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Changing Objectives of Batu's Campaign in Hungary and the Reasons for the Mongol Withdrawal in 1242

Abstract

Scholars have traditionally regarded Batu's campaign in Central and Southeastern Europe as purely destructive in nature. Opinions have also been expressed concerning its possible reconnaissance character and the Mongols' attempt to establish in Hungary a political center of the Jochid Ulus (Ulus of Jochi), a bridgehead for further westward expansion. Historians have attributed the withdrawal of Batu's army from Hungary to several factors: the news of the death of the Great Khan Ögedei, the decline of the Mongol army's military potential, and unfavorable natural conditions. If the campaign of 1241–1242 is examined from the standpoint of its objectives, it can be seen to have begun as a reconnaissance operation (the actions of Shiban's advance detachments), after which it assumed a destructive character, yet with the intention of subsequently incorporating Hungary into the Mongol Empire. Since this objective proved unattainable, in the winter of 1241/1242 the invasion became pure-



ly predatory, aimed at extracting from the country as much booty as possible. The final objective of Batu and his entourage was the capture of King Béla IV in order to compel him to pay tribute to the Mongol khans, but this, too, proved impossible to achieve. The death of Ögedei served only as a pretext for the Mongols' return to the steppes of Eastern Europe, concealing the gradual exhaustion of the military potential of the Mongol army.

Keywords:

Batu's campaign in Hungary; Formation of the Mongol Empire; The reign of Béla IV in Hungary

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In 1235, a group of Hungarian Dominicans set out eastward in order to find the descendants of those Hungarians who, in the first third of the ninth century, had refused to leave their ancestral homeland on the Volga (Great Hungary) and migrate first to the lower Don and then to the northern Black Sea region, ultimately to “find a homeland” in the lands of the Carpathian Basin. The report on this mission, written by another Hungarian Dominican — Brother Richard — contains the opinion that there was no Mongol threat to the Hungarians, since the eastern Magyars had defeated the “Tatars” (as medieval Hungarian chroniclers, and not only they, called the Mongols) “in the

very first battle”. “For this reason they (the Mongols — M.Y.) chose them (the eastern Magyars — M.Y.) as their friends and allies, so that together with them they utterly devastated fifteen kingdoms”. After this, the report tells of Julian’s meeting with a certain noble Mongol, who “said that the Tatar army, which was then stationed nearby at a distance of five days’ march, intended to go against Alemannia; but they were waiting for another army that had been sent to ravage Persia”.¹ By “Alemannia” the Mongols meant the German Empire², which at that time was considered the largest state in Europe. If Richard’s report is compared with the later work of Julian himself, it may be assumed that in 1235–1236, Batu Khan and his entourage possessed only the most general information about the lands lying west of Rus’, and therefore regarded the German emperor (Frederick II Hohenstaufen) as their principal adversary.

In 1237 Julian set out a second time, now with other Dominican companions, to the eastern Magyars with the intention of beginning their Christianization. On this occasion, however, he was unable to go beyond the borders of Rus’, since by that time the Mongols had already destroyed Volga Bulgaria and were preparing to invade northeastern Rus’. The report on this expedition was written by Julian himself after his return home in 1238 in the form of a letter to the bishop of Perugia, Salvio Salvi, known as the *Epistula de vita Thartarorum* (“Letter on the Life of the Tatars”). In it, information about the impending threat of an invasion by the Mongol hordes appears more concrete, at least with regard to Batu’s initial objective, which had become the conquest of the Kingdom of Hungary. Julian learned this while communicating with Prince Yuri Vsevolodovich of Vladimir-Suzdal (1218–1238). The Hungarian Dominican writes as follows on this matter: “It is reliably reported by many, and the prince

¹ Relatio fratri Ricardi / Ed. I. Deér // Scriptores rerum Hungaricarum tempore ducum regumque stirpis Arpadianae gestarum / Edendo operi praefuit E. Szentpétery (hereinafter: SRH). Vol. II. Budapestini, 1938. P. 541. The quotation is taken from an unpublished translation of Richard’s report, made by V.P. Shusharin.

² Jelentés Julianus első útjáról / Ford. Györffy Gy. // A tatárjárás emlékezete. Budapest, 1987. 122. l.

of Suzdal verbally conveyed (it) to the king of Hungary through me, that day and night the Tatars are holding council on how they may reach and seize the Kingdom of Hungary. It is said that they intend to go and conquer Rome and beyond Rome. For this reason, he sent envoys to the king of Hungary, who, passing through the land of Suzdal, were captured by the prince of Suzdal, and the letters addressed to the king were obtained from them by that prince”.³

Julian managed to find an interpreter who translated into Latin the text of one of these letters from the Mongol ruler to the Hungarian king. The resulting translation is also included in Julian's letter to the bishop of Perugia. I cite it in full: “I, Khaim, the Envoy of the King of Heaven, to whom He has given power over the earth to raise up those who submit and to suppress those who resist, marvel at you, king of Hungary, that although I have already sent envoys to you thirty times, you have sent none of them back to me, nor have you sent me either your envoys or letters. I know that you are a rich and powerful king, that you have many warriors at your disposal, and that you alone rule a great kingdom. Therefore, it is difficult for you to submit to me voluntarily; yet it would be better and wiser for you to submit to me of your own accord. Furthermore, I have learned that you keep under your protection the Cumans, my slaves. For this reason, I command you that in the future you not keep them with you so that because of them you do not make me your enemy. For it is easier for them to escape than for you, since they, wandering without houses in tents, may perhaps save themselves, whereas you, living in houses and possessing fortresses and cities — how will you escape from my hands?”⁴

