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The Memory of the Mongol Invasion of the Hungarian Kingdom in the 13th Century among Contemporaries

Summary: Between 1240 and 1242, a large Mongol invasion struck Central Europe, including the Hungarian Kingdom. This first invasion had a serious impact on the entire region, both militarily and politically, as well as psychologically. Contemporary memory attempted to process the topic and the psychological shock caused by the attack in various ways. The following article reviews how this Mongol campaign was reflected in 13th-century Hungarian memory and perception of time. The study examines contemporary literary works (a poem written during the Mongol invasion and a personal memoir written a few years later), the terminology used by the royal chancellery in documents issued in the 1240s and 1250s, contemporary references to the Mongol invasion as divine punishment, and the characteristic feature of the contemporary perception of time, whereby events unrelated to the invasion were often dated as 'before the Mongol invasion' or 'after the Mongol invasion.' This view of time was not only prevalent among the upper classes of society but also among the common people, and even among those who, due to their age, had no personal experience of the Mongol invasion. It can be showed that the experience of the Mongol invasion extended beyond its actual boundaries not only in space but also in time and served as a point of reference even for those who had only experienced it as children or not at all, but who were influenced by it as a kind of 'post-memory' through the transmission of information from the older generation.

Keywords: Mongol invasion, Hungarian Kingdom, Hungary, historical memory, trauma, time perspective



Between 1241 and 1242, a large Mongol invasion struck Central Europe, including the Hungarian Kingdom. This first invasion had a serious impact on the entire region, both militarily and politically, as well as psychologically. Contemporary memory attempted to process the topic and the psychological shock caused by the attack in various ways. The following article reviews how this Mongol campaign was reflected in 13th-century Hungarian memory and perception of time.

First, it is necessary to examine why the great European Mongol invasion, which was a campaign between 1236 and 1242,¹ left such a deep mark on the memory of the time. It is important to note that there were other times when nomadic horsemen from the east attacked the region, or Hungary more specifically. During the 11th century, the Pechenegs and the Oghuz Turks were the main threat, and then, from the end of the 11th century, the Cumans, who appeared in the region, attacked several times.² The scenario of these campaigns was always very similar: they entered the border region unexpectedly and then began to plunder the area, plundering and capturing prisoners. When news of the attack reached the ruler and a Hungarian army was organised, the attackers preferred to avoid confrontation and retreated. If there was a battle, the regular army defeated the invaders. Thus, these eastern campaigns never posed a real threat to the functioning of the country. One Hungarian chronicler who wrote about the Mongol invasion, Rogerius, canon of Várad (today Oradea, Romania), conveyed the following image of the threat posed by the eastern nomadic peoples in the first half of the 13th century: 'for the Cumans used to attack swiftly and devastate a part of the country before the Hungarians could assemble, and then quickly retreat. And the Hungarians did the same in Cumania.'³ The same was true of the western campaigns. The border region was repeatedly attacked from the Holy Roman Empire (specifically from Bohemia), and in the 12th century, the southern part of the country was threatened by the Byzantine Empire, which was at the height of its power.⁴

However, the last time an enemy army reached the innermost part of the country and inflicted such a defeat on the Hungarian king that his existing power collapsed was just under 200 years before the Mongol invasion, in the middle of the 11th century, when the armies of the Holy Roman Empire placed their supported candidate, Salamon, on the throne in 1063.⁵ Subsequently, until the Mongol invasion in 1241, never before had there been an instance of a foreign army inflicting a complete defeat on the Hungarian ruler and penetrating into the centre of the country. Thus, before 1241, it had been the experience for many generations that the country was stable and

1 There is extensive literature on the great European campaign of 1236–1242, a brief summary of which can be found, for example, in: Jackson P. 2005, 58–74.

