Altahensis Annales*, ed. Philipp Jaffé, MGH SS, XVII, Hannoverae 1861, 394.

<sup>2</sup> Jenő Szűcs, *Az utolsó Árpádok*, Budapest 2002, 12–16; Gyula Kristó, “A tatárjárás korának demográfiai viszonyai”, in: *Tatárjárás*, ed. Balázs Nagy, Budapest 2003, 499–505. See also: József Laszlovszky et al., “Contextualizing the Mongol Invasion of Hungary in 1241–42”, *The Hungarian Historical Review* 7/3 (2018) 422–432.

<sup>3</sup> Александар Узелац, *Од Урала до Цариграда. Монголски поход на Европу (1236–1243)*, Београд 2023, 171–172. For other assessments of the strength of the Mongol army on the eve of their invasion of Central Europe, ranging from 40,000 to 150,000, see: Д. В. Чернышевский, “Приидоша бесчислены яко пружи”, *Вопросы истории* 2 (1989) 132; Hansgerd Göckenjan, “Der Westfeldzug (1236–1242) aus mongolischer Sicht”, in: *Wahlstatt 1241. Beiträge zur Mongolenschlacht bei Liegnitz und zu ihren Nachwirkungen*, ed. Ulrich Schmilewski, Würzburg 1991, 49; Denis Sinor, “The Mongols in the West”, *Journal of Asian History* 33 (1999) 19; Johannes Gießauf, “Herzog Friedrich II. von Österreich und die Mongolengefahr 1241/42”, in: *Forschungen zur Geschichte des Alpen-Adria-Raumes. Festgabe für em. o. Univ.-Prof. Dr. Othmar Pickl zum 70. Geburtstag*, eds. Herwig Ebner, Paul W. Roth & Ingeborg Wiesflecker-Friedhuber, Graz 1997, [5]; Lajos Négyesi, “A muhi csata, 1241. április 11”, in: *Tatárjárás*, ed. Balázs Nagy, Budapest 2003, 401; Ferdinand Uličný, “Vpády Mongolov na Slovensko v roku 1241”, *Vojenská história* 8/3 (2004) 18–19; János Zsolt Pintér, “Tatárok és magyarok (1241–1242)”, *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 118/3 (2005) 666–667.

<sup>4</sup> On the Mongol campaign in the Polish lands in 1241: Witold Świątosławski, “The Mongol Invasions of Poland in the Thirteenth Century. The Current state of knowledge and perspectives for future research”, in: *The Routledge Handbook of the Mongols and Central-Eastern Europe*, eds. Alexander V. Maiorov & Roman Hautala, London – New York 2021, 82–89;

by Batu and Sübütai, entered Hungary through the Verecke Pass around 10 March.<sup>5</sup> In the final week of the same month, the left wing, divided into two detachments and commanded by Kadan, son of the Great Khan Ögödei, and Böček, advanced into Transylvania further southeast, defeating local forces led by the Transylvanian *vajda* Posa on Easter Day (31 March) and seizing many towns and fortified places by storm.<sup>6</sup>

On 11 April, just two days after Orda and Baidar won the Battle of Legnica, Batu and Sübütai inflicted a devastating defeat on the forces of King Béla IV of Hungary at the Battle of the Sajó River.<sup>7</sup> Although the Mongols also sustained significant losses, their victory was overwhelming, leaving them in control of the central and eastern regions of the Kingdom of Hungary.

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Adam Lubocki, “A lengyelországi mongol támadás és annak morvaországi epilógusa”, in: *Mongol invázió Európa ellen (1236–1242)*, eds. János B. Szabó & Dorottya Uhrin, Budapest 2022, 268–284.

<sup>5</sup> “Magistri Rogerii Epistola in miserabile carmen super destructione regni Hungarie per Tartaros facta = Master Roger’s Epistle to the sorrowful lament upon the destruction of the kingdom of Hungary by the Tatars”, translated and annotated by János M. Bak & Martyn Rady, in: *Anonymus and Master Roger*, Budapest – New York 2010, 160–161 [= *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*]. For the date see also: Gustav Strakosch-Grassman, *Der Einfall der Mongolen in Mitteleuropa in den Jahren 1241 und 1242*, Innsbruck 1893, 68; A. Узелац, *Од Урала до Царугпада*, 191. Cf. J. Zs. Pintér, “Tatárok és magyarok”, 672; Roman Hautala, “The Mongols in Eastern Europe”, in: *The Routledge Handbook of East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages*, ed. Florin Curta, London – New York 2022, 551.

<sup>6</sup> The clash between Posa and the Mongols is recorded only in the so-called Echternach note, a brief, presumably eyewitness account of the Mongol invasion of the eastern parts of the Kingdom of Hungary, *Annales Frisacenses*, ed. Ludwig Weiland, MGH SS XXIV, Hannoverae 1879, 65 (nota); Stephen Pow, “Mongol inroads into Hungary in the Thirteenth Century. Investigating some unexplored avenues”, in: *The Routledge Handbook of the Mongols and Central-Eastern Europe*, eds. Alexander V. Maiorov & Roman Hautala, London – New York 2021, 100–101. The Mongol commander who won the battle was Böček, *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 166–167; *Rashiduddin Fazlullah’s Jami’u’l-tawarikh: Compendium of Chronicles. A History of the Mongols I–II*, English translation and annotation by Wheeler M. Thackston, Cambridge MA 1998–1999, 332. For a general overview of the Mongol invasion of eastern Hungary, see: Zsigmond L. Bordi, “The Mongol Invasion in Eastern Hungary (1241–1242)”, in: *The Mongols in Central Europe: The Profile and Impact of their Thirteenth-Century Invasions*, ed. Balázs Nagy, Budapest 2024, 247–257.

<sup>7</sup> Frequently referred to as the Battle of Muhi, although only the fifteenth-century Pozsony Chronicle locates the engagement near the medieval village of Muhi. Contemporary sources consistently refer to it as the Battle of the Sajó. On the battle, see: L. Négyesi, “A muhi csata, 1241.”, 394–406; J. Zs. Pintér, “Tatárok és magyarok”, 676–682; János B. Szabó, “The Hungarian View of the Battle of Muhi (11 April 1241): A New Interpretation of Historiographic Traditions”, *Zolotoordynskoe Obozrenie* 8/2 (2020) 243–257; József Laszlovszky et al., “Mongol Invasion of Hungary in its Eurasian Context”, *Historical Studies on Central Europe* 3/2 (2023) 188–195; A. Узелац, *Од Урала до Царугпада*, 197–203.

Following widespread devastation, the separate Mongol columns regrouped in central Hungary in May 1241. This was the conclusion of a dynamic and destructive campaign which, over the course of approximately three months, had ravaged southern Poland, Moravia, Upper Hungary, central Hungary, and Transylvania. During the summer, the Mongol forces encamped in the pastures along the Danube and Tisza rivers.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the conquerors established a temporary occupational administration, imposing heavy taxation on the surviving local population in the central and eastern regions of the Hungarian kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

At that point, the western regions of the Kingdom of Hungary, known as Transdanubia, comprising the territories south and west of the Danube River and north of the Drava river, had remained untouched by the Mongol invasion. Consequently, the region became a refuge for many individuals displaced from the devastated eastern parts of the kingdom.<sup>10</sup> However, in early 1242, Transdanubia itself became a target when the Mongols crossed the frozen Danube and briefly extended their campaign into the area. The Mongol campaign in Transdanubia remains among the least-studied aspects of their invasion of Central Europe. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including the contemporary account of the Italian cleric Master Roger, archdeacon in the diocese of Várad (present-day Oradea, Romania); the narrative of Thomas, archdeacon of Spalato (Split, Croatia); and the writings of the Persian scholar and historian Rashīd al-Dīn, alongside documentary records and archaeological evidence, this article seeks to examine these events in detail, analysing their background, strategic objectives, and broader consequences.