The replacement of Germany by Hungary as the principal objective of the Mongols' planned invasion of the West indicates that their leaders had refined their knowledge of Central Europe. Batu and his entourage apparently realized that not Germany, but Hungary was the European country most favorable in terms of providing a fodder

³ *Frater Julianus*. *Epistula de vita Thartarorum* // SRH. Vol. II [repr.]. Budapest, 1999. P. 719. Here and below, the unpublished translation of Julian's epistle, made by V.P. Shusharin, is cited.

⁴ *Ibid.*

base for the Mongol cavalry⁵. In the khan's letter, in addition to the call to submit without resistance to the "Envoy of the King of Heaven", two *casus belli* are cited: (1) the absence of "feedback", that is, the lack of reciprocal embassies from the king to the Mongol khan; and (2) the king's acceptance for settlement of a group of Cumans, whom the khan regarded as his slaves. While the second of these reasons finds support in the sources, nothing is known to scholars about the "thirty embassies" allegedly sent by Batu to Béla IV. Most likely one or several such embassies were indeed dispatched by the ruler of the Jochid Ulus to the Hungarian king (Andrew II or Béla IV), but the sources available to us contain no information about their arrival in Hungary prior to 1241. Incidentally, Julian's letter contains the only testimony to the concrete objective of Batu Khan's western campaign. Other, more limited aims of the Mongol invasion can only be inferred on the basis of an analysis of the specific actions of Batu's army in the Middle Danube region, which constitutes the main subject of the present study.

From a theoretical standpoint, the objectives of a planned military campaign largely determine its character, which may change as a result of shifts in the military-political situation during hostilities, as well as due to miscalculations revealed in the planning. Together with changes in the character of a campaign, its ultimate goals often change as well. In this connection, determining the nature of the Mongol invasion of the Kingdom of Hungary at its various stages, in my opinion, is extremely important for the study of the military campaigns of 1241 and 1242. Unfortunately, this issue has attracted little interest among researchers, most of whom have considered the campaigns in question to differ little from other Mongol invasions, while the withdrawal of Batu's hordes from Hungary in 1242 was long explained by the death of the Great Khan Ögedei in Karakorum⁶. This produced the impression that the devastation of Rus',

⁵ Пауцто В.Т. Героическая борьба русского народа за независимость. XIII век. М., 1956. С. 170.

⁶ Всеобщая история с IV столетия до нашего времени / Под ред. Э. Лависса и А. Рамбо. Пер. с франц. Т. II. Феодалная Европа. Крестовые походы. М., 1897. С. 879.



Batu Khan in a medieval Chinese drawing of the 14th century.
From open sources

Hungary, Poland, and Bohemia were links in a single chain — the relentless advance of the Mongols “to the last sea”. In reality, as will be shown below, matters were far more complex.

Researchers of Batu's campaign deep into Europe have been, and continue to be, far more interested in the details of the military operations, battles, changes in the strategic situation, and the like, than in the character of the campaigns of 1241 and 1242. This is especially evident in the works of Austrian and Hungarian historiography of the interwar period devoted to this subject. Remaining within a descriptive framework, even the most serious scholars of the Mongol invasion of Hungary and neighboring countries (G. Strakosch-Grassmann, J. Doberdói Breit [Bánlaky], L. Zichy⁷) regarded the campaign in question as a predatory, destructive expedition and nothing more.

In a recent detailed study of Batu's invasion of Central and Southeastern Europe by the Hungarian military historian János

⁷ *Strakosch-Grassmann Gustav*. Der Einfall der Mongolen in Mitteleuropa in den Jahren 1241–1242. Innsbruck, 1893; *Doberdoi Breit József*. A tatárjárás (1236–1242). Bp., 1930 (Magyar nemzet hadtörténelme. V.); *Zichy Ladomér*. A tatárjárás Magyarországon. Pécs, 1934.



Andrew II. 19th-century depiction.
 From open sources

Zsolt Pinter, homage is likewise paid to this established tradition: “The reason that provoked the Tatar offensive ... was the expansion of Hungarian sovereign influence into territories to which the Mongol khans laid claim (Wallachia, Moldavia, the Cuman lands, and Galicia). The specific *casus belli* was the acceptance of Köten (the Cuman prince Kotyan — M.Y.) and his people in 1239”.⁸ These assertions of the Hungarian historian are difficult to accept, since in 1234 the 29-year struggle of King Andrew II of Hungary (1205–1235) for southwestern Rus’ ended ingloriously. As Master Rogerius testifies in his *Carmen Miserabile*, written soon after the return of Batu’s hordes from the European campaign to the Volga region, on the eve of the Mongol invasion, Hungarian society feared not an incursion of steppe nomads from beyond the Carpathians, but rather an invasion by the inhabitants of Rus’, seeking to avenge the damage inflicted upon them by the Hungarians during nearly three decades of devastation of the Galician and Volhynian lands by the army of Andrew II⁹. The only argument supporting J.Zs. Pinter’s

⁸ Pinter János Zsolt. *Tatárok és magyarok // Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*. 118 (2005). 3. sz. 696. l. (A quotation from the Russian-language summary).