2 Kovács S. 2014, 175–177; Kovács Sz. 2014, 181–185.

3 MRE 2010, 182–183.

4 Varga G. 2003, 99–161; Makk F. 1989.

5 Varga G. 2003, 128–129.

militarily well-defended, and that attacks by nomadic horsemen from the east were not a major threat, as they could be stopped by the armies stationed along the border. This defensive strategy had yielded the same results for 200 years, and there was no reason to question it even at the time of the Mongol attack. The extent to which this was the prevailing mindset is illustrated by the aforementioned Rogerius who stated that before the clash with the Mongols in 1241, several nobles were politically opposed to the king and wanted him to lose the battle, because then they would be more appreciated: ‘They would have liked the king to be defeated so that they would then be dearer to him. They thought that any such calamity would only hit some in particular and not all in general as they had heard that such things had happened before in Hungary.’⁶ Contemporary Hungarian public opinion did not feel threatened by the Mongol invasion at all.

It is necessary to provide a brief summary of the Mongol invasion of Hungary to provide greater context.⁷ The Hungarian king, Béla IV (1235–1270), tried to prepare for the danger, so in this case there was no question of an unexpected invasion. After the Mongol armies appeared in Eastern Europe in 1236 and attacked the Cumans, the king took in a group of Cumans. The leaders of the Mongol army sent several envoys to King Béla, demanding that he extradite the fugitive Cumans, but he refused, confident in his own strength. The Cuman armies, which would normally have reinforced the Hungarian main army, turned against the Hungarians and withdrew from the country towards the south. Despite this, Béla IV gathered his army and engaged in battle near the village of Muhi, on the Sajó River. The Mongols led by Batu clashed with the Hungarians at Muhi almost simultaneously (11–12 April 1241), while another group of them fought the Polish army at Legnica (9 April 1241). Both battles ended in victory for the Mongols. King Béla IV managed to escape, but the state apparatus in the eastern part of the country collapsed completely. The Mongol army settled in the flatlands of the ‘Alföld’ and completely exhausted the region’s resources. Béla still retained power in the western part of the country, as the two parts of the country were separated by the Danube River, which the Mongols did not yet want to cross. The panicked king sought help from the pope and the emperor, but to no avail. The western half of the country fell under Mongol occupation in early February 1242, when their armies crossed the frozen river. They began to besiege some of the more important castles and fortified towns in the area and tried to capture the king, who had fled to the Adriatic Sea, but in the spring of 1242, suddenly (apparently following a central command), the individual army units withdrew from the country.⁸ Consequently, some areas in the west of the country were hardly or not at all affected by the Mongol raids.

6 MRE 2010, 182.

7 For the latest account of the events of the Mongol invasion of Hungary, see: for example Bordi Z.L. 2024, 233–263; Holeščák M. 2024, 265–286; Szabó J.B. 2025, 215–246; Szabó J.B. 2025, 263–282.

8 On the question of the withdrawal from Hungary, see: Pow S. 2021, 109–115.

Although the extent of the destruction varied greatly from region to region,⁹ the events affected the entire country. Much of domestic and foreign trade ceased, and the state apparatus ground to a halt. The Mongol armies were stationed in the flatland named *Alföld*, a large food-producing region, and consumed most of the crops and livestock, while the rest did not reach other regions of the country, resulting in widespread famine throughout the land after the Mongols withdrew. According to the somewhat exaggerated claim of later Hungarian chroniclers, 'And because during that time they could not sow their fields, the number of Hungarians who perished of hunger after the departure of the Tartars was greater than the number of those who were carried away into captivity or fell beneath the sword.'¹⁰ Although the country was starting to recover relatively quickly when the king, who had fled to the coast, returned to his country, the events had not only political but also psychological significance. The people of the country had to face the fact that something had happened that even their grandfathers could not remember: a foreign army had ruled the country. Faced with the loss of home and friends, the profound upheaval of everyday life, and the persistent fear that the Mongols might return at any moment. It is clear that the Mongol invasion left a deep mark on people's memories.

