Valéria Tóth

✉ toth.valeria@arts.unideb.hu

🆔 https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0822-591X

⌂ University of Debrecen

🌐 Debrecen, Hungary

The Source Value of Toponyms in History

Abstract

When investigating the historical context (settlement and ethnic conditions) in the medieval Carpathian Basin (Kingdom of Hungary), the academic field of history also relies on information provided by proper names. This is due to the fact that in the first few centuries of Hungarian written culture, written documents are made up almost entirely of Latin charters; besides these, only four Hungarian texts have survived. Thus, during the early Old Hungarian Era, the tens of thousands of Latin charters provide the key sources for research in historical linguistics, and these are the sources that other fields in history may also rely on when trying to answer various scholarly questions.

The Hungarian corpus of Latin charters is mostly made up of proper names as there was vested legal interest in recording these in the vernacular language (to ensure their role as identifiers); European charter writing in general also followed this approach and it obviously served as a model for Hungarian practice as well.

The historical source value of the two proper name categories is not identical: there are major differences between toponyms and personal names in terms of the extent to which their use and systems are determined by linguistic factors and the degree to which name giving and name usage are influenced by extra-linguistic forces. For these circumstances, we may consider toponyms to be the more reliable of the two proper name categories when discussing questions related to history.

In this paper I outline those scholarly problems in which we can rely on historical toponyms and those in which we cannot expect to move forward with the help of this group of sources.

Keywords

1. The historical source value of toponymic data

Historical studies rely on findings of historical linguistics and historical ono-mastics in several issues. This also applies to the exploration of the medieval history of the Carpathian Basin (the Kingdom of Hungary). Such a relation-ship is clearly justified as for various ages data in written sources (especially proper names) represent almost the only source material for addressing both linguistic and historical questions. In the first few centuries of Hungarian literacy, written documents are made up almost entirely of Latin charters; besides these, only four Hungarian texts have survived (containing a few hun-dred words altogether). Thus, during the early Old Hungarian Era (895–1350), the tens of thousands of Latin charters provide the key sources for research in historical linguistics, and these are the sources that other fields in history may also rely on when trying to answer various scholarly questions.

Before moving on with this train of thought, we should also briefly dis-cuss 1) what the reason for this is (that is, we need to interpret the phenome-na presented here within their sociocultural context) and 2) how and based on which factors did Hungarian literacy emerge and what its special features are with regard to the early centuries.

The evolution of Hungarian written culture, of course, is important not only from the perspective of research on Hungarian language but also because it entailed a transformation of the culture and lifestyle of Hungarians, while it also had a significant impact on the development of the Hungarian language. The emergence of written culture in Hungary was a necessary result of the dual process in which Hungarians settled down in the Carpathian Basin as part of the Conquest (895–900) and joined the European Christian-feudal culture. In most parts of contemporary Europe, literacy had traditionally been pres-ent in various aspects of life and thus had a rather solid existence. It exerted its influence on the internal affairs of the Church, science and education were unimaginable without it, and it also had a key role in state administration. In South-Eastern Europe Greek language and literacy were widespread, while to the west and northwest of this area the use of Latin was typical. The newly conquered country of the Hungarians and their state acquired by (Saint) Ste-phen I (1000) was located exactly at the meeting point of these two cultures and thus at the beginning both exerted their effects on the region. Hungarian

literacy, however, emerged as a Latin-language written culture practically in the same form as it had already existed in the greater part of Europe, to the west of the country (which was in line with the expanding and strengthening system of relations of Hungarians and especially that of the Hungarian state).

Such a Latin-based literacy, however, from the very beginning also required the recording of some of the elements of Hungarian with the same tools and set of letters also used in the Latin texts. This is because some contemporary written genres made the inclusion of Hungarian language elements necessary in the texts. Such a genre included official documents, charters, as well as works published later discussing the historical past of Hungarians, called *gestas* and chronicles, as in these the names of Hungarian places and people also had to be recorded.

Therefore, the Hungarian corpus of Latin charters as well as *gestas* and chronicles is mostly made up of proper names as there was vested legal interest in recording these in the vernacular language (to ensure their role as identifiers); European charter writing and chronicle literature in general also followed this approach and it obviously served as a model for Hungarian practice as well. As a result, several hundred thousand Hungarian toponyms and anthroponyms survived in charters from this era, while we may only sporadically find coherent Hungarian texts from this age.

