

Sherwood, Peter. Sándor, Klára. *Nyelvrokonság és hunhagyomány. Rénszarvas vagy csodaszarvas? Nyelvtörténet és művelődéstörténet*. [Linguistic Kinship and the Hun Tradition. Reindeer or Miracle Stag? The History of Language and the History of Culture]. Budapest: Typotex. 2011. Pp. 467. AHEA: E-journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 5 (2012): <http://ahea.net/e-journal/volume-5-2012>

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Reviewed by Peter Sherwood, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Klára Sándor has written an unusually fascinating and extraordinarily important book, which despite its occasional self-indulgence makes compulsive reading for all those interested in the complex and often deliberately obfuscated early history of the Hungarian language and the Hungarian people and the way in which the two are intertwined. Since in Hungarian émigré circles from the 1930s onwards, and within Hungary itself -- particularly in the years since the end of Communism -- a number of crackpot theories have continued to flourish and indeed gain ground, just as in close association with these certain narratives and symbols of Hungarianness have been (mis)appropriated by the political right, the book is also vital reading for anyone interested in today's Hungary. For this reason, especially, it needs to be made available in English, perhaps in a slightly abridged form.

In an introductory chapter Klára Sándor explains why she has written this book. She thinks the facts of linguistic history and the truth of the Hungarian fables -- which are representations of the earliest traces of Magyar history -- are in cognitive dissonance in the minds of many Hungarians, while for her part she is convinced that they are in harmony. The fact that the Hungarian language shares its basic features with other Uralic (sometimes still, but less accurately, called Finno-Ugric) languages, that the Magyars arrived in the Carpathian basin as a "Turkic people", and that they have for hundreds of years regarded themselves as being of Hun origin -- these are all notions that can, in her view, be reconciled with each other and this is what her ambitious book sets out to do. She adds that a further motivation for writing the book -- which bears many signs, both positive and negative, that it was originally produced as a series of articles for the leading liberal Hungarian website Galamus -- was her training and lifelong interest in Turkic studies and, to complete the picture, her love of the legend of the Miracle Stag and all that it represents; this has recently become a political football, she says, with one part of Hungarian society idolizing it and the other mocking it. She points out that despite the Hungarians' long-standing and intense interest in their own prehistory and early history, not least as a pillar of national identity, there has been no previous work that integrates the linguistic, historical, and cultural elements relating to their earliest times. Up-to-date knowledge of a wide range of fields is required: the essentials of comparative historical linguistics as well as acquaintance with the history of the peoples of the vast Eurasian steppes, with elements of the organization and culture of horse-riding nomads, with the written and unwritten sources of early Hungarian history, with features of medieval and humanistic Hungarian culture, and by no means least an acquaintance with numerous relevant works of Hungarian literature from the 18th to the 20th century.

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This is a tall order and it is difficult to imagine anyone capable of mastering this material and synthesizing it into a scholarly yet highly readable work for the intelligent layman; but the author has succeeded admirably in this demanding task. It is an even taller order, particularly in a brief notice such as this, to do justice to this rich work and from the 25 (unnumbered) chapters after her introduction I can pick out only some highlights. Particularly important is the opening piece (pp. 12-29), a detailed and lacerating account of the breathtakingly wide range of idiotic ideas that have proliferated, and continue to proliferate, about the "origins of the Magyars" and how these have been increasingly appropriated by the extreme political right. The next few chapters clarify why merely knowing a language as a native speaker is no qualification for discussing it in a scholarly manner and stresses both the emergence of the comparative method in historical linguistics and the importance of language typology: without a thorough understanding of these, and their complex interrelationship, statements about the undocumented prehistory of a language -- often, in the absence of other evidence, the only access to a people's earliest history -- are not just unscientific but damagingly worthless. A fine chapter, "The cradle of the Magyars" (pp. 80-90), gives some basic data about the Uralic languages and the core vocabulary and essentials of grammar that prove beyond any shadow of doubt that genetically (genealogically) Hungarian is a member of the Uralic family of languages: as regards vocabulary, for example, 700 to 800 basic words have cognates (proven relatives) in the other Uralic languages, thus having a history of between 5,000 and 6,000 years, and -- given the nature of Hungarian -- these have each given rise to vast "families" of derived words (p. 86). Importantly, this does not mean that it cannot, with respect to certain typological features, such as vowel harmony and agglutination, resemble other, genetically unrelated, languages.