Although individuals often try to bury their personal traumas within themselves, some choose the opposite path and prefer to talk about their experiences. There are several sources that were created shortly after the Mongol invasion of Hungary. One of these is a literary work that was written in the final hours of the Mongol occupation or shortly after the events. Its title is *Planctus destructionis regni Ungarie per Tartaros* (*Lament for the Destruction of Hungary by the Tartars*), and its only manuscript is found in a late medieval codex preserved in the University Library of Wrocław.¹¹ The author of the work is unknown, but it can be established that he was a person living in Hungary,¹² educated in the church and well versed in Latin literature. The work conveys a general picture of destruction, with the slaughter of people, the unburied dead lying around, famine, and the liturgy ceasing in the country's churches. It features the early Christian topos that God punished the country for its sins with the attack. It is certain that the poem faithfully reflects the spiritual state of its author and, presumably, the general spiritual state of his contemporaries. A recurring element of the poem is its description, in unique forms, of the starvation that the country's inhabitants had to endure in early 1242 (which is a typically recurring thought in the case of a person who is actually starving), as well as the lack of public safety,

9 About the regional differences in the destruction caused by the Mongol invasion in Hungary: Romhányi B.F. 2025, 327–342.

10 *Chronica de Gestis Hungarorum*. 2018, 326 (in Latin), 327 (in English).

11 Reference: I. F. 262, the poem can be found on folios 155^v–156^r. Latin edition: PDRHT 1938, 593–598.

12 The expressions 'nostra Pannonia' and 'salva nostram Ungariam' (*our Pannonia* and *protect our Hungary*) show his attachment, see: PDRHT 1938, 596, 598.

the breakdown of traditional human relationships and the resulting uncertainty of existence. However clichéd the horrors listed in the poem may seem, taken individually, they are typical symptoms of a society in which economic relations (i.e., trade and a steady supply of goods) and social relations (the traditional master-servant relationship and the cohesive power of the community) are disintegrating. This poem reflects the uncertainty that arises in such times.

Even more interesting is another source, which is essentially a personal (prose-style) account of how the author experienced the Mongol invasion. It was written a few years after the events, around 1243, and its author was Rogerius, canon of Várad (Oradea).¹³ Rogerius came from Italy and arrived in Hungary in 1232.¹⁴ He was here when the Mongol invasion took place, which he recounts in a very vivid manner. He begins his memoir with a general political overview, then recounts the immediate events leading up to the Mongol invasion, the army's incursion, the story of the lost battle of Muhi, and the king's escape. Subsequently, the narrative suddenly shifts to a personal memoir, and the account of the Mongol invasion continues without interruption, now from the author's point of view, in the first person singular, which is sometimes replaced by a more detached narrative perspective. Rogerius clearly tried to maintain the chronological order of the narrative, so when he reached parts that he knew about but had not experienced himself, he became a 'narrator' and then reverted to a 'personal memoirist.' From his description, it can be learnt how he fled for a long time from the marauding Mongol troops, always avoiding the places where the Mongols had just struck, but later he was captured, then escaped, and then went into hiding again. His perspective is very similar to that of the author of the *Lament*: the two most important themes of the personal section are the emphasis on constant fear and hunger. In his account, written several years after the events, he relived the events emotionally and was able to provide exceptionally vivid descriptions of the psychological state that overwhelms helpless people at such times. When he heard of the arrival of the Mongols while hiding in a reinforced place:

my hair stood on end, my body shivered with fear, my tongue stuttered miserably, for I saw that the inevitable moment of dreadful death was menacing me. I already beheld my murderers in my mind's eye: my body exuded the cold sweat of death. I also saw the human beings, when earnestly expecting death, unable to grab weapons, raise their arms, move their steps to places of safety, or survey the land with their eyes. What more? I saw people half-dead with fear.¹⁵

¹³ Latin-English edition: MRE 2010, 132–227.

¹⁴ For a brief account of his life, see: MRE 2010, XLIII–XLIV.

¹⁵ MRE 2010, 204–205.

Later, when he had already been captured, 'I always saw death with my physical and mind's eyes';¹⁶ and when they were banished from the country as prisoners, 'I had no hope of survival, and a bitter and cruel death was already waiting at the door, I thought it were better to die here than to be tortured by the steady stings [of fear].'¹⁷ In addition to the terror, the descriptions of the details of starvation are so vivid¹⁸ that it is certain that reference is made to memories that he experienced — and relived while writing. In any case, it is clear from the description that Rogerius specifically wanted to record his feelings, which is well illustrated by including personal elements alongside the more narrative, detached parts.