⁹ Rogerius. *Carmen miserabile / Ed. L. Juhász // SRH. Vol. II. P. 560–561.*



Béla IV. 19th-century depiction.
From open sources

view is Béla IV's adoption of the title "king of Cumania",¹⁰ yet this reflected rather the Hungarian king's supreme authority over the area of Cuman settlement within Hungary than any claim to extend the power of the Hungarian crown over the Cuman steppe.

During the first years of the reign of Béla IV, who ascended the Hungarian throne in 1235, he had to contend not only with the consequences of the unsuccessful foreign policy of his father Andrew II, but also with a sharply intensified opposition movement of the Hungarian nobility against the king. As is well known, in the course of creating their empire, the Mongols, before the beginning of every major campaign, collected (through their scouts) information about the political situation, armies, fortresses, roads, and so forth in the country they intended to invade. If J.Zs. Pinter is correct, then in the case of Batu's campaign in Hungary the khan and his entourage would have possessed clearly outdated information about the possibility of Árpád expansion to the east — something difficult to believe.

The first to challenge the established tradition of a simplified understanding of the aims and character of the Mongol invasion

¹⁰ Györffy György. *Bevezetés // A tatárjárás emlékezete / Szerk. Katona Tamás, bev. Györffy György. Bp., 1987. 19. l.*

of Hungary were the Hungarian Marxist historians Emma Lederer and Ödön Schütz at the turn of the 1950s. Having carefully studied the methods by which the Mongol-Tatars carried out their policy of conquest in China, Central Asia, and Transcaucasia, as well as against various nomadic peoples of Eurasia, E. Lederer and Ö. Schütz advanced the concept of the reconnaissance-related, preliminary character of Batu's campaign in Hungary, similar to the reconnaissance expeditions that preceded the final conquest of other states and peoples¹¹. According to this concept, the goal of Batu and his entourage was large-scale reconnaissance of the possibilities for establishing the Mongols in Central and Southeastern Europe, from where (should they succeed in retaining this region) they could prepare for a campaign "to the last sea".

This concept initially gained acceptance among Hungarian scholars, which was reflected in the first volume of the academic *History of Hungary*¹². Among the Soviet historians it was supported by V.P. Shusharin¹³, but it immediately drew criticism from M.A. Pavlushkova. In a review of one of E. Lederer's articles devoted to international relations during the period of the Mongol campaigns in Europe, M.A. Pavlushkova speaks of the inconsistency between the plans of the campaign in question and the nature of a preliminary reconnaissance. However, Pavlushkova's arguments are based primarily on the presumed logic of the ruler of the Jochid Ulus (if it had been a reconnaissance campaign, Batu would not have sent his entire army with his best commanders and would not have led it personally)¹⁴, rather than on source data characterizing various as-

¹¹ *Ледерер Эмма*. Татарское нашествие на Венгрию в связи с международными событиями эпохи // Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungariae. T. II. 1953. N. 1–2. С. 1–45; *Schütz Ödön*. A mongol hódítás néhány problémájához // Századok. 1959. 2–4. sz. 209–232. 1.

¹² Magyarország története. I. Előzmények és magyar történet 1242-ig / Főszerk. Székely Gy. 2. kiad. Budapest, 1987. 1439. l.

¹³ История Венгрии в 3-х тт. / Отв. ред. В.П. Шушарин, Т.М. Исламов, А.И. Пушкаш. Т. I. М., 1971. С. 147–148.

¹⁴ *Павлушкова М. А.* Аннотация на статью Э. Ледерер «Международные отношения в период татарского нашествия» // Средние века. Т. 5. 1954. С. 408.

pects of the campaign. In the works of contemporary Hungarian historians one no longer encounters assertions that the invasion of Hungary by Batu's hordes was a reconnaissance expedition.

An interesting idea regarding the main objective of the campaign under study was advanced by V.T. Pashuto. In his works devoted to the Mongol-Tatar invasion of Rus' and Central Europe, the historian writes that the Mongol-Tatars intended "to turn the Hungarian plain ... into a fodder base for their cavalry".¹⁵ Unfortunately, this idea was not developed by Pashuto into a full concept of the conquering character of Batu's campaign in Hungary (where one of the political centers of the Jochid Ulus was to be located) supported by source material, although such a conclusion logically follows from his statement.

There is also the opinion of the American Mongolist Thomas T. Allsen, who, on the basis of statements in Chinese and Mongolian sources contemporary to Batu Khan's campaign in Central and Southeastern Europe, which unequivocally refer to the campaign of 1241 as the "Cuman campaign", considers the main goal of this campaign to have been the destruction of Cuman power in the steppes of the northern Black Sea region in order to transform this "steppe corridor" into the western frontier of the Mongol Empire¹⁶. Allsen's viewpoint appears highly improbable, since the Chinese chroniclers of the period of the Mongol Empire were located relatively close to Karakorum but very far from the steppes of Eastern Europe; consequently, they had a poor understanding of the international situation that had developed there by the beginning of 1241. As a result, they elevated the pretext for the Mongol army's advance westward — the desire to subject all the Cumans to their authority — into the main objective of Batu's campaigns of 1241–1242.