The next major group of chapters offers a broad conspectus of the many peoples across a vast, approximately five thousand miles wide, swathe of the Eurasian steppe, stretching from the Alföld of eastern Hungary to the Amur and Manchuria. The author makes the crucial point that for thousands of years this area formed a single economic, political, and cultural unit and it was here that the Magyar-speaking tribes/nationalities were shaped into a people. In the course of this discussion she covers a similarly vast territory in terms of archaeology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology, carefully weaving into her tapestry many of the terms that some readers will likely have only vague ideas about, such as 'Ob-Ugrians', 'Scythians', 'Sarmatians', or the 'Hiungnu' empire with its possible links with the term 'Hun'. She alerts us to the danger of projecting back our own views of the nation(-state), which evolved only in the course of the 19th century, onto the names of groups from this period. She illuminates how it was possible for the Magyars to be labeled "*turkoi*" (i.e. "Turks" or "Turkic (speakers?)") and "Onogurs" through a striking analogy: if we were as short of information about the USSR or Yugoslavia as we are about some of these early Eurasian formations, we might refer to all the various peoples of the former USSR as "Slavs" or even just "Russians", or of former Yugoslavia as "Yugoslavs" (p. 122). Though at points the welter of data may seem overwhelming, and perhaps it is in these chapters that some condensation might be desirable, it is still well worth allowing oneself to be led carefully by the author through

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this section of the book, if only to appreciate the context for what little we know of Attila and his Huns, and the nature of their relationship with the Magyars. One important point: the current scholarly consensus is that the leading Hun tribe spoke some kind of Turkic language (p. 147). Another riveting chapter, "The Sword of God -- the Scourge of God" (pp. 303-320) is entirely devoted to the image of Attila in Europe and European (including Hungarian) literature.

After her training in Turkic studies, the author developed interests in language change and sociolinguistics in general, and is thus well qualified to shed light on the vexed matter of the relationship between Magyar and the Turkic languages, in the past and often even today reductively formulated as: is Hungarian a Uralic or a Turkic language? No one disputes that several hundred words in Hungarian, from every cultural sphere (even such relatively core items as certain body parts, e.g. *nyak* 'neck'), as well as some fundamental grammatical features (such as the absence of formative elements on verbs of Turkic origin, like *ér* 'reach, touch, ripen, etc.', with as enormous a family of derivatives as any verb of Uralic origin, whereas verbs borrowed later must have a verb formative, e.g. *szörföl* 'to surf') have been taken into the language from a number of Western Turkic languages, of which the only surviving member is Chuvash. The more interesting question is: what does this say about the origins of the Hungarian language and/or people? In her measured consideration of the history of this issue in light of current socio- and psycholinguistic research, she finds no evidence to support what is now called language shift (if this were the case, the Hungarians would now be speaking a language that was obviously Turkish/Turkic), and tentatively concludes that since the Magyars were exposed to extensive and lengthy cultural Turkic influence, living until the second half of the 9th century under Turkic political suzerainty, this must have led to widespread bilingualism, or perhaps a type of diglossia, among them. It is this that explains the fact that Hungarian is a Uralic language with an extensive amount of Turkic material, manifested chiefly, but by no means solely, in its cultural vocabulary. This is itself a necessarily simplified and abbreviated account of Klára Sándor's contribution to this debate, in the course of which she also demonstrates, among other things, that the work of the legendary orientalist Ármín Vámbéry (1832-1913), the *bête noire* of so many Uralists, in fact anticipates her conclusions. In this area, as in nearly all of those she treats in this book, the reason there are no simple answers is that few of the really interesting questions are really simple.

There is a great deal more to enjoy in this book, from an account of the Magyar tribes and their arrival in present-day Hungary and its representation in the Miracle Stag myth, to a survey of the relevant aspects of the Magyars' ancient history in the medieval chronicles and in later *belles lettres*. The final chapter brilliantly shows how the Miracle Stag myth is 'written in the stars'. It is a fitting conclusion to a bravura performance. I can only say: if you care at all about Hungary and Hungarian culture, you must read this book. And let me repeat the urgent need to produce an English version as soon as possible.