However, it was not only the authors of these two literary works who felt this way about the Mongol invasion. The terminology used by the royal chancellery faithfully reflected the official position of the court on this issue. If the wording of royal charters after 1242 is examined, it is clear that the Mongol invasion became synonymous with some kind of universal catastrophe in the royal chancellery as well.

In his letters to the Pope, Béla IV goes beyond the bounds of factuality and speaks dramatically about the invasion of the Mongols and the destruction of the country. The Mongols themselves are often referred to with negative adjectives in official documents written shortly after their withdrawal in 1242: 'the hands of the evil Tatar people,'¹⁹ 'the persecution of the evil Tatars,'²⁰ 'the harmful Tatar people' or 'the harmful arrival of the Tatars,' 'the barbaric Tatar people.'²¹ No other people were described with such strong adjectives in the chancellery's documents; this kind of narrative approach was reserved exclusively for the Mongol invasion. When the event was mentioned in the legal text of the document for some reason, it was often exaggerated and dramatised. The fact that circa 1250 (or possibly in 1247 or 1248), King Béla IV wrote to the Pope that 'Hungary was largely laid waste by the Mongol invasion and is surrounded by various faithless peoples like a fence around a sheepfold...' ²² could even be attributed to propaganda. After all, in this letter, Béla asked Pope Innocent IV for help, so it could be assumed that he somewhat exaggerated the danger that threatened Hungary and the Christian world. However, no propaganda can explain why, in 1248, he wrote about the Mongol invasion in a letter to his subjects, saying that 'our country suffered the same cruel and savage fury of the Mongols, some of its inhabitants were miserably killed, others were taken into slavery, the land was depopulated and

16 MRE 2010, 210–211.

17 MRE 2010, 220–221.

18 MRE 2010, 204–207, 222–225.

19 "manus gentis impie Tartarorum." ÁÚO 7. 1869, 174.; *Az Árpád-házi királyok okleveleinek. 1923–1930*, 229.

20 "persecutionem impiorum Tartarorum." CDH 4/1, 406.

21 "gens pestifera Tartarorum." ÁÚO 7. 1869, 263.; "in aduentu pestifero Tartarorum." CDH 4/1, 273, 274.

22 "Cum regnum Hungarie per pestem Thartharorum pro maiori parte in solitudinem sit redactum, et quasi ovile sepibus sit diversis infidelium generibus cicumspectum." *Vetera Monumenta Historica Hungariae*. 1859, 230.

became a wasteland.²³ Here, the chancellery (and thus the ruler) certainly expresses its own point of view on how it viewed the event. Similarly, in domestic donation letters, assessments are made such as ‘during the general devastation wrought by the Tatars, when the nobles and commoners of our country fled together to save their lives,’²⁴ or that ‘the unexpected invasion of the Tatars brought great loss upon our country, and its inhabitants, nobles and commoners alike, fell victim to the slaughter of the aforementioned people, and few survived.’²⁵

Another motif appears in the documents: according to this, the Mongol invasion was God’s will, as a punishment. Since late antiquity, there had been a Christian topos that various peoples attacking Christian peoples were God’s punishment, with which He avenged the sins of the people. This view also emerged in connection with the Mongols at the time of the events. Shortly after the Battle of Muhi, on 17 June 1241, Pope Gregory IX wrote to King Béla IV, who had narrowly escaped the battle, that ‘the judgment from heaven is already destroying the Christian people on all sides... For as the clamour of humanity’s sins grew louder and louder, it rose to the ears of the Almighty and compelled him... to draw his sword in retribution for the injustices.’²⁶ Regardless of the papal letter, the image quickly spread throughout the country, and the unknown ecclesiastical author of the ‘Lament’ already emphasised in early 1242 (while the Mongols were still here) that the Mongol invasion was a fitting punishment for the sinful people. ‘Because of the sins you have committed, you have reaped the reward of your deeds,’²⁷ the author wrote, and this idea recurs several times in the poem with different poetic images.²⁸ Similarly, in the days of the Mongol invasion, in early February 1242, Hungarian prelates wrote in a letter to the pope that the Mongols had attacked Hungary ‘because of our sins, as we believe.’²⁹ This topos was eventually incorporated into the documents of the royal chancellery. Sometimes it appeared only as a subtle allusion, with the mention of the Mongol invasion accompanied by the addition that they had invaded the