### **On the Eve of the Mongol Advance Across the Danube**

Before turning our attention to the Transdanubian campaign, it is necessary to briefly review the key events that occurred between the Battle of the Sajó River and the Mongol crossing of the Danube. King Béla IV managed to escape the battlefield near the Sajó thanks to the self-sacrifice of several loyal men<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Rashiduddin Fazlullah's Jami'u't-tawarikh*, 332.

<sup>9</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 206–211.

<sup>10</sup> For the insufficiently researched phenomenon of refugees and displaced population during the Mongol invasion of Hungary see: James Ross Sweeney, “‘Spurred on by the Fear of Death’: Refugees and Displaced Populations During the Mongol Invasion of Hungary”, in: *Nomadic Diplomacy, Destruction and Religion from the Pacific to the Adriatic*, eds. Michael Gervers & Wayne Schlepp, Toronto 1994, 34–62.

<sup>11</sup> As evidenced by several documents issued by the Hungarian royal chancery in the aftermath of the Mongol invasion. See: *Codex Diplomaticus Hungariae ecclesiasticus ac civilis*, IV/1, ed.

and fled northward through densely forested regions, aiming to evade the pursuing Mongol forces. According to Master Roger, once he had sufficiently distanced himself, the king turned westward to reunite with his wife, Queen Maria, who was in the borderlands between Hungary and Austria.<sup>12</sup>

During his flight, Béla IV passed through Nyitra (Nitra, Slovakia) and Pozsony (Bratislava, Slovakia),<sup>13</sup> before receiving an offer of asylum from his western neighbour, Duke Frederick II of Babenberg (1230–1246). The king accepted the offer, unaware that Frederick intended to exploit his misfortunes to settle their prior disputes. Consequently, the duke temporarily detained the Hungarian monarch (probably in Hainburg an der Donau) refusing to release him until he had extorted a substantial ransom in coin, as well as three frontier “counties” (probably Moson, Sopron, and Vas).<sup>14</sup> However, Frederick failed to secure control over these territories due to local resistance,<sup>15</sup> but also the incursion of Mongol raiding parties into parts of Lower Austria north of the Danube in the late spring of 1241, which engaged his forces for the following couple of months.<sup>16</sup>

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Georgius Fejér, Budae 1829, 286, 288, 405; IV/2, 207 [in further text CDH]; *Árpádkori új okmánytár. Codex diplomaticus Arpadianus continuatus* VII, ed. Gusztav Wenzel et al., Pest 1869, 321–322, no. 223 [in further text ÁÚO] (=Az Árpád-házi királyok okleveleinek kritikai jegyzéke. *Regesta regum stirpis Arpadianae critico-diplomatica* I/2, ed. Imre Szentpétery. Budapest 1927, nos. 744, 748, 827, 956, 987 [in further text Reg. Arp.]).

<sup>12</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 182–183, 192–193.

<sup>13</sup> Nyitra: ÁÚO VII, 226, no. 151 (=Reg. Arp. I/2, no. 858); Pozsony: *Monumenta Ecclesiae Strigoniensis* I, ed. Ferdinand Knausz, Strigonii 1874, 346–347, no. 435 (in further text MES) (=Reg. Arp. I/2, no. 740). See also: Gustav Strakosch-Grassmann, *Der Einfall der Mongolen in Mitteleuropa in den Jahren 1241 und 1242*, Innsbruck 1893, 98–99; F. Uličný, “Vpády Mongolov na Slovensko”, 10–11.

<sup>14</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 192–195. The Hungarian king’s flight to the Duke of Austria following the battle with the Mongols is also mentioned by Thomas of Spalato and in the so-called *Chronica regia Coloniensis*. However, neither source refers to the king’s temporary loss of liberty. See: *Thomae Archidiaconi Spalatensis Historia Salonitanorum atque Spalatinorum pontificum* / Archdeacon Thomas of Split, *History of the Bishops of Salona and Split*, Latin text by Olga Perić, edited, translated and annotated by Damir Karbić, Mirjana Matijević-Sokol & James Ross Sweeney, Budapest 2006, 272–273; *Annales s. Pantaleonis Coloniensis*, ed. Hermann Cardauns, MGH SS, XXII, Hannoverae 1872, 535. For the identification of the fortress in which Béla IV was held: Эмма Ледерер, “Татарское нашествие на Венгрию в связи с международными событиями эпохи”, *Acta historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 2/1–2 (1953) 12. For the identification of the three Hungarian counties that Béla IV was forced to cede to Frederick II: J. Gießauf, “Herzog Friedrich II. von Österreich”, [14].

<sup>15</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 192–195.

<sup>16</sup> J. Gießauf, “Herzog Friedrich II. von Österreich”, [23–25]; A. Узелац, *Од Урала до Царугпада*, 210–215; Stephen Pow, “Ivo of Narbonne’s Account of a Mongol Attack on Austria: Fact or Fiction?”, in: *The Mongols in Central Europe: The Profile and Impact of their Thirteenth-Century Invasions*, ed. Balázs Nagy, Budapest 2024, 105–139.

In the meantime, having regained his freedom, Béla IV made his way to Segesd, where he was joined by Queen Maria and Stephen of the Bánca kindred, Bishop of Vác.<sup>17</sup> He subsequently proceeded to Zagreb, where, on 18 May, he issued letters, urgent appeals for assistance against the Mongols, entrusting the Bishop of Vác with their delivery to Pope Gregory IX and Emperor Frederick II Hohenstaufen in Italy.<sup>18</sup>

The ongoing conflict between the pope and the emperor rendered them indifferent to the early rumours of the Mongol advance, at least until Stephen Bánca arrived the following month with alarming reports.<sup>19</sup> News of Hungary's catastrophe prompted a temporary pause in their hostilities. Yet, Béla IV's hopes for meaningful aid and the formation of a joint Christian front against the Mongol invaders proved unfounded. Shortly after issuing appeals for a crusade against the Mongols, Pope Gregory IX died on 22 August. His successor, Celestine IV, elected under imperial pressure on 25 October, passed away just seventeen days later.<sup>20</sup> As a result, authority in Rome devolved to the College of Cardinals, which remained deadlocked for nearly two years, unable to elect a new pontiff. Meanwhile, Emperor Frederick II responded to Béla IV's plea by issuing letters to European courts, warning of the Mongol threat and advocating the organisation of a crusade in German lands.<sup>21</sup> However,

<sup>17</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 194–195. On Stephen Bánca see: Gergely Kiss, *Dél Magyarországtól Itáliáig. Bánca nembeli István (1205 k.–1270) váci püspök, esztergomi érsek, az első magyarországi bíboros életpályája*, Pécs 2015.

<sup>18</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 194–195. For Béla IV's letter to the pope: *Vetera monumenta historica Hungariam sacram illustrantia* I, ed. Augustin Theiner, Osnabrück 1968<sup>2</sup>, 182, no. 335. Although Béla's letter to the emperor has not been preserved, its contents, including the king's proposal to submit to the emperor and acknowledge his overlordship in exchange for assistance against the Tatars, are recorded in several sources: *Ryccardi de Sancto Germano notarii Chronica*, ed. Carlo Alberto Garufi, Bologna 1938, 209; *Annales s. Pantaleonis Coloniensis*, 535; *Matthaei Parisiensis monachi Sancti Albani Chronica Majora* IV, ed. Henry Richards Luard, London 1877, 298. See also: Peter Jackson, "The Crusade Against the Mongols (1241)", *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 42/1 (1991) 12–14; Attila Bárány, "A tatárjárás híre Nyugat-Európában", *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 133/3 (2020) 491–492.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Bánca first met with the emperor, likely in early June near Fano, where the emperor was staying on his way to Spoleto (cf. *Ryccardi de Sancto Germano notarii Chronica*, 209). He subsequently arrived in Rome in the second half of the month, where he met with the pope. For a detailed reconstruction of his itinerary, see A. Bárány, "A tatárjárás híre Nyugat-Európában", 489–491.