If one summarizes at a theoretical level the opinions of the scholars cited above, it may be concluded that there exist three different viewpoints on the character of Batu's campaign of 1241–1242 in Cen-

¹⁵ Пауцто В. Т. Героическая борьба русского народа за независимость. С. 170. See also: Пауцто В.Т. Монгольский поход вглубь Европы // Татаро-монголы в Азии и в Европе. М., 1977. С. 221.

¹⁶ See: Szabó János B. A tatárjárás: A mongol hódítás és Magyarország. Budapest, 2007. 162. l.

tral Europe. On this basis, more than three decades ago I proposed distinguishing three types of campaigns undertaken by the founders of nomadic empires against countries whose inhabitants “live in houses”: (1) reconnaissance campaigns; (2) purely destructive campaigns aimed at the subsequent imposition of tribute on the surviving part of the population not carried off into captivity; (3) destructive campaigns aimed at subsequent annexation, when, after the defeat of the main military forces of the conquered country, the aggressors create organs of occupation authority to prepare the local population for incorporation of their country into the nomadic empire¹⁷.

Each of the types of campaigns listed above presupposes its own specific objective and a corresponding pattern of troop movement. A reconnaissance campaign involves the incursion of a small army or military detachment acting rapidly, without pausing for large-scale plunder of the territories being reconnoitered, even in the event of a defeat of the enemy¹⁸. The principal aims of such a reconnaissance expedition are to verify information previously obtained by scouts and to “probe” the defensive system of the prospective adversary’s borders, in order to determine what level of military force would be required to break that system of defense. If such a reconnaissance detachment (or army) encounters effective resistance, it immediately withdraws and returns to the headquarters of the nomadic ruler with the valuable intelligence it has acquired. The campaign of the Mongol commanders Subedei (Subutai) and Jebe, who, after defeating the military forces of the Khwarazmian state in Central Asia and capturing Samarkand in 1220, moved westward along the southern coast of the Caspian Sea, passed through Transcaucasia,

¹⁷ *Juraszov Mihail Konsztantinovics. Batu magyarországi hadjáratának jellegéről és a tátárok elvonulásának okairól // Világtörténet. Budapest, 1989, 4. sz. 92–103.1.* The journal was published in 1991. In it, the classification of the military campaigns of the founders of nomadic empires against neighboring peoples and states is formulated in a more simplified manner.

¹⁸ A striking example of this is the actions of the Mongol army of Subedei and Jebe, which, after defeating the forces of the Russian princes at the Kalka River in 1223, devastated only one section of the steppe frontier of Rus’ (the southern outskirts of the Pereyaslavl land), after which it quickly set off eastward, toward its native nomadic pastures.

is attested by Master Rogerius (Roger) of Varadin (ca. 1200–1266), who was held captive by the Mongols and described these matters in his *Carmen Miserabile*, which will be discussed in detail below.

As for the invasion of Hungary by Batu's hordes, at different stages of this military operation it assumed different characters, and within it all three of the aforementioned types of nomadic campaigns against sedentary European peoples and states manifested themselves. After crossing the line of the Carpathian mountain ranges¹⁹, the main Mongol forces under the leadership of Batu Khan advanced slowly to meet the army of Béla IV. In mid-March – early April 1241 the advance detachments of Shiban carried out a series of reconnaissance actions aimed at testing the strength of the defensive system along the northeastern borders of the Kingdom of Hungary. Batu and his commanders clearly expected a decisive battle, calculating that the absence of a permanent royal army – one assembled from the military contingents of seventy-two castle districts – would result in insufficient coordination among the hastily gathered troops during such a battle. At the same time, Béla IV undoubtedly bears responsibility for underestimating the Mongol threat during the devastation of the Russian lands by Batu's hordes.

As noted above, the expectation by the steppe forces of a decisive battle is characteristic of the third type of military campaign against sedentary populations, the ultimate goal of which is the subsequent annexation of the attacked country. That the principal objective of the Mongol invasion of Central and Southeastern Europe in 1241 was precisely Hungary is indicated not only by Julian, but also by the strategic decision taken by Batu and his entourage to divide the Mongol army into three columns. One of these, under the command of Baidar and Orda, was to bypass the Kingdom of Hungary from the north and west through Poland, Bohemia, and Austria; another, led by Kadan and Baghatur, invaded Transylvania on 31 March 1241 in order to devastate the southern regions of the Árpád monarchy. This

¹⁹ According to “*Carmen miserabile*”, on March 12, 1241, the main forces of Batu's army invaded the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary through the Veretsky Pass. (*Rogierius. Carmen miserabile. P. 561*).



Battle of Mohi.
Hungarian illustrated chronicle Chronicon Pictum. 1358

column of the Mongol army captured Beszterce (modern Bistrița, Romania) on 2 February, Kuomelburg (not localized by scholars) on 4 April, and Sebes (modern Sibiu, Romania)²⁰ on 9 April, while Batu's main forces, aimed at a direct advance into the central regions of Hungary (where its capitals Buda, Esztergom, and Székesfehérvár were located) moved toward the Hungarian royal army in order to defeat it in a decisive battle. All of this corresponds to the third type of campaign according to the classification outlined above.