23 “regnum nostrum eiusdem Tartarice persecutionis sevitia crudeliter et immaniter sevient fuisse, suis regnicolis aliis miserrime interemptis, aliis in captivitatem abductis depopulatum et pariter desolatum.” CDH 4/2, 456.

24 “in generali vastacione Tartarorum, quando communiter et nobiles et populares regni nostri pro conservacione vite sue ante faciem eorum fugiebant.” ÁÚO 7. 1869, 283.

25 “per subitam irruptionem Tartarorum grande dispendium pertulisset, et de ipsius incolis, tam nobilibus, quam inferioribus in maiori parte per prefatam gentem interemptis, pauci remansissent.” CDH 4/2, 49–50.

26 “iaculatum de coelo iudicium iam depopulatur vndique populum Christianum... Clamor enim scelerum humani generis multiplicatus, ascendens in aures omnium conditoris... expectauit, vltorem iniquitatum gladium coëgit exserere.” CDH 4/2, 216–217.

27 “ob peccata, que fecisti / messuisti / meritorum premia.” PDRHT 1938, 597. In the second part, something may be missing before *messuisti* because the usual number of syllables does not add up, although the sentence is still understandable.

28 PDRHT 1938, 595, 597.

29 “nostris, ut credimus, hoc peccatis exigentibus.” Schneider F. 1915, 669.

country ‘with the Lord’s permission’ (*Domino permittente* or *permittente Domino*).³⁰ The expression was sometimes rephrased to be somewhat longer: the Mongol invasion was ‘an inevitable divine judgment’ or ‘as we believe, divine punishment.’³¹ Sometimes, using the old topos of the ‘whip motif,’ royal charters listing the merits of their subjects wrote about the Mongol invasion as follows: ‘in that terrible time, when the heavenly power, because of our sins, whipped our country with the ferocity of the Mongols,’³² or ‘when the Lord of the heavens, who holds all power over the countries in his hands, allowed the Christian people to be whipped by the Tatars because of their sins.’³³

The sources discussed so far provide insight into the perspectives of individuals belonging to the upper echelons of society (educated clergy, members of the royal court), but it would be interesting to examine what impact the Mongol invasion had on the lives and memories of ordinary people. Although it can be reasonably assumed that it left a profound mark, unfortunately the available sources do not allow for a detailed exploration of this impact. However, there is one perspective from which the thinking of the average person can be understood and that is the perception of time. It can be shown that the Mongol invasion became a point of reference, a temporal epochal boundary in later times. Relative dating may be used, such as an event occurring before or after the Mongol invasion. This perception of time can also be traced in the terminology used in documents. In the 1250s and 1270s, several events were dated as having taken place ‘before the arrival of the Tatars’ or ‘during the time of the Tatars.’³⁴ Although this still only reflects the perspective of the document issuers, sources are available that show that even decades later, the Mongol invasion was still considered a turning point in time for the common people.

King Béla IV’s daughter, Margaret, died in a Dominican monastery in 1270, and shortly after her death, actions were initiated for her canonisation. During the proceedings in 1276, several witnesses who knew Margit were questioned, or miracles attributed to her were recounted. During the interrogation, each witness was asked about their age. The majority only gave their estimated age or compared their birth to something else. A very common point of reference (in 1276) was the Mongol invasion. ‘I was a child when the Tatars invaded this land,’ ‘When the Tatars came to this land, I was already born,’ ‘I don’t know [how old I am], but I was young before the

30 CDH 4/1, 288; CDH 4/2, 49; Gárdonyi A. 1910, 76.

31 “divino iudicio, cui resisti non potest” and “ex divina, ut credimus, ultione.” CDH 4/2, 32, 207.