<sup>20</sup> *Matthaei Parisiensis Chronica Majora* IV, 162, 164–165, 172; *Annales s. Pantaleonis Coloniensis*, 536; A. Bárány, "A tatárjárás híre Nyugat-Európában", 494; Brett E. Whalen, *The two Powers. The Papacy, the Empire and the Struggle for Sovereignty in the Thirteenth Century*, Philadelphia 2019, 122–126.

<sup>21</sup> *Matthaei Parisiensis Chronica Majora* IV, 112–119; *Historia diplomatica Friderici Secundi* V/2, eds. Jean-Louis Alphonse Huillard-Bréholles, Paris 1859, 1148–1154, 1165–1167; A. Bárány,

beyond these diplomatic efforts, he took no further action to provide direct military support to the beleaguered Hungarian king.

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Béla IV's initiative was not limited to the pope and the emperor. He also sent a plea for assistance to King Louis IX of France.<sup>22</sup> In addition, he entered into correspondence with the emperor's son, Conrad IV, King of Germany, warning him that he had received intelligence suggesting the Mongols intended to use the winter to launch a new campaign against the German lands.<sup>23</sup> The exact date of Béla's letter to Conrad is not recorded, but it was likely sent during the summer of 1241, when preparations for a crusade against the Mongols were underway – plans that, despite the widespread fear of a continued Mongol advance, ultimately never materialized.<sup>24</sup>

The king also sent another embassy to Rome that summer; however, it never reached its destination, as his envoys, Lucas, the provost of Győr, and Archdeacon Stephen, drowned in a storm on the Adriatic Sea. A third appeal to the Curia was made on 19 January 1242, from Čazma, where the king was at the time. In this letter, carried by Dominican monks, Béla IV briefly recounted the unfortunate fate of the previous mission and pleaded with the Roman Curia to influence the initiation of a crusade and to mediate with the Venetians, urging them to send their renowned crossbowmen to guard the river crossings. He warned that if aid did not arrive by mid-Lent and the Mongols crossed the Danube, it would threaten not only the still-untouched parts of

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“A tatárjárás híre Nyugat-Európában”, 494–495. The crusade against the Mongols in German lands began independently as a local initiative before the emperor's appeal, as early as March/April 1241, and was officially proclaimed in mid-May. On this, see: P. Jackson, “The Crusade Against the Mongols”, 1–18.

<sup>22</sup> The only trace of Béla's appeal to the French king for assistance during the Mongol invasion is recorded in a letter from the King of Hungary to Pope Innocent IV in 1247: *Vetera monumenta historica* I, 231, no. 440; J. Gießauf, “Herzog Friedrich II. von Österreich”, [15].

<sup>23</sup> *Die goldene Chronik von Hohenschwangau der Burg der Welfen, der Hohenstauffen und der Scheyren. Anderte Abtheilung: Die grosse Mongolische Fluth*, ed. Joseph von Hormayr von Hortenburg, München 1842, 65, no. 1 (=ÁÚO II, 126–127, no. 71). Béla's letter to Conrad is preserved in the so-called Ottobeuren collection of documents related to the Mongol invasion, Matthew Coulter, “Patterns of communication during the 1241 Mongol invasion of Europe: insights from the Ottobeuren letter collection”, *Journal of Medieval History* 48/4 (2022) 496–523.

<sup>24</sup> It is undated, and some scholars believe it was sent simultaneously with the letters to the pope and the emperor carried by bishop of Vác (cf. A. Bárány, “A tatárjárás híre Nyugat-Európában”, 495). Nonetheless, considering that it mentions the Mongol plans to cross the Danube, it is more likely to have been written during the summer or early autumn. A. Maiorov dated it to July 1241: Александр В. Майоров, “Завершающий этап Западного похода монголов: военная сила и тайная дипломатия (1)”, *Золотоордынское обозрение* 1 (2015) 71.

Hungary but the entire Christendom.<sup>25</sup> From Rome, the College of Cardinals sent only words of consolation, promising that assistance would arrive as soon as a new pope was elected.<sup>26</sup> No support came from the Serenissima either. The Venetian chronicler Andrea Dandolo notes that his compatriots, at the very least, conducted themselves honourably by refraining from exploiting the Hungarian king's misfortunes to his detriment.<sup>27</sup>

In the autumn of 1241, Béla IV realised that no help would come, at least not in time. Anticipating a new Mongol attack over the Danube, he first ensured the safety of his family. Queen Maria and their two-year-old son, Stephen, were sent to the Adriatic shore, under the protection of his trusted men, where they would remain in safety until the danger had passed. The king also took care to secure the relics of St. Stephen, the first Christian king of Hungary, as well as the treasures of numerous churches, which were sent to the coastal regions along with the queen and the heir to the throne.<sup>28</sup> Finally, he turned his attention to the nobles in his retinue whose estates had been occupied by the Mongols. To provide for their upkeep, the king borrowed 800 marks of silver from the treasury of the Monastery of St. Martin in Nemetújvár (Güssing, Austria), a sum he would repay only several years later.<sup>29</sup>

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The king was in a dire position, and the situation in Transdanubia was extremely precarious. On the eve of the new Mongol offensive, expected to take place during the winter, there was no royal army capable of resisting the invaders. In such conditions, the organisation of the defence largely fell to the local administration and ecclesiastical circles.

However, the respite in hostilities during the summer and autumn of 1241 provided western Hungary with the necessary time to prepare for this challenge. A joint letter from the local prelates, sent to Rome on 2 February

<sup>25</sup> *Historia diplomatica Friderici Secundi* VI/2, 902–904. On this letter, see also: G. Strakosch-Grassmann, *Der Einfall der Mongolen*, 151–152; Э. Ледерер, “Татарское нашествие на Венгрию”, 15–16.

<sup>26</sup> Wilhelm Wattenbach, “Zum Mongolensturm”, *Forschungen zur Deutschen Geschichte* 12 (1872) 643–645.

<sup>27</sup> Andrea Dandolo, *Chronica per extensum descripta: 46–1280*, ed. Ester Pastorello, Bologna 1938, 299.

<sup>28</sup> *Thomae Archidiaconi Spalatensis Historia*, 286–289; J. R. Sweeney, “Spurred on by the Fear of Death”, 47–48. For the king's confidants, Michael and Herbord, who accompanied the queen and their son: CDH, IV/2, 32; ÁÚO VII, 158, no. 104; 263, no. 183 (=Reg. Arp. I/2, nos. 779, 882).

<sup>29</sup> CDH, IV/3, 117 (=Reg. Arp. I/3, no. 1340); See also: G. Strakosch-Grassmann, *Der Einfall der Mongolen*, 161.



1242, and carried by Master Solomon of the chapter church in Székesfehérvár, indicates that Székesfehérvár, Esztergom, Veszprém, Tihany, Győr, Pannonhalma, Moson, Sopron, Vasvár, Güssing, Zalavár, and Léka (Lockenhaus, Austria) on the right bank, as well as Pozsony, Nyitra, Komárom (Komárno, Slovakia), Fülek (Filakovo, Slovakia), and Abaújvár on the left bank of the Danube, had been fortified and were ready to resist the attack.<sup>30</sup> These fortified places became temporary refuges for the surrounding local population, as evidenced by the case of Komárom.<sup>31</sup> After the letter to Rome was completed, Uros, the abbot of St. Martin's Abbey in Pannonhalma, entrusted its bearer, Master Solomon, with two of his own personal letters to the Roman Curia, written the following day (3 February), reporting on the devastation suffered by churches and monasteries in Hungary and urgently requesting much-needed aid without delay.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, despite these appeals for help, the lands beyond the Danube faced the Mongol storm alone, without even their king, who, on hearing the first reports of the Mongols crossing the Danube, fled with his retinue to Dalmatia.