The historical source value of the two proper name categories is not identical: there are major differences between toponyms and anthroponyms in terms of the extent to which their use and systems are determined by linguistic (intra-lingual) factors and the degree name giving and name usage are influenced by extra-linguistic (primarily social and cultural) forces. Due to these circumstances, we may consider toponyms to be the more reliable of the two proper name categories when discussing questions related to history (Hoffmann et al., 2018, pp. 41–42).

In this paper I outline those scholarly problems of history in which we can rely on historical toponyms and those in which we cannot expect to move forward with the help of this group of sources.

2. The ethnic source value of toponyms

As a result of those already mentioned, history has relied on Hungarian-language proper names that have survived in Latin charters, among them especially toponyms (and mostly settlement names), primarily in studies of ethnic and settlement history, as well as history of ownership; but this group of linguistic elements was also frequently used to explore the occupational structure of medieval society. Of these areas, I focus on only one in this paper: the use of toponyms in ethnic history. It is in this area that contradictions present themselves most vividly and, what is more, I believe the wrong methodological foundations and the faulty conclusions based on these present the most dangers in this respect. (On the historical source value of toponyms in general see chapters of Hoffmann et al., 2017; and on the historical source value of anthroponyms see Tóth, 2016, pp. 11–31.)

2.1. Relations between language and ethnicity in the Carpathian Basin during the Middle Ages

The history of the Carpathian Basin after the Conquest was characterized by diversity in all eras both in terms of the ethnicity of people living there and the languages spoken by them. As this circumstance significantly influenced (and influences to this day) both the fate of individuals and the history of groups of people of various sizes, it is understandable that historical studies have long shown interest in this issue. Direct sources on the ethnic composition of the peoples in the Carpathian Basin provide insights only into the past few centuries, while the interpretation, use of the available data and information carries in itself numerous problems even for more recent times. This is even more so the case with regard to earlier ages. The biggest obstacle to the study of the age of the Conquest and the subsequent centuries is represented by the lack of sources and as a result, the methodological questions of scientific research using indirect sources are more in the limelight.

As a start, it is not even easy to decide which disciplines shall be considered competent in issues related to ethnicity. This dilemma is not only a question of research methodology but more like a problem resulting from the

interpretation and definition of the concept of ethnicity, ethnos (for a recent summary of this issue that may be used well for our purposes, see Rácz, 2016, pp. 15–24, and earlier Róna-Tas, 1997, pp. 18–26; see also Koopman, 2016 for studying this issue from another aspect, using a broader horizon and primarily focusing on the status and function of ethnonyms). We usually mention linguistic, cultural, anthropological features as well as mental factors (a shared sense of origin and belonging, the presence of self-naming, etc.) when defining ethnicity, along with additional attributes. If we pick and examine single components from this complex system, we can do so only if we are aware that in this way we provide a description of the ethnic group not in its own complexity but we can learn more only about one of its attributes considered to be typical. For example, there is no direct correspondence between language and ethnic group either, as there are different people speaking the same language, while people who claim to belong to the same ethnic group may use different languages. This was no different in earlier times either.

In the scholarly study of issues in which several disciplines are involved (and the topic discussed here is certainly such an example) inherently carries research methodology pitfalls. Often the representatives of different disciplines rely on the results of one another in a way that results in a certain *circulus vitiosus*, although they have the impression (with often those involved wishing to create such an effect) that the process is moving ahead in a spiral. For example, a historian using results of linguistic research may claim that due to the fact that in an area there were a strikingly large number of Slavic names, a large population of Slavs must have lived there once. Relying on the Slavic dominance established by the historian, the linguist relies on Slavic foundations more and more in new name etymologies, using this method prominently even in cases when other opportunities of interpretation would also be available. In turn, the historian feels that their findings have been confirmed yet again and so on; this, of course, may also apply to Turkic, Hungarian or any other language (Hoffmann, 2007, p. 12).

This flawed methodological procedure is visible in numerous details of research in ethnic history and questions the reliability of some of the results as well. This danger, however, comes hand in hand with the need for complexity, which at the same time also characterizes the study of eras characterized by a lack of sources. If, for example, we wish to draw the linguistic map of an earlier era from a regional perspective, we obviously cannot disregard the information provided by historical geography about the natural

features of the era, among others, as we cannot suppose the presence of a population of a significant size in an extensive marshland or forest area. As we cannot disregard the confrontation and linking of results from several disciplines in ethnic reconstruction either, as a result it is encouraged even more than before. We may protect ourselves from the mentioned methodological pitfalls mostly by continuously reviewing the research principles and methodology used by the disciplines involved and make the adjustments necessary in response to the emergence of new knowledge.