32 “illo tempore formidinis, quo per Tartarorum sevitiam coelestis potencia regnum nostrum, peccatis exigentibus, flagellavit.” CDH 4/1, 405.

33 “cum peccatis exigentibus coeli dominus, in cuius manu sunt omnia iura regnorum, flagellare permisisset per Tartaros populum christianum.” CDH 4/2, 456.

34 “per nostrum privilegium ante adventum Thartarorum datum.” ÁÜO 2. 1861, 271; “quam scilicet particulam terre quidam Butus nomine, et sui cognati tempore Tartarorum, sine herede decedentes, referuntur primitus possedissee.” CDH 5/1, 161.

Tatars came’ — these were the statements made by witnesses who did not know their exact age.³⁵ Some knew more precisely, saying, ‘When the Tatars came to this land, I was six years old.’ Another witness made a similar statement and even named the source of his memory: ‘I don’t know [how old I am], but my mother told me that when the Tatars invaded this land, I was 3 years old.’³⁶ Parents certainly told their children about the Mongol invasion and also told them how old they were when they experienced it — these stories remained with them as adults, and so they were able to relate their age to this event some 35 years later. The fact that the Mongol invasion appears in the minutes as one of the most frequently recurring chronological points when an older event needs to be dated (in this case, the witnesses’ own birth dates) shows that the memory of the Mongol invasion was embedded not only in the minds of the generation that experienced it, but also in those of their descendants.³⁷

The Mongols returned to Central Europe, including Hungary, several times in the 13th century with attacks of lesser intensity.³⁸ These attacks (with the exception of an incursion in 1285) were only minor incidents affecting the border areas,³⁹ but they still served as points of reference in the particular historical context. For example, according to a document from the Lelesz (today Leles, Slovakia) convent dated 1307 and an undated (but possibly 1308) document from Palatine Aba Amadé, a crime was committed ‘in the third year after the departure of the Tatars.’⁴⁰ This event cannot in any way refer to the Mongol invasion of 1241–1242, but either to the invasion of 1285 or to a later unknown event that affected only a small part of the country.⁴¹

In summary, it can be said that the first Mongol attack was a generational shock and left a very strong mark on contemporary memory. The vast majority of coping strategies have not been preserved in the sources, but they may have been similar to later psychological strategies, since psychology did not yet exist in the Middle Ages, but the human psyche did, and it functioned according to similar principles as it does today. It is due to this psychological shock that the disaster had a much greater impact on people’s minds and memories than its long-term effects actually

35 “Puer eram, quando Tartari intraverunt terram istam”; “Quando Tartari intraverunt terram istam, iam eram natus”; “Nescio, sed ante adventum Tartarorum eram iuvenis.” MREV, 347, 349, 381.

36 “Quando Tartari intraverunt terram istam eram sex annorum”; “Interrogata quot annorum est, respondit: Nescio, sed quando Tartari intraverunt terram, habebam tres annos, sicut dixit mater mea.” MREV, 339, 344.

37 All this is very similar to the phenomenon of ‘postmemory’ created by Marianne Hirsch, which she examined in relation to the Holocaust. Postmemory is not a direct memory, but a traumatic imprint of the memories of the first generation, which becomes a defining experience for subsequent generations. See: Hirsch M. 2012.

38 For a summary of the 13th-century Mongol invasions of Europe after the first Mongol invasion, see: Hautala R. 2017, 364–372.

39 For a specific look at the 13th-century invasions of Hungary, see: Szűcs T. 2023, 325–362.

40 “tertio anno post exitum Tartarorum”. *Regesta diplomatica nec non epistolaria Slovaciae*. 1980, 239, 260.

41 For a more detailed assessment of the report, see: Szűcs T. 2023, 355, not. 113.

were. Of course, there were areas where it really was a disaster, but other parts of the country experienced only secondary effects and psychological trauma. The invasion's experience reached beyond its actual boundaries in space and time. It even became a referencepoint for those who only experienced it as children or not at all yet felt influenced by it as 'post-memory' through generational information transfer.

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