The critical days arrived around Christmas of 1241, when the Danube froze over. The early rumours about the Mongols crossing the Danube reached Austria in early January, although they turned out to be false, at least for the time being.<sup>33</sup> Pál of the Geregye kindred, serving as judge royal, was in charge of the defence on the right bank of the river.<sup>34</sup> His forces exchanged arrows

<sup>30</sup> György Györffy, "Újabb adatok a tatárjárás történetéhez", *Történelmi Szemle* 33/1–2 (1991) 87: 'Nos vero quamplures et competenter armati in castris de Alba, de Strigonio, de Vesprimio, de Tyhon, de Jaurino, de Monte Sacro Pannonie, de Mussunio, de Supprinio, de Ferreo Castro, de Novo Castro, de Zala, de Leuca et aliis castris et locis citra Danubium munitis, ultra vero de Posonio, de Nitria, de Camarun, de Philek, de Novo Castro Abe et aliis castris et locis similiter munitis...'

<sup>31</sup> CDH, VII/3, 26 (=Reg. Arp. I/2, no. 810).

<sup>32</sup> Gy. Györffy, "Újabb adatok a tatárjárás történetéhez", 88.

<sup>33</sup> In the letter, probably authored by Abbot Felix of the Scottish Monastery (Schottenstift) in Vienna and dated 4 January 1242, which is preserved in the work of the English chronicler Matthew Paris, the Mongol crossing of the frozen Danube on Christmas Day is mentioned (*Matthaei Parisiensis Chronica Majora* VI, 79). For the identification of the letter's author, see Zsuzsana Papp Reed, *Matthew Paris on the Mongol Invasion in Europe*, Turnhout 2022, 298. While some modern scholars accept the claim that the Mongols crossed the Danube on Christmas Day at face value, the fact that King Béla IV was still in Slavonia at the beginning of the second half of January 1242 clearly shows that it was an unfounded rumour.

<sup>34</sup> ÁÚO VII, 283, no. 200 (=Reg. Arp. I/2, no. 901): 'Item in generali vastacione Tartarorum, quando communiter et nobiles et populares Regni nostri pro conseruacione vite sue ante faciem eorum fugiebant, zelo fidelitatis accensus, imo potius virtute propria animatus, ad Danubium cum copiosa multitudine armatorum se preparando, tamdiu transitum prohibuit Tartarorum varijs fortune casibus intrepide se subiiciendo, donec ab eorum impetu quisque sane poterat se saluare.' Pál Geregye is attested as judge royal for the first time in late September

with the attackers on the opposite shore while simultaneously trying to break the ice to keep the river navigable and prevent the Mongol cavalry from crossing. However, after an exceptionally cold wave struck and the river froze completely, the efforts of the defenders proved futile. As Master Roger attests, uncertain whether the ice was thick enough to support them, the Mongols were initially unwilling to risk a blind crossing and instead resorted to deception once more. They released herds of horses and cattle to roam freely and waited for the Hungarians to cross the river, capturing them and leading them back across. Only after this, convinced that the crossing was safe, did the Mongols rush across the frozen Danube into the still-untouched regions of Transdanubia.<sup>35</sup> According to the report of Thomas of Spalato and the previously mentioned letter from the prelates of western Hungary, the Mongols' passage over the frozen Danube took place on 1 February 1242.<sup>36</sup>

### The Mongol Campaign in Transdanubia

As evidenced by the letter from the prelates of western Hungary, the Mongol crossing of the Danube occurred near Pest (Portus Danubii).<sup>37</sup> The first city to bear the brunt of their assault was Óbuda, which was captured and burned, apparently without resistance.<sup>38</sup>

According to Master Roger, after crossing the Danube, the Mongols split into two groups.<sup>39</sup> The first, led by Kadan, gave chase to the Hungarian king

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1241, ÁÜO VII, 116, no. 74 (=Reg. Arp. I/2, no. 710). On him see also: Attila Zsoldos, *Magyarország világi archontológiája 1000–1301*, Budapest 2011, 30, 341.

<sup>35</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 214–215. See also: Andrea Kiss, “Weather Events during the First Tatar Invasion in Hungary (1241–42)”, *Acta Geographica Universitatis Szegediensis* 37 (2000) 150–151.

<sup>36</sup> According to Thomas, the Mongol crossing of the Danube took place “as soon as January had passed”, i.e., at the very beginning of February, *Thomae Archidiaconi Spalatensis Historia*, 288–289. Meanwhile, the letter from the prelates in western Hungary, sent from Székesfehérvár to Rome on 2 February 1242, states that the Tatars had already crossed the river by that time. See Gy. Györffy, “Újabb adatok a tatárjárás történetéhez”, 87. Based on this evidence, it can be concluded that the most probable date of the Mongol crossing was 1 February. The news would have taken only a day on horseback to reach Székesfehérvár (cf. *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 160–161), prompting the swift dispatch of the letter to Rome. On the date of the Mongol crossing of the Danube cf. D. Sinor, “The Mongols in the West”, 17; R. Hautala, “The Mongols in Eastern Europe”, 552; János B. Szabó, “A magyarországi hadjárat második fázisa”, in: *Mongol invázió Európa ellen (1236–1242)*, eds. János B. Szabó & Dorottya Uhrin, Budapest 2022, 334.

<sup>37</sup> Gy. Györffy, “Újabb adatok a tatárjárás történetéhez”, 85, 87; A. Kiss, “Weather Events during the First Tatar Invasion”, 151.

<sup>38</sup> *Thomae Archidiaconi Spalatensis Historia*, 288–289.

<sup>39</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 216–217.

and reached Székesfehérvár.<sup>40</sup> This unofficial royal capital, also the coronation and burial site of the Árpád dynasty rulers, was situated on an island surrounded by marshes, making access to the city difficult, in particular “because the snow and ice was about to melt”.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Székesfehérvár was well fortified and defended by a “Latin garrison” made up of townspeople of Western European origin who possessed effective defensive engines.<sup>42</sup> Faced with insurmountable natural obstacles and the defenders’ determined resistance, Kadan abandoned the siege after a few days and withdrew, though not before plundering the unfortified suburbs outside the city walls.<sup>43</sup>

As documentary and archaeological evidence further indicates, Kadan then followed the road to Veszprém, located on the northern edge of Lake Balaton. The Mongol destruction of a village of Beren, near the lake (*villa Beren iuxta Balatinum per insolentem rabiem Tartarorum depopulatam*), is documented in a letter from the bishop of Veszprém dated 1256.<sup>44</sup> From there, Kadan advanced toward Kalnik in present-day Croatia; a charter issued by King Béla IV in early June 1243 refers to a successful defence of the Kalnik fortress, led by Philip of the Ákos kindred, against the Mongols.<sup>45</sup> While it is typically assumed that the Mongols attempted to storm Kalnik, it is also plausible that the Mongol commander merely passed near this stronghold en route. A possible Mongol presence in the area of nearby Koprivnica is suggested by an intriguing archaeological find at Torčec–Cirkvišće. There, a dog’s head was discovered, carefully separated from its body and stored in a ceramic pot, perhaps for ritual purposes.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the general route of Kadan’s movement

<sup>40</sup> *Thomae Archidiaconi Spalatensis Historia*, 288–289. Thomas claims that Kadan was the Mongol commander who burned Buda, advanced to Esztergom, and then proceeded to Székesfehérvár. However, as Master Roger attests, it was another Mongol force, not commanded by Kadan, that moved toward Esztergom, *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 214–215. Unlike Roger, who describes the activities of two Mongol detachments in Transdanubia, Thomas’s account only mentions the movements of Kadan. However, he can be trusted when discussing Kadan’s approach to Székesfehérvár, as this aligns with other information regarding Kadan’s pursuit of King Béla, as we will further examine in the text.

<sup>41</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 218–219.

<sup>42</sup> *Thomae Archidiaconi Spalatensis Historia*, 290–291. This community, under the name ‘Latini Albenses’, is recorded in Székesfehérvár even before the Mongol invasion; see ÁÚO I, 174, no. 96 (=Reg. Arp. I/1, no. 368); cf. *Thomae Archidiaconi Spalatensis Historia*, 290, n. 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 218–219; *Thomae Archidiaconi Spalatensis Historia*, 290–291.