The decisive battle between the armies of Batu and Béla IV took place on 11 April 1241 on the field of Mohi, situated halfway between the Verecke Pass (through which Batu entered the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary) and Pest. Béla IV's army suffered a crushing defeat, and the king himself escaped by fleeing through the north-western counties of Hungary (modern Slovakia) to Austria. As early as 15 April the advance units of the Mongol army reached Pest²¹. During the following weeks the entire eastern half of the Kingdom of Hungary came under Mongol control. It would seem that noth-

²⁰ *Annales Frisacenses // Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores. T. XXIV. Hannoverae, 1879. P. 65.*

²¹ *Rogierius. Carmen miserabile. P. 565.*

ing prevented Batu from giving the order to cross the Danube in order to achieve his main objective — the transformation of Hungary into one of the provinces of the Mongol Empire.

However, the ruler of the Jochid Ulus, evidently after consulting with the commanders of his military column, did not issue such an order. Having by June 1241 seized Transylvania and all the lands east of the middle course of the Danube²², the Mongol army turned the Danube into a front line that remained unchanged for ten and a half months, until mid-winter 1241/1242. It is difficult to explain the reasons for this decision, which was clearly erroneous from a strategic point of view, since such a prolonged respite allowed the enemy to “heal its wounds”, assemble a new army, strengthen the walls of castles, and seek assistance from neighboring states. It also contributed to a decline in the morale of the Mongol troops, whose principal occupation became the constant plundering of the local population.

The sources provide no explanation for the cessation of the Mongol advance in Hungary in mid-April 1241. Judging by the fact that it resumed at the turn of January–February 1242, its principal objective — the transformation of Hungary into the western frontier of the Mongol Empire — remained relevant for several months. Nevertheless, the Mongol army, having moved several thousand kilometers from its homeland and separated from the steppes of Eastern Europe by the Carpathian range, could not fail to feel the potential danger posed by the more westerly European states, especially in the context of a diminishing military potential of its own.

Although Poland, fragmented into separate principalities, was unable to resist the detachments of Baidar and Orda, and although on 9 April (two days before the battle of Mohi) the Mongols defeated the army of the Polish princeps, Prince Henry II the Pious of Kraków (1238–1241), at Legnica, the city itself was not captured, and in suppressing the resistance of the Silesian knighthood the Mongols suffered appreciable losses. After this the northern column of the Mongol army turned to the southwest, intending to reach the Middle

²² Magyarország történeti kronológiája. I. köt. 3. kiad. / Főszerk Benda K. Budapest, 1986. 148. l.



Battle of Legnica. Medieval miniature.
From open sources

Danube through Bohemia. At first the steppe forces were successful there as well, but the Czech king Wenceslas I (1230–1253) forced one of the Mongol detachments to retreat in the battle of Kladno.

After fleeing from the battlefield of Mohi, Béla IV for some time found himself effectively a hostage of the Austrian duke Frederick II the Warlike (1230–1246). As a pledge for his release the king was compelled to hand over to the duke, for temporary possession, three northwestern counties of Hungary — apparently Moson, Sopron, and Pozsony (or Locsmánd). The fact that these castle districts came under Austrian authority saved them from Mongol devastation: Frederick II was able to repel the onslaught of Batu Khan's hordes against his domains. On 18 May 1241, already in Zagreb, Béla IV appealed for assistance to Pope Gregory IX, to Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II Hohenstaufen, to King Louis IX of France, and to King Conrad IV of Germany, but he received no tangible aid from any of them.

An interesting source illustrating the degree of Hungary's subjugation by Batu Khan's hordes is a letter from an unnamed cleric of Székesfehérvár to the pope (Gregory IX), dated 2 February 1242, which lists the Hungarian fortresses not captured by the Mongols. Of those located in the territory where Batu's authority had been established between March and June 1241, the letter mentions

Pozsony (modern Bratislava), Nitra, Komárom (modern Komárno), Fülek (modern Fiľakovo), and Abaújvár²³. All of these were situated in Upper Hungary (modern Slovakia).

Batu Khan and his entourage undoubtedly had to take these facts into account when considering plans for the conquest of the western half of the Kingdom of Hungary after reaching the line of the middle Danube. Moreover, the transformation of the already occupied part of the Árpád domains into one of the political centers of the Jochid Ulus required the creation of elements of an occupation administration, which, as noted above, corresponds to the third type of Mongol campaigns against the lands outside the Eurasian steppe belt.