In the following, I provide a brief overview of linguistic research methods and opportunities aimed at ethnic identification, primarily by relying on such a critical approach in which we focus not only on specific details related to given eras but also on the general problematics of theoretical and methodological principles. The approach of linguistics in this respect may also provide important information for scholars in other fields relying on this discipline.

2.2. Methods and liimitations in ethnic history research

Traditionally, the name origin identified by etymology has great significance in Hungarian research in historical linguistics and historical onomastics as, due to the lack of other sources, historians (and often linguists as well) attempted to specify the ethnic composition of the Carpathian Basin based on this, with special regard to the appearance of Hungarians in the region. This process is based on the following simplified train of thought: 1) the etymological explanation of a toponym reveals the language in which the name was created, 2) the name may be linked to the people speaking the given language and 3) the conclusion is made that this group of people must have lived in the area designated by the name at the time of name giving. The biggest difficulty involved in this process is that the first recording of the name in charters is independent of the age of name giving, which means that there may be a long time between the creation and recording of a name. It was in this context that the worth of toponyms was valued highly in defining an era, presenting a set of knowledge based on linguistic typological analysis according to which the genesis of certain types of toponyms can be associated with a specific era. This procedure was used by István Kniezsa (1938) as well, when he drew the ethnic map of 11th-century Hungary based on historical, archeological, and linguistic data. He mostly relied on toponyms created from tribes' names as

linguistic evidence (approximately 250 toponyms).[1] Although only 6 of these could be dated from the 11th century, he also used those found in later sources in his studies as he believed that the chronological relations of toponyms belonging to this type could be limited to the interval between the end of the 10th and the middle of the 11th century as the tribes were forgotten after this. This, based on the theory of toponyms with an era-defining value means that whenever a toponym created from a tribe's name appears in sources, it could not be created later than the middle of the 11th century and thus could be used without problems in studying the 11th century.

Based on the current interpretation and arguments in historical linguistics, this theory is not deemed acceptable (for a detailed discussion of this issue see Hoffmann & Tóth, 2016, pp. 273–286). Gyula Kristó (1976 and 2000) criticized the ideas of Kniezsa at several points, modifying Kniezsa's theory especially in terms of chronology. (For the arguments formulated against the idea see Hoffmann & Tóth, 2016, pp. 295–315). Kristó's method was that he examined a toponymic corpus created along strict criteria from the perspective of etymological origin and he associated ethnic proportions with the linguistic origin present in different source groups. The main problem with his approach was not that he drew conclusions from a small amount of data and not even that etymologies were often established without enough circumspection but mostly that he disregarded important chronological circumstances. That is, for example, that the much earlier status of name giving and its linguistic features do not by any means provide information on the age of the documents (in this case the age of St. Stephen, the first third of the 11th century).

We need to explore more complicated connections if we wish to clarify the strata of names and their chronological relations, that is, if we wish to determine when the elements of the different etymological layers related to different languages were created; when the languages in question were in contact with one another; and when and in what direction the borrowing of names took place. If we can determine at least the relative chronology of the strata

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[1] This group represents the larger part of toponymic data verifying the presence of Hungarians for Kniezsa: besides 242 tribes' names, he lists 198 other toponyms and added another 202 toponyms not referring to Hungarians (of these 184 are names of Slavic, 7 Turkic, and 11 German origin). Therefore, toponyms created from tribes' names represent close to 40% of the data used by Kniezsa as linguistic evidence.

of names belonging to particular languages, then we can gain insights at least into the chronology of the settlement of peoples in the given region.

In order to show how etymological mistakes deriving from a faulty theoretical starting point could distort our perceptions of the 11th-century toponymic corpus in terms of its etymological layers, let me outline the analysis of the toponymic data of the Founding Charter of Tihany from 1055 (which is the first authentic charter in Hungarian language history that has survived in the original) as presented by Gyula Kristó (2000), and then contrast it with result of recent research. Based on various etymological considerations, Kristó lists eleven toponyms that refer to a Slavic population, but he also presents four toponyms he considers to be of Turkic and German origin. Based on this, he concludes that the