<sup>44</sup> CDH, IV/2, 403.

<sup>45</sup> CDH, IV/1, 288–289 (=Reg. Arp., I/2, no. 748)

<sup>46</sup> Tajana Sekelj Ivančan et al., “Slučajni nalaz lubanje Canis familiaris položene u srednjovjekovnu keramičku posudu s lokaliteta Torčec – Cirkvišće kraj Koprivnice”, *Prilozi Instituta za arheologiju u Zagrebu* 15–16 (1998) 61–79. Similar findings of animal sacrifice, interpreted by archaeologists as indicators of Mongol shamanistic rituals and practices, have also been

during the first half of February, in pursuit of the Hungarian king, can be reconstructed as follows: Székesfehérvár–Veszprém–Kálnik (Koprivnica?), and from there toward Dalmatia.

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The goal of the second Mongol group, which moved upstream along the river's left bank after crossing the Danube, was Esztergom.<sup>47</sup> Situated at the bend of the Danube, northwest of Pest and Óbuda, Esztergom was Hungary's main ecclesiastical centre and an important economic hub. Master Roger noted that it "surpassed all and every city in Hungary".<sup>48</sup>

The city was densely populated and well fortified, and its inhabitants had reinforced its defenses with ditches, ramparts, and wooden towers in anticipation of the Mongol crossing of the Danube. The Mongols resorted to a siege. Thirty siege engines, protected by an improvised wall made of bundled twigs constructed by Mongol prisoners of war, bombarded the city day and night, eventually breaching the wooden walls and filling the ditches with earth. Realising they could not hold back the attackers at the outer defences, the defenders, "Hungarians, Franks, and Lombards", resorted to a desperate measure. According to Master Roger, they deliberately set fire to the outer town, buried their belongings and valuables, and retreated to the city's palaces, attempting to mount a final defence from there. Enraged at being deprived of plunder, the Mongols, after capturing the palaces, massacred nearly everyone they found inside. Roger claims that the Mongols "fried people alive, like pigs". Barely fifteen people, he adds, survived the massacre.<sup>49</sup> This statement was presumably exaggerated, but the city undoubtedly suffered severe and exemplary destruction. Indirect evidence includes traces of burned houses and workshops, a skeleton, and numismatic finds uncovered in archaeological excavations from mid-13th-century layers.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, there is no reason to doubt another grim detail provided by Master Roger, attesting to deliberate

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discovered at several sites in Hungary (Orosháza-Bonum, Bugac-Pétermonostora, Dunaföldvár-Ló-hegy), Attila Gyucha, Wayne E. Lee & Zoltan Rózsa, "The Mongol Campaign in Hungary, 1241–1242: The Archaeology and History of Nomadic Conquest and Massacre", *Journal of Military History* 83/4 (2019) 1061–1062.

<sup>47</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 214–215; cf. *Thomae Archidiaconi Spalatensis Historia*, 288–289.

<sup>48</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 214–215.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, 216–219.

<sup>50</sup> László Szende, "Esztergom kézművessége a tatárjárás idején", in: *Tiszteletkőr – Történeti tanulmányok Draskóczy István egyetemi tanár 60. születésnapjára*, eds. Gábor Mikó, Bence Péterfi & András Vadas, Budapest 2012, 245–250; A. Gyucha, W. E. Lee & Z. Rózsa, "The Mongol Campaign in Hungary", 1044.

Mongol cruelty: around three hundred captured women were brought before the Mongol commander who had led the siege. Though they pleaded for mercy and promised to serve him, he ordered their jewellery and valuables stripped from them, after which they were all beheaded.<sup>51</sup>

It should be noted that the name of the Mongol commander who led the attack on the city is not recorded in our sources. Master Roger refers to him only as a “grand prince” (*magnus princeps*). Notably, our chief source was familiar with the names of the Chinggisid leaders who spearheaded the Mongol invasion of Hungary, so the omission of a name in this case suggests that the commander was not a Chinggisid, but rather an anonymous commander (*tümen-noion*), dispatched by Batu and Sübütai.<sup>52</sup>

The most fortified part of Esztergom, the citadel, remained beyond the attackers’ reach. Its defence was led by Count Simeon, an Aragonese by origin, who had faithfully served both Kings Andrew II and Béla IV, and likely accompanied the latter at the Battle of the Sajó River.<sup>53</sup> During the defence of the Esztergom citadel, Simeon commanded a large force of crossbowmen (*multis balistariis*), who proved highly effective in combat. Realising that an assault on the citadel was futile, the attackers had no choice but to withdraw and move on.<sup>54</sup> When Béla IV issued charters on 24 January 1243, granting rewards to Simeon and his brother Bertram, the defence of the Esztergom citadel was specifically highlighted among their merits.<sup>55</sup>

From Esztergom, this Mongol detachment advanced westward to the fortified Abbey of St. Martin in Pannonhalma, near Győr, one of the oldest

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<sup>51</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 216–219.

<sup>52</sup> Although some historians have suggested that the siege of Esztergom was personally commanded by Batu (cf. S. Pow, “Mongol inroads into Hungary”, 106–107), it is implausible that Master Roger would have failed to name the nominal leader of the Mongol invasion explicitly had Batu indeed been present. Furthermore, while the Mongol commander at Esztergom is referred to by Roger merely as the “grand prince” (*magnus princeps*), Batu is described using significantly more elevated epithets, such as “King of Kings” (*rex regum*) and “Great Lord” (*maior dominus*), *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 162–163, 164–165, 168–169, 170–171.

<sup>53</sup> According to the 14<sup>th</sup>-century so-called Hungarian Illustrated Chronicle, Simeon and his brothers arrived in Hungary in the retinue of Queen Yolande of Courtenay, who became the second wife of Hungarian King Andrew II, *Chronica de gestis Hungarorum e Codice Picto Saec. XIV. The Illuminated Chronicle. Chronicle of the Deeds of the Hungarians from the Fourteenth-Century Illuminated Codex*, Edited and Translated by János M. Bak & László Veszprémy, Budapest – New York 2018, 92–93. Simeon is first recorded in Hungarian documents in 1221, A. Zsoldos, *Magyarország világi archontológiája*, 134, 352.

<sup>54</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 218–219.

<sup>55</sup> MES I, 345, no. 433. (=Reg. Arp. I/2, no. 732)

and wealthiest religious centres in this part of Europe.<sup>56</sup> Here as well, the Mongols had reason to expect rich spoils. Once again, they encountered unexpectedly strong resistance from the defenders, personally led by Abbot Uros.<sup>57</sup> The natural position of Pannonhalma, situated atop a hill dominating the northwestern part of the Pannonian Plain, undoubtedly played a significant role in the successful defence. The precise details of the fighting remain unknown, except that, according to Master Roger, the Mongol detachment was “suddenly called back” immediately after the failed assault.<sup>58</sup> The furthest western reach of the advance of this Mongol group was thus the area around Pannonhalma and Győr, with the former successfully withstanding the Mongol attack and the latter never even coming under assault.<sup>59</sup>

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The events surrounding the Mongol sieges at Székesfehérvár, Esztergom, and Pannonhalma, in which two Mongol detachments, led by Kadan and the unknown commander participated, are well documented in the accounts of Master Roger and Thomas of Spalato. However, there is compelling evidence for the presence of a third Mongol detachment involved in the Transdanubian campaign, constituting the left wing of the invading army. Although the movements of this group are not recorded in the narrative sources, their presence can be inferred from documentary records and archaeological evidence, which provide valuable insights for reconstructing their trajectory.