That organs of occupation administration were indeed created by the Mongols is testified by Master Rogerius (Roger) in his *Carmen Miserabile*. Recalling the period of his captivity among the Mongols, he writes that “they appointed *canesei*, that is, bailiffs (*balimi*)²⁴, who oversaw justice and cared for their horses, animals, weapons, property, and clothing. My overseer was one of these lords, and he governed nearly a thousand settlements, and there were in all almost one hundred *canesei*. We had peace and tranquility, and proper and equal justice was observed for all. The most beautiful maidens were handed over to them, but sheep, oxen, and horses were returned by their leaders for a considerable ransom. The *canesei* gathered almost every week. In order to observe their way of life, to become acquainted with some of their elders, and to find out whether it was possible to ransom oneself from captivity, I often went to them with my *caneseus*. All the *canesei* received in advance a certain order in writing that men, women, and children from specified settlements should appear before them with gifts. We greatly feared these notices, having no idea of the underlying purpose. I decided that it was better to go with the *canesei*

²³ The latest edition of the letter with Russian translation and commentary, see: *Магистр Рогерий. Горестная песнь о разорении венгерского королевства татарами / Пер. с лат., вступ. статья и комм. А.С. Досаева. СПб., 2012. С. 206 (пер.), 209 (текст), 283–284 (комм.).*

²⁴ The use of the French-derived term *balimi* to designate the heads of the local administration who were not *ispáns* of the royal castle districts (counties) underscores the alien character of the elements of the occupation administration created by the Mongols.



Béla IV.

Hungarian illustrated chronicle Chronicon Pictum. 1358

themselves to the army than to remain in the settlement with such doubts. Therefore, stripped and barefoot, we stayed near the guard of the wagons in the tents of certain Hungarians whom the Tatars had chosen for their service. The *canesei*, having approached the prepared gifts, took them and led all those gathered into a single valley, where, deceitfully stripping them naked, they slaughtered them all”.²⁵

As can be seen from this extensive quotation from the recollections of a man who spent a year in Mongol captivity, the part of Hungary occupied by Batu's army was divided into roughly one hundred administrative-territorial units headed by *canesei*. Most likely the figure “one hundred” represents a literary rounding up of the actual number since Hungary at that time was divided into seventy-two castle districts (counties), although it is possible that Batu and his entourage divided the country in accordance with the decimal system traditional among the Mongols. The word *canesei* is clearly of Slavic origin and was used by Rogerius to make the term more understandable to his readers. The educated medieval Hungarian public was

²⁵ Rogerius. *Carmen miserabile*. P. 581; *Мазистр Рогерий*. Горестная песнь о разорении венгерского королевства татарами. С. 51–52.

aware that before the arrival of the Hungarians “Pannonia” had been inhabited by Slavs, whose leaders were called princes (*knyazes*). The memory of former princely domains on the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary was preserved in various toponyms such as Kanizsa.

From the standpoint of the present study, it is important to note that the occupiers attempted to present themselves to the subjugated population as guardians of legality, although the sense of complete impunity made representatives of the occupation authorities appear in Hungarian eyes as typical plunderers and murderers. If this latter circumstance is regarded as a “local distortion” of the policy aimed at transforming the Middle Danube region into a new military-political center of the Jochid Ulus, then, on the whole, Batu’s campaign of 1241 in Hungary corresponded to the third type of campaign. This is confirmed by the more “civilized” character of the plundering of the Hungarian population in comparison with the “scorched-earth” devastation experienced by northeastern Rus’ in 1237–1238, as well as by the creation of elements of a local occupation self-government.

The inability of scholars to provide an exhaustive answer to the question of the reasons for the sudden halt of the Mongol offensive in Hungary in mid-April 1241 makes the problem of determining the principal objective of the resumption of that operation in late January – early February 1242 all the more enigmatic. Was it an attempt to achieve the original goal – the transformation of Hungary into the westernmost political center of the Jochid Ulus – or had that objective already been recognized as unattainable? Attempts to capture the ecclesiastical capital (Esztergom) and the royal capital (Székesfehérvár) of Hungary can be interpreted as elements of either the third or the second type of Mongol campaigns against sedentary European populations. Although the time for achieving the most ambitious objective (a march “to Rome and beyond”) had been lost, Béla IV’s failure to raise a new army still gave the Mongols hope of making the German Empire the western neighbor of their great power.

This hope, however, quickly vanished when the Mongol army, which invaded Transdanubia at the turn of January–February 1242, fully experienced the negative consequences of the suspension of its advance in the spring of 1241. Of the Hungarian capitals the



The Mongols pursue the King of Hungary, Béla IV.
Hungarian illustrated chronicle Chronicon Pictum. 1358

Mongols succeeded in capturing and plundering only Óbuda (Old Buda), where no large material wealth was stored, and the city of Esztergom, though its fortress withstood the Mongol assault, as did Székesfehérvár. Batu Khan's warriors were also unable to take the wealthiest Hungarian monastery, St. Martin of Pannonia (Pannonhalma), whose dilapidated walls had been hastily reinforced during the campaign of 1241. Any prospect of achieving the grand objective — the maximal westward expansion of the Mongol Empire — was now out of the question. Consequently, Batu and his entourage decided, as a final act, to devastate “to the ground” the remaining part of the Kingdom of Hungary as well as those territories where they had previously created elements of occupation administration. The change in the principal objective of the invasion entailed a change in its character: from a campaign aimed at subsequent annexation (type three) it became a purely destructive campaign (type two).