> larger places, landmarks were names of Slavic (to a certain extent Turkic) origin, while names of a microtoponym function were mostly Hungarian. This in itself indicated that the names of more important objects (settlements, lakes) were borrowed by Hungarians from the Slavs, while they themselves named the places within the settlements. (Kristó, 2000, p. 23)

The recently completed study of the Founding Charter of Tihany Abbey from the perspective of historical toponomastics and using the method of toponym reconstruction, however, concluded that of the close to one hundred toponyms and common name expressions indicating a place that can be reconstructed based on the Hungarian language elements of the charter, there are only two such names that did not emerge from the Hungarian language. However, even the names of the lake *Balaton* and *Kesztölc* settlement appear in such a form in the charter that certainly indicated Hungarian name users in the middle of the 11th century and not Slavic ones. This therefore means that we cannot find any linguistic elements in the Founding Charter of Tihany Abbey that would indicate the presence of a Slavic, Turkic or German population in the middle of the 11th century (Hoffmann, 2010, pp. 226–232).

2.3. Opportunities and perspectives in ethnic reconstruction

We may summarize the conclusions drawn from those mentioned so far as follows. In 1938 István Kniezsa drew the 11th-century linguistic-ethnic map of the Carpathian Basin in his extensive study titled "Magyarország népei a XI.

században" [Peoples of Hungary in the 11th century]. However, as his methods and the conclusions based on these are not fully in line with our current knowledge, we cannot regard the linguistic-ethnic map drawn by him to be accurate either. A large part of toponyms used as sources are already interpreted differently today both in terms of their chronology and etymology; and historical and archeological studies have also moved beyond those conclusions that he used as the basis of his findings.

In view of all these, the question rightfully emerges if we have the chance at all to draw the 11th-century linguistic-ethnic map of the Carpathian Basin in such detail based on our currently available scientific knowledge as István Kniezsa did in 1938. I believe that for the time being this cannot be done, and moreover, that research in historical linguistics and toponomastics will not be able to do it with such precision later on either.

Yet, we have the tools at our disposal that enable us to formulate a more precise opinion on the issue at hand. For this, we first of all need a meticulous processing of the linguistic sources that have survived from the 11th century as our former knowledge might change significantly as a result of reconsideration (as already shown in connection with the Founding Charter of Tihany Abbey). At the same time, we cannot disregard the sources of uncertain chronological status (copies, forged and interpolated charters) considering the fact that the 11th century was poor in sources, even if these were practically ignored by former research. The utilization of these sources and their inclusion in research, at the same time, requires a unique methodology: Melinda Szőke (2015) provided an excellent example for this with her analysis of the interpolated Founding Charter of the Abbey of Garamszentbenedek (1075), and the same method was used also by Éva Kovács (2018), in the case of the Founding Charter of Százd ([around 1067]/1267) that survived in the form of a copy.

In our analyses, it is not enough to complete only etymological studies focusing on the origin of names, but we also need to use a more complex method of toponym reconstruction, which also takes into consideration the history of names. (On the methodology of historical toponym reconstruction, see Hoffmann et al., 2018, pp. 135–147). We can build numerous conclusions and studies on the results of this (including, with some limitations, also linguistic and ethnic reconstruction). At the same time, we also need to consider the results of historical name sociology, as well as the broadly accepted tenets of name theory.

There is no question that when we study the 11th century ethnic composition of the Carpathian Basin, of course, other disciplines besides linguistics

need to have their say: the findings of history and archeology were already used by István Kniezsa (1938). I believe, however, that we can reach more reliable results if researchers of the different areas assess the relevant data within their own field and without looking for arguments from other disciplines that support their own results. In the second phase of the study, therefore, research results that are independent from one another may become comparable, which can then either reinforce or refute each other.

We can get closer to achieving reliable results after several stages. First, it seems expedient to complete the studies in a carefully selected smaller region, for example, in an area that has extensive data from the perspective of linguistics, historical and archeological studies and which has been explored adequately. However, even such a research process demands an identical conceptual approach used by scholars and the coordination of their work from the very beginning. In such a complex question as the one presented here, we can reach new results only with a research program implementing this method.