A first reference to their actions appears in the destruction of the Carthusian Monastery of St. Nicholas in Ercsi, south of Buda, as mentioned in a letter from Pope Innocent IV in 1253.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, the archaeological site at Dunaföldvár (Dunaföldvár-Ló-hegy) provides evidence of destruction that can undoubtedly be linked to Mongol actions in early 1242. At this site, in addition

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<sup>56</sup> According to a census of its lands conducted three years before the Mongol invasion, the abbey owned over ninety villages across ten counties, as well as more than 2,200 dependent households, Beatrix F. Romhányi, “The Ecclesiastic Economy in Medieval Hungary”, in: *The Economy of Medieval Hungary*, eds. József Laszlovszky et al., Leiden – Boston 2018, 324.

<sup>57</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 218–219.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>59</sup> Another location, near Győr, a village named Byka, is mentioned as abandoned and devoid of inhabitants since the time of the Mongol invasion in a charter of King Ladislaus IV from 1287, ÁÚO IV, 293, no. 187. Strakosch-Grassmann used this site as the furthest known point of the Mongol incursion in the region, G. Strakosch-Grassmann, *Der Einfall der Mongolen*, 172.

<sup>60</sup> *Vetera monumenta historica* I, 217, no. 408. On the monastery in Ercsi: Beáta Vida, “‘Monasterium de Erche situm in insula loci secreti’: Ercsi monostorának története”, in: *Műhelyszemináriumról dolgozatok* I, eds. Szilvia Kovács & Éva Révész, Szeged 2013, 181–197.

to incomplete skeletons of murdered people and domestic animals, the well-preserved skeletons of two women and two children, a boy and a girl, were discovered. It appears that they had attempted to hide from the attackers but perished from asphyxiation amid the fire. Beside the boy's skeleton, a coin from the early reign of Béla IV was found, dispelling any doubt that this settlement had indeed fallen victim to the Mongols.<sup>61</sup> This is a unique site on the right bank of the Danube, while about a dozen similar sites, destroyed by the Mongols, have been uncovered in recent decades to the east of the river.

The furthest confirmed point of this Mongol detachment's penetration was Pécs, a regional centre and episcopal seat. Its devastation is suggested in a charter from the Pécs Chapter, dated 1248, which mentions that old donation charters had been lost due to the general chaos of the Tatar invasion, necessitating the issuance of new ones.<sup>62</sup> While the charter does not explicitly mention the city's destruction, a later document from the Bishop of Pécs, dated 1297, refers to the Tatars burning a church in the nearby Pauline monastery of Ürög (...quod cum ecclesia beatae virginis de Ireg per insultum gentis tartaricae fuisset concremata).<sup>63</sup> Several coin hoards discovered in and around Pécs can also be linked to these Mongol actions, confirming that the city and its vicinity were ravaged during the Transdanubian campaign.<sup>64</sup>

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On the preceding pages, an attempt has been made to reconstruct the general course of the Mongol actions in Transdanubia. Following established strategic patterns, the invaders were divided into three columns. After crossing the Danube near Pest and the sack of Óbuda, the central column, led by Kadan, advanced along the route from Óbuda through Székesfehérvár, Veszprém, and Kalnik, ultimately heading toward Dalmatia, with the primary objective of capturing the Hungarian king. The right wing, commanded by an unnamed

<sup>61</sup> Magdolna Szilágyi, "Perished Árpadian-age village at Dunaföldvár", *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 63 (2012) 155–179. For a short summary: Mária Wolf, " Régészeti adatok a tatárjárás történetéhez", *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 143 (2018) 120–121; A. Gyucha, W. E. Lee & Z. Rózsa, "The Mongol Campaign in Hungary", 1054–1055.

<sup>62</sup> ÁÜO VII, 273, no. 192.

<sup>63</sup> *Hazai oklevéltár 1234–1536*, eds. Imre Nagy, Farkas Deák & Gyula Nagy, Budapest 1879, 159. no. 151. Although the document dates from more than half a century later, there is little doubt that it refers to the events of February 1242, as during the so-called Second Tatar Invasion of Hungary (1284–1285), the attackers did not cross the Danube.

<sup>64</sup> Balázs Nagy, "Tatárjárás kori pénzleletek Pécsről", in: *Fiatal Középkoros Régészek IV. Konferenciájának Tanulmánykötete*, ed. Máté Varga, Kaposvár 2013, 227–238; M. Wolf, "Régészeti adatok a tatárjárás történetéhez", 121.

leader, followed the Danube, advancing upstream toward Esztergom and subsequently Pannonhalma. The left wing moved southward along the Danube, leaving a trail of destruction at the Carthusian Monastery of Ercsi and Dunaföldvár, and continued its advance as far as Pécs.

The exact timing of the withdrawal of the right and left wings of the Mongol army from Transdanubia is not explicitly recorded in the sources. Nevertheless, the available evidence offers valuable clues in this regard. It is certain that by mid-February, Kadan had already passed near Kalnik. According to Thomas of Spalato, his detachment advanced rapidly through Transdanubia, Slavonia, and Croatia “as if flying through the air”. His vanguard reached the Dalmatian coast in late February, while Kadan himself appeared in the vicinity of Spalato in early March 1242.<sup>65</sup> As for the Mongol right wing, Master Roger emphasises that the invaders “did not encamp” there but instead “devastated all they found while passing through”.<sup>66</sup> Although he does not specify the duration of the sieges of Esztergom and Pannonhalma, his narrative implies that the Mongols undertook only brief preparations before launching direct assaults, aiming to capture the fortresses by storm. Prolonged sieges, therefore, can be confidently excluded.

Taking into account the timing of the Mongol crossing of the Danube (1 February), the limited scope of the theatre of operations, and the overall rapid pace of their movements, it can be reasonably concluded that the Transdanubian campaign lasted no more than a month. By the time Kadan was approaching Dalmatia in late February, the right and left wings of the Mongol army had likely already been recalled to the left bank of the Danube.

### **The Death of the Great Khan and the Mongol Withdrawal**

The Transdanubian regions of Hungary could not escape the Mongol onslaught; however, they were far better prepared to resist it, resulting in considerably less devastation than the eastern parts of the kingdom. A more organised system of defence, the presence of stone fortifications, largely absent in the eastern regions of the Hungarian Kingdom, and the limited duration of the Mongol campaign in the area all contributed to this outcome. Nevertheless, these factors alone do not fully account for the cessation of Mongol activities in Transdanubia and their subsequent withdrawal. Historians have often attributed this development to a single event: the death of Great Khan Ögödei

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<sup>65</sup> *Thomae Archidiaconi Spalatensis Historia*, 294–295, 298–299.

<sup>66</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 218–219.



(1229–1241). According to traditional interpretations, this news reached the Mongol leadership in Pannonia, prompting them to abandon the Central European campaign entirely. Whether this was truly the case, however, warrants brief examination.

Ögödei, like many other members of the Chinggisid dynasty, struggled with excessive drinking, which ultimately cost him his life. According to the Persian historian Juvayni, he died in his sleep after consuming an excessive amount of wine on the fifth day of Jumada al-Akhirah in the Islamic calendar, which corresponds to 11 December 1241.<sup>67</sup> Both the cause and date of the Great Khan's death are corroborated by Chinese sources, which state that he died after a drinking bout following his return from a hunting expedition.<sup>68</sup>

The death of the ruler triggered a succession crisis, leading to a five-year interregnum in the Mongol Empire. During this period, Batu found himself in opposition to the primary claimant, Ögödei's son, Güyük, who was eventually elected as the new Great Khan in 1246. At that time, the Franciscan missionary and papal envoy, John of Plano Carpini, who was present at Güyük's enthronement, recorded that Ögödei had been poisoned by his sister and that Batu, upon learning of his death, withdrew from Hungary.<sup>69</sup> This explanation was the first to be proposed by a Westerner for the Mongol retreat and was accepted uncritically in scholarly literature until recent decades.