As noted above, a campaign of the second type presupposes not only the devastation of the territory attacked by the steppe forces, but also the formal establishment of subsequent tribute payments by the surviving population that has not been carried off into captivity. In order to achieve this aim, Batu sent his cousin Kadan (Qadan) with a military detachment to the southern part of the Kingdom of Hungary in pursuit of Béla IV, who, prior to the crossing of the Dan-

ube by the Mongol hordes, had been in Zagreb and from there, on 19 January 1242, once again appealed to the Holy See in Rome for assistance in organizing resistance to the aggressors. After the Mongols entered Transdanubia, Béla IV was forced to flee southward from Zagreb toward Dalmatia. It appears that Kadan's tasks were to catch up with the king, take him captive, and bring him to Batu's headquarters in order to secure the Hungarian king's official recognition of dependence on the Mongol khans and his obligation to pay tribute.

This objective, however, was not achieved. Béla IV managed to reach the Adriatic coast, where he found protection from Kadan's detachments on one of the islands near Trogir. By that time (early March 1242) the bulk of the Mongol army was already leaving the territory of Hungary, intending to ravage on their return route the lands of Serbia and the Second Bulgarian Empire, after which they would return to the steppe belt of Eastern Europe, where the creation of a new political center of the Jochid Ulus — known to history as the Golden Horde — soon began.

The reasons for the Mongol invasion of Central and Southeastern Europe have traditionally been regarded by scholars as obvious and understandable; yet as far as the causes of the Mongol army's withdrawal from Hungary, ever new hypotheses and conjectures have been and continue to be advanced. The matter is complicated by the fact that on 11 December 1241 the Great Khan of all the Mongols, Ögedei, died in Karakorum, and, in accordance with the testament of Chinggis Khan, his descendants were required to gather in the capital of the Mongol Empire to elect a new supreme ruler. Given the means of communication available at the time, messengers could not have informed Batu of Ögedei's death before the beginning of 1242, since the straight-line distance between the Middle Danube region and Karakorum is nearly 6,000 kilometers.

Beginning with the positivist historians of the nineteenth century, the only conceivable reason for the Mongols' departure from Hungary was long considered to be Batu Khan's receipt of news of the Great Khan's death on 11 December 1241. The authors of the *Histoire générale du IVe siècle à nos jours* write on this subject as follows: "When the official news of his (Ögedei's — M.Y.) death reached Hungary, probably in March 1242, Batu could not be restrained by any means. Subedei

himself agreed to let him go and took measures for the evacuation of the entire country from the Adriatic Sea and the March of Treviso to the Dniester... Nevertheless, it had to be arranged so that no one could harbor even the slightest suspicion that the army was retreating. Batu rode ahead with his retinue; behind him the main body of the army moved in slow marches, while at the same time Kadan and Kaidu were dispatched for a diversion to the west and inflicted complete devastation there in order to demonstrate that the Mongols were leaving of their own free will”²⁶ (back translation from Russian — *Editor*). As can be seen from this quotation from the chapter written by Léon Cahun, it was precisely the death of Ögedei (called Oktay in the cited book) that prompted Batu Khan to lead his army back to the steppes of Eastern Europe. As is well known, the ruler of the Jochid Ulus never went to Karakorum, instead turning to the organization of the political center of his domains in the Middle and Lower Volga region.

Hungarian historians of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries sought to verify the dating of the Mongols' withdrawal from Hungary in March 1242 by calculating how many days it would have taken for news of the Great Khan's death to reach Batu's headquarters in Hungary²⁷. In one of the most recent studies of the Mongol invasion of Hungary, this view is supported by references to information provided by Hungarian envoys sent by Béla IV to Karakorum²⁸. It is hardly open to doubt that the news of Ögedei's death influenced the decision to return Batu's army to the steppes of Eastern Europe; most likely, however, this was not the fundamental cause but rather a pretext, intended to conceal the impossibility of the Mongols' further stay in the lands of the Carpathian Basin.

Modern historians likewise do not regard the death of the Great Khan as the reason for the Mongols' withdrawal from Hungary²⁹.

²⁶ Всеобщая история с IV столетия до нашего времени. Т. II. Феодалная Европа. Крестовые походы. М., 1897. С. 879.

²⁷ *Doberdoi Breit József*. Atatárjárás (1236–1242). 109. l.

²⁸ *Szabó J.B.* A tatárjárás. 157. l.

²⁹ See: <https://24.hu/tudomány/2021/11/07/tatarjaras-batu-kanvalasztas-kozepkor-tortenelem> (in Hungarian). 24.hu.2021. November 7 (accessed: 2022. április 1.).

The principal argument advanced in this regard is the absence of any real chance that Batu could have been elected as the new Great Khan of all the Mongols. Unlike their predecessors, who based this view solely on logical reasoning and on the fact that Batu was not present at the election, contemporary scholars draw upon evidence from Chinese sources indicating that Batu's chief military adviser, Subedei, criticized him for his unwillingness to travel to Karakorum, but was unable to persuade him to take part in the election of the new Great Khan³⁰.

As for the actual causes of Batu's departure from Hungary, in my opinion the main one was the steady deterioration of the situation of the large Mongol cavalry army, which had no effective means of replenishing its ranks in conditions where it could not fully exploit its best military qualities. Narrative sources contain no specific information about resistance to the invaders on the part of the Hungarian population; there exist only folkloric accounts of a partisan movement against the Mongols in Transylvania³¹. At the same time, John of Plano Carpini, in his *History of the Mongols* (*Ystoria Mongalorum*), writes of the numerous casualties suffered by the Mongols during their military operations in Poland and Hungary³². He is echoed in this respect by the Armenian king Hethum II³³.