How, based on these principles, historical linguistic analysis may contribute to ethnic reconstruction in practice is illustrated based on the research findings of István Hoffmann (2017a, 2017b) providing an overview of the history of the hydronyms and settlement names of a smaller region, the river valley of four rivers in Bakonyalja. The names of larger watercourses in the region, the *Tapolca*, *Gerence*, *Bittva* and the *Torna*, are of Slavic origin without a doubt based on modern etymological studies (for a summary, see Hoffmann, 2017a, pp. 50–51, Hoffmann, 2017b, pp. 138–140). All of the four settlement names dated from the 11th century (*Pápa*, *Tevel*, *Bél*, *Koppány*) come from Hungarian language name givers and name users without question. Of course, besides these there could be other settlements in the examined area also; however, we are not aware of any methods in historical linguistics or toponomastics with the help of which any of the other later settlement names could be connected to the 11th century. Not only in this century are we unable to say that there are a majority of Slavic settlement names in the valley of the four rivers – as opposed to what Kniezsa (1938) claimed (p. 424) – but of the 79 names of the 71 settlements appearing here throughout the entire Old Hungarian Era (until 1526) only two might be suspected to have a Slavic origin (*Zsemlér*, *Ganna*). However, even in their case we may consider the option of them being derived from Hungarian. Therefore, no settlement names in the region of the Bakonyalja examined here indicate 11th-century Slavic traces at all.

How can we explain then, under such circumstances that the main rivers of the area have names of Slavic origin? These were certainly borrowed by Hungarians from the Slavic people living here and naming these watercourses. The main question in this regard concerns the chronological relations in the settlement history of the two peoples living here. The option that these hydronyms would come from Slavic people who settled down among Hungarians living in the area is practically out of the question as in this case the names of later Slavic settlements would definitely appear in sources as well. As another option, we may suppose that at the time of their settlement Hungarians encountered Slavic people in the area and they borrowed these hydronyms from them. Of these names of rivers, we can find that of *Gerence* already in 11th-century sources: 1086: ad torrentem *Greniçę* (DHA 1, p. 250), similarly to that of *Torna*: 1075/+1124/+1217: *Tornowa* (DHA 1, p. 215). Due to these systematical relations, the names of *Tapolca* and *Bittva* could also be created prior to the appearance of Hungarians, even though we can find such records only from the middle of the 13th century: 1245: *Toplicha* ~ *Toplycha* (ÁÚO 2, p. 186), 1240: *Bitua* (ÁÚO 2, p. 112).

The Hungarians who settled down, however, probably did not take over the settlement names of the Slavic people living here, which means that the idea of Gyula Kristó discussed before (and which he presented as a generally applicable one) cannot be confirmed. The reason for this could be identified easily by the differing features of the name-giving process of settlement names and hydronyms. Natural names (also including hydronyms) and civilizational names (among them settlement names) differ from each other not only in terms of their linguistic features but also with regard to their genesis. Consciousness and individual intentions played a much bigger role in the creation of settlement names than in the case of other name types. This is also connected to the fact that settlement names may also be perceived as the linguistic signs of taking ownership of an area, especially at the time when written documents played only a negligible role as legal insurance as opposed to orality. Therefore, the settlement name could also express the right to an area at the same time. It also indicates the significance of this name type that in this part of the Bakonyalja region two-thirds of the settlement names feature a personal name or a word indicating a person: e.g., *Pápa:* 1061/1257: *Papa* (DHA 1, p. 173; cf. *Papa*), *Izsa:* 1269: possessio *Isay* (ÁÚO 8, p. 247; cf. *Ysa*), *Atya:* 1319: *Athya* (Cs. 3, p. 21; cf. *Athya*, *Sávoly:* 1330: *Saul* (PRT 8, p. 307; cf. *Saul*), etc.

Therefore, based on linguistic studies we can overall only establish about the population features of the Bakonyalja region that the presence of Hungarians in the area can be established with certainty in the second half of the 11th century and (mostly based on systematical arguments) we can also state with high probability that at the time of their settlement in the area the Hungarians encountered a Slavic population. The presence of this population, however, cannot be confirmed with tools of linguistics in the 9th century (as presented in some publications, e.g., Melich, 1925–1929, p. 379).

Of course, the results have been presented here only broadly and can be refined further partly by including microtoponyms in the analysis, and partly through comparative, complex studies involving findings in historical and archeological research. It is a key task of research in historical linguistics and toponomastics to assess the historical linguistic source materials of smaller regions carefully also from the perspective of ethnic reconstruction and in consideration of the principles presented here. By fitting the mosaic pieces of studies conducted this way, we may create a more complete and comprehensive image of the historical linguistic and toponymic situation of the entire Carpathian Basin. This, in turn, may provide a sound basis also for drawing the early ethnic map of the region from the perspective of linguistics.

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