It is, however, contrasted by Rashīd al-Dīn, who offers brief yet significant insights into the Mongol western campaign from the perspective of the conquerors. The Persian historian asserts that when Kadan left Dalmatia in early April 1242, following an unsuccessful attempt to capture Béla IV, news of the Great Khan's death had not yet reached the Mongol princes in Pannonia.<sup>70</sup> Unlike the widely accepted account of John of Plano Carpini, Rashīd al-Dīn's testimony has largely been overlooked in the scholarly literature.

<sup>67</sup> 'Ala-ad-Din 'Ata-Malik Juvaini, *Genghis Khan: The History of the World Conqueror*, translated from the text of Mizra Muhammad Qazvini by John Andrew Boyle, Manchester 1997, 200; *Rashiduddin Fazlullah's Jami'u't-tawarikh*, 329–330.

<sup>68</sup> Николай Ц. Мункуев, *Китайский источник о первых монгольских ханах: надгробная надпись на могиле Елюй Чу-Цая*, Москва 1965, 85; Waltraut Abramowski, "Die chinesischen Annalen von Ögödei und Güyük. Übersetzung des 2. Kapitels des Yüan-Shih", *Zentralasiatische Studien* 10 (1976) 135.

<sup>69</sup> Giovanni di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli*, a cura di Paolo Daffinà et al., Spoleto 1989, 322; The same story is echoed by his companion, the cleric C. de Bridia (Bridra), who composed a separate narrative of Plano Carpini's journey and his delegation: *Hystoria Tartarorum C. de Bridia monachi*, ed. Alf Önnersfors, Berlin 1967, 21. The sister of Ögödei, falsely accused of poisoning him, was Altalun (Al-Altan), the youngest daughter of Chinggis Khan: *Rashiduddin Fazlullah's Jami'u't-tawarikh*, 39, 87, 147, 361; Anne F. Broadbridge, *Women and the making of the Mongol Empire*, Cambridge 2018, 119–120, n. 4; 187–191.

<sup>70</sup> *Rashiduddin Fazlullah's Jami'u't-tawarikh*, 332.

The problem has recently been examined in detail by Stephen Pow, who, in his analysis of the accounts of mid-13<sup>th</sup> century European travellers to Mongolia and other sources, concluded that, given the date of Ögödei's death (11 December 1241), news of his death could not have reached Pannonia by the time the Mongol withdrawal began.<sup>71</sup> Plano Carpini and his companions, who, traveling swiftly with Mongol guides, took three and a half months to reach Güyük's camp in Mongolia from the shores of the Volga (from 8 April to 22 July 1246).<sup>72</sup> Similarly, William of Rubruck, an unofficial envoy of the French king, travelled from Batu's camp on the Volga to the Great Khan's winter quarters in central Mongolia, changing horses as necessary, two or three times a day, and it took him just over three months to complete the journey (from 15 September to 27 December 1253).<sup>73</sup> This route was roughly one-third shorter than the route from Mongolia to Pannonia. Moreover, both Plano Carpini and Rubruck had access to the Mongols' efficient postal relay system, the yam, whereas those tasked with relaying news of the Great Khan's death did not. According to the Secret History of the Mongols, Ögödei and his brother Chagatai ordered the expansion of this network, establishing relay stations for couriers to rest, refresh themselves, or change horses, toward Batu's lands only near the end of the great western campaign (around 1241).<sup>74</sup>

In addition to the chronological challenges and the valuable testimony of Rashīd al-Dīn, further evidence suggests that Batu and the Mongol leadership had already decided to withdraw from Pannonia prior to the death of the Great Khan and the campaign in Transdanubia. This indication comes from none other than Master Roger, who was pressed into Mongol service following their occupation of the eastern parts of the Hungarian Kingdom. In his account, Roger described how, during the summer of 1241, the Mongols "...during one single night surrounded all the remaining villages and made their swords 'drunk with the blood of the slain', so that very few could escape from these villages... Yet they did not burn the crops, straw, or some houses, but arranged all this to save their lives. From this I firmly concluded that they intended to spend the winter in this area or send their servants here to find shelter and fodder for their horses. This proved to be correct, as I learnt later. They left people alive for a time with the proviso that the corn crop should be brought

<sup>71</sup> S. Pow, "Mongol inroads into Hungary", 111–115.

<sup>72</sup> Giovanni di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli*, 312–316.

<sup>73</sup> Guillelmo di Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia (Itinerarium)*, a cura di Paolo Chiesa, Milano 2011, 314–315.

<sup>74</sup> *The Secret History of the Mongols. A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*, Translated with a Historical and Philological Commentary by Igor de Rachewiltz, Leiden – Boston 2006, 215, 1027.

together and the grapes harvested, but they did not want them to consume what they had brought in”.<sup>75</sup>

Roger inferred from this behaviour that the Mongols intended to spend the winter in the region before continuing their campaign, although he expected them to advance into German lands, not to withdraw. Hoping that service in their ranks might facilitate his eventual escape, Roger joined them. It was only during the winter that he learned the Mongols would not proceed into Germany. This revelation left him disheartened, as his escape plan had failed, but also relieved, as “the destruction of Christendom had been averted”.<sup>76</sup>

It is plausible that the Mongols themselves deliberately circulated false rumours of an impending invasion of Germany – a possibility also suggested by the contents of the letter sent by King Béla IV to Conrad IV. Regardless, the Mongol leadership kept their true intentions closely guarded. As Roman Hautala has perceptively observed, however, Roger’s account indicates that the Mongols intended to winter in the occupied eastern regions of Hungary but had no plans to establish a permanent presence there. Otherwise, their decision to massacre the rural population, who constituted their labour force, or to deprive them of essential sustenance would be difficult to explain.<sup>77</sup>

Shortly after the Mongols evacuated Transdanubia, the main body of their army commenced its eastward withdrawal from Pannonia toward Transylvania and, via the Carpathian passes, into “Cumania” (the Wallachian Plain).<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, Kadan’s contingent, having failed to capture King Béla IV, departed from Dalmatia, passing through Serbia and Bulgaria, with part of his force even ravaging territories belonging to the Latin Empire.<sup>79</sup> Kadan eventually rejoined Batu at the Danube Delta, and the Mongol army did not

<sup>75</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 210–211.

<sup>76</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 218–221.

<sup>77</sup> The author wishes to thank Roman Hautala for drawing attention to this important point.

<sup>78</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 220–221. For the reconstruction of the route of the Mongol withdrawal, see S. Pow, “Mongol Inroads into Hungary”, 107–108; cf. Zs. L. Bordi, “The Mongol Invasion in Eastern Hungary (1241–1242)”, 257–259. There is a long-standing view that a portion of the Mongol army retreated southwards along the Danube. This stems from a misidentification of the city referred to as ‘Belegrave,’ captured by the Mongols during the invasion, according to William of Rubruck (*Guillelmo di Rubruk, Viaggio in Mongolia*, 234–235), with modern Belgrade. In fact, this city is Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia, Romania) which Böcek stormed in April 1241; on this, see Aleksandar Uzelac, “Notes on the Capture of William Bouchier by the Mongols in Hungary”, *Medieval History of Central Eurasia* 1 (2020) 27–34.

<sup>79</sup> Georgi Atanassov & Plamen Pavlov, “Sur l’itinéraire de l’armée tatare à travers la Bulgarie du Nord (Mésie et Dobroudja) en 1242 (Selon les données des sources numismatiques, archéologiques et narratives)”, *Dobroudja – Добруджа* 12 (1995) 233–241; Panos Sophoulis, “The Mongol Invasion of Croatia and Serbia in 1242”, *Fragmenta Hellenoslavica* 2 (2015) 264–275; Mirko Sardelić, “‘Sicut per aerem volans’: the Mongols on the Adriatic (AD 1242) and the Long-Lasting Echoes of their Campaign in the Croatian National Imaginary”, in: *The Mongols in Central Europe: The Profile*

begin its final retreat to the steppes of Eastern Europe until January 1243.<sup>80</sup> These events fall outside the scope of the present study. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that the Mongol withdrawal from Hungary to the Pontic steppes unfolded at a remarkably slow pace. This observation further reinforces the argument that their retreat was not a reaction to the death of Ögödei, but rather the execution of a premeditated strategic plan.