A specialist in the foreign policy history of medieval Hungary, Géza Herczegh, explained the Mongols' withdrawal from Hungary in the following way: "In Hungary the freedom of movement of the Tatar cavalry in the open steppes reached its limit, beyond which they would hardly have been able to wage war as successfully as before. For the eastern conquerors, Hungary was important as a bridgehead for expansion to the west and south, and as soon as Batu abandoned further conquests, the secure possession of the country appeared to him inexpedient. Consequently, the significance of the campaign of 1241–1242 was to remove Hungary from among the active states

³⁰ Szabo J.B. A tatárjárás. 158. l.

³¹ Павлушкова М.А. Аннотация на статью Э. Ледерер. С. 408.

³² Иоанн де Плано Карпини. История монголов. Текст, пер, комм. / Под ред. А.А. Горского, В.В. Трепавлова. М., 2022. С. 71 (текст), 152 (пер.).

³³ Szabó J. B. A tatárjárás. 159. l.

that could threaten Tatar domination over Rus.”³⁴ As is clear from the quotation, G. Herczegh held a distinctive view regarding the final objective pursued by Batu and his entourage before leaving the Hungarian Kingdom in the spring of 1242.

Not long ago the American historian Denis Sinor attempted to answer the question of the reasons for the Mongols' retreat from Hungary from an ecological perspective. In his opinion, the enormous Mongol cavalry army (which Sinor estimates at 100–150 thousand warriors) had sufficient pasture on the Hungarian grasslands only for the campaign of 1241, while in the following year a shortage of fodder forced the Mongols to leave the Middle Danube region³⁵. This view of Sinor's is not considered convincing by B. Szabó, who argues that the Mongols successfully waged war for long periods of time in countries far less rich in pasture³⁶.

Another hypothesis, recently advanced by American and Swiss researchers, explains the withdrawal of Batu's hordes from Hungary by climatic anomalies that occurred in the Carpathian Basin on the eve of and during the years of the Mongol invasion. Between 1238 and 1241, temperatures in this region were higher than usual, while the winter of 1241/1242 was so severe that the frozen Danube in its middle course allowed the Mongol cavalry to cross it without difficulty and immediately begin the devastation of Transdanubia. However, snow cover exceeded normal levels, and the winter was followed by a rainy spring, which led to the flooding of a significant portion of Hungary's pastures³⁷.

These hypotheses all emphasize, each in its own way, the sharp deterioration of the conditions under which the Mongols were forced to conduct the campaign of 1242. In one way or another, the withdrawal of Batu's hordes from Hungary in 1242 appears to have been inevitable. The death of Ögedei came at a particularly oppor-

³⁴ *Herczegh Géza*. Magyar külpolitika, 896–1919. Budapest, 1987. 39–40. l.

³⁵ *Sinor D.* The Mongols in the West // *Journal of Asian History*. 33/1. 1999. P. 1–44.

³⁶ *Szabo J.B.* A tatárjárás. 161. l.

³⁷ See: https://index.hu/tudomany/tortenelem/2016/05/26/a_tatarok_nem_birtak_a_inagyar_klimat/ (2016.05.26).

tune moment, and the need to participate in the election of a new Great Khan served to push into the background the Mongol army's inability to "reach the last sea".

Thus, none of the objectives that Batu Khan and his entourage had set for themselves when invading Hungary was achieved, with the sole exception of the removal from its territory of as much booty as possible. During the military campaigns of 1241 and 1242, features of all three types of nomadic invasions into lands with predominantly sedentary populations manifested themselves. After crossing the Russo-Hungarian border, the advance detachments of Shiban carried out a reconnaissance raid, penetrating several dozen kilometers into Hungarian territory and quickly returning to the locations of Batu Khan's main forces. The campaign of 1241 represented a destructive expedition oriented toward the subsequent transformation of the Middle Danube region into the political center of the Jochid Ulus, which presupposed certain limits on the plundering of the local population, although it was extremely difficult to restrain Mongol warriors within such limits in a country that had been unable to halt their onslaught. In 1242, when the impossibility of retaining Hungary within the Mongol Empire became evident, the invasion assumed a purely destructive character, accompanied by unrestricted violence and atrocities against the local population.

With regard to the principal aims of the invasion of Hungary by Batu Khan's hordes, it may be assumed that in the course of the campaign these aims became progressively more modest. The initial plans to entrench themselves in the Middle Danube region in order to "reach Rome and beyond" were rapidly replaced by the aspiration to retain the Hungarian Kingdom as the western frontier of the Mongol Empire. This task likewise proved beyond the capabilities of a Mongol army separated by many thousands of kilometers from its homeland and having in its rear the devastated lands of Rus' and the Kipchak (Cuman) steppe. At the end of the winter of 1241/1242 Batu and his entourage sought, before leaving Hungary, to capture its ecclesiastical and royal capitals (Esztergom and Székesfehérvár) in order to carry away with them the most valuable treasures of the Hungarian Church and Crown, but this objective was not achieved

either. In the same way the Mongols failed to attain the final goal they had set themselves in Hungary: to capture King Béla IV and compel him to formally recognize the authority of the rulers of the Mongol Empire and to undertake the regular payment of tribute.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.



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