A comprehensive analysis of the reasons behind the Mongol withdrawal from Pannonia must be deferred to another occasion. Here, it suffices to briefly outline several alternative explanations that have emerged in recent scholarship, beyond the traditionally cited death of the Great Khan. Among these are the “geographic theory”, which argues that the Pannonian Plain was ill-suited to support the vast logistical needs of the Mongol army; the “military weakness theory”, which attributes the retreat to the considerable human losses sustained during prior campaigns and the invasion of Hungary; and the “gradual conquest theory”, which posits that the incursion of 1241 represented only the initial phase of a longer-term plan to conquer Europe – a plan that, for various reasons, was ultimately abandoned.<sup>81</sup>

Although the circumstances surrounding the Mongol withdrawal from Pannonia remain somewhat obscure, it can be asserted with confidence that the seemingly abrupt conclusion of the Mongol campaign in Transdanubia was not related to the death of the Great Khan.

## Conclusions

The key observations and conclusions concerning the Mongol actions in Transdanubia may be summarised as follows:

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*and Impact of their Thirteenth-Century Invasions*, ed. Balázs Nagy, Budapest 2024, 363–386; Aleksandar, Uzelac, “The Mongol Invasion and the Latin Empire of Constantinople”, in: *The Mongols in Central Europe: The Profile and Impact of their Thirteenth-Century Invasions*, ed. Balázs Nagy, Budapest 2024, 423–449.

<sup>80</sup> *Rashiduddin Fazlullah's Jami'u'l-tawarikh*, 332; *Thomae Archidiaconi Spalatensis Historia*, 300–303. For the date of the conclusion of the Mongol campaign in Central and Southeastern Europe see also: Роман Хаутала, “Ездил ли Александр Невский в Монголию? Несколько замечаний о поездках Александра Невского и его отца к монгольским правителям”, in: *Александр Невский: личность, эпоха, историческая память. К 800-летию со дня рождения*, eds. Леонид А. Беляев & Елена Л. Конявская, Москва 2021, 199–207.

<sup>81</sup> For the overview of these theories see: Greg S. Rogers, “An Examination of Historians’ Explanations for the Mongol Withdrawal from East Central Europe”, *East European Quarterly* 30/1 (1996) 3–26. See also: J. Laszlovszky et al., “Contextualizing the Mongol Invasion of Hungary”, 436–438; J. Szabó, “A magyarországi hadjárat második fázisa”, 340–347.

First, from a chronological standpoint, the campaign can be dated to February 1242.

Second, only a portion of the Mongol invasion force present in Pannonia participated in the Transdanubian campaign. Neither Master Roger nor Thomas mention Batu or other Mongol princes in the region, except for Kadan, who was tasked with the primary objective: capturing (or eliminating) Béla IV.

Third, the Mongol forces in Transdanubia were divided into three detachments: a central unit led by Kadan, tasked with pursuing the king, and two flanking contingents, one advancing upstream along the Danube toward Esztergom and Pannonhalma, and the other moving downstream toward Pécs.

Fourth, the campaign appears to have had limited strategic objectives from the outset. In this context, it is worth recalling the words of Master Roger, who noted that the Mongols “did not encamp” in Transdanubia, “but only wasted all they found while marching through.”<sup>82</sup> This observation suggests that they had no intention of remaining on the left bank of the Danube and that their withdrawal, though seemingly “sudden”, was anticipated from the beginning.

Finally, the Mongol withdrawal from Transdanubia and their eventual departure from Hungary was not due to the death of Great Khan Ögödei, which Batu and the other Mongol princes were still unaware of.

Taking all these points into account, it can be inferred that the Mongol campaign in Transdanubia was not aimed at territorial conquest. Instead of pursuing long-term strategic objectives, the campaign was limited in manpower, scope, and duration. Its primary aim seems to have been the pursuit and capture of the Hungarian king – the Mongols’ main military objective, though one in which they ultimately failed.

The two flanking Mongol divisions were tasked with safeguarding the advance of Kadan’s central force. Furthermore, their confinement to the areas along the Danube was likely necessitated by the need for a swift withdrawal to the river’s left bank, before the thaw rendered evacuation both hazardous and exceptionally challenging. Although precise meteorological data for the Danube region in late February 1242 is unavailable, Master Roger’s account of melting snow in the swamps near Székesfehérvár in early February indicates that the river could not have remained frozen much longer.<sup>83</sup> Thus, from a tactical perspective, weather conditions played a noticeable role in shaping the execution of the Mongol campaign in Transdanubia. While the harsh winter initially facilitated the crossing of the frozen Danube, the rapid onset of the

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<sup>82</sup> *Magistri Rogerii Epistola*, 218–219.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. A. Kiss, “Weather Events during the First Tatar Invasion in Hungary”, 152.

thaw compelled the Mongols to restrict both the duration and geographical scope of their operations.

These circumstances, combined with the resolute resistance mounted by local forces, are among the primary reasons why Transdanubia experienced significantly less devastation than other parts of the Kingdom of Hungary.

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**МОНГОЛИ У ЗАДУНАВЉУ (ФЕБРУАР 1242. ГОДИНЕ)**

**Резиме**

Првог фебруара 1242. године монголска војска прешла је залеђени Дунав код Пеште и упала у западне крајеве Краљевине Угарске. Била је то завршна фаза њихове инвазије на Средњу Европу. Ослањајући се на добро познате наративне изворе: дела Руђера из Варадина, Томе Архиђакона, персијског писца Рашид ад-Дина, те широк спектар документарних извора и археолошких сазнања, овај чланак критички преиспитује кључне аспекте монголских дејстава у Задунављу, доводећи у питање устаљене претпоставке и нудећи нове увиде у размере и стратешке циљеве ове кампање.

Сагласно закључцима изреченим у тексту, ова кампања је била краткотрајна и монголски одреди напустили су Задунавље пре краја фебруара. У њој је учествовао само део монголских снага у Панонији. Ангажовано људство је било подељено у три одреда. Центар, предвођен монголским принцем Каданом, имао је задужење да зароби угарског краља Белу IV и у потери за њим, брзо прошавши кроз задунавске крајеве, стигао је почетком марта све до далматинског приобаља. Десно крило је напредовало узводно дуж Дунава ка Естергому и Панонхалми, опсевши ова места, док се лево кретало низводно, опустошивши крајеве све до Печуја на југу, пре него што су се ови монголски одреди вратили на леву обалу Дунава. Кампања је од почетка имала ограничене стратешке циљеве и Монголи нису имали намеру да дуже остану у Задунављу. Њихово повлачење, а затим и њихов одлазак из Угарске, нису били изазвани вестима о смрти великог кана Огедеја – што, уосталом, монголски предводник Бату и остали монголски принчеви тада нису ни знали, како сведочи Рашид ад-Дин.

Монголска кампања у Задунављу, ограничена по људству, обиму и временском трајању, није представљала освајачки подухват. Њен главни циљ била је потеря и заробљавање угарског краља, што Кадан на крају није успео да оствари. Улога два крилна монголска одреда била је да олакшају Каданово почетно напредовање, штитећи његове бокове. Поред тога, одлука монголског вођства да ограниче дејства левог и десног крила на подручја уз Дунав највероватније је била условљена стратешком потребом да се обезбеди правовремена евакуација на леву обалу реке пре него што отапање леда то учини ризичним или тешко изводљивим. Временски услови су, тако, играли приметну улогу у планирању и извођењу ових монголских операција. Поменуте околности, у комбинацији са одлучним отпором локалних снага у утврђеним упориштима, представљају кључни разлог зашто су области Задунавља током Монголске инвазије претрпеле знатно мања разарања у поређењу са источним и централним деловима Краљевине Угарске.

*Оригинални научни рад*

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