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## The Mongol Invasion of Hungary in 1241–1242 New Perspective

**Summary:** The Mongols invaded Hungary in the spring of 1241 and occupied it until the middle of 1242. Recent research has unearthed new data in connection with Hungarian resistance against the Mongols and on the basis of these new observations of historians and archaeologists we can conclude that local resistance was substantially stronger than had been concluded earlier. The Mongols faced serious difficulty in expanding their occupation in Hungary. New light has also been shed on the history of the battle of Muhi, which was the decisive turning point in the Mongolian campaign. Hungarian troops, especially warriors of the military orders (Knights Templar and Knights Hospitaller) caused serious damage to the Mongols, who later regarded this battle as the most difficult one that had been fought against European foes. Western and eastern parts of the country alike put up serious resistance during the months following the battle of Muhi. The Mongols were reluctant to cross the Danube River because formidable Hungarian forces were gathering in Transdanubia (the western part of the country), and when they finally did cross the river in January 1242, they laid waste only to the vicinity of the main roads in those parts of the country. Although the extent of devastation was staggering, the country was able to recover from it in a few years, and would have been ready to face a second Mongol invasion if it had materialised.

**Keywords:** Mongolian warfare, the battle of Muhi, military orders, local resistance, King Béla IV

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In this study I will exclusively focus on the military history of the Mongol invasion of Hungary and Central Europe in 1241 and 1242. This tragic event has always been in the forefront of interest of historians of past centuries, because contemporary people as well as historiographers and historians of later periods sensed the importance of the previously unprecedented nature of this barbaric and brutal aggression, which can



only be compared with that of the Ottomans. Rogerius, archdeacon of Várad (Oradea, Romania), perhaps the richest source of information on the campaign of the Mongols, mentions in his work *Carmen miserabile*<sup>1</sup> that the events he lived through reminded him of the onset of the Last Judgement. Another important narrative source regarding the invasion of the Mongols is the work of Thomas Spalatensis<sup>2</sup> (Split, Croatia), which, although written several years later, was based on eyewitness accounts. Even in the case of the battle of Muhi, though his depiction of the battle itself is to some extent biased against King Béla IV and the Hungarians, it can still be regarded as a reliable source on the battle and succeeding events. Recent research has unearthed a number of important sources, which describe certain – so far either unknown, or deemed not very important – aspects of the Mongol invasion, which together with the results of archaeological excavations shed new light on the history of these eventful years.<sup>3</sup> The latest results of research into the history of the destruction of Hungary by the Mongols are contained in two recent volumes, one of which is part of the latest synthesis on Hungarian military history,<sup>4</sup> and the other is a collection of studies.<sup>5</sup> In this study I will sum up the results of the latest research, consider information preserved in charters,<sup>6</sup> and put forth some of my own observations relating to these events.

After the capture of Kyiv on 6 December 1240, the Mongols began the preparation for their attack on Central Europe. They planned to outflank the Carpathian Basin on both sides. Orda led the right wing, cutting through Poland and Silesia with a view to turn towards the south in Bohemia and attack Austria and north-western Hungary. The left wing, under the leadership of Kadan, attacked southwards planning to break through the passes of the Carpathians from the east and from the south, entering the Carpathian Basin. The center was built up by Batu, who intended to break into Hungary from the north-east through Verecke Pass,<sup>7</sup> where, according to tradition, the forebears of the Hungarians entered the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. It is not exactly clear why the Mongols chose this plan instead of breaking through Poland towards the Holy Roman Empire. One possible explanation could be the conduct

1 SRH 2. 1938, 551–588.

2 CFHH 3. 1938, 2232–2244.

3 Two rich collections of sources (in Hungarian translation) and corresponding literature have been published on this topic in the past decades: Katona T. (ed.), 1981 and Nagy B. (ed.), 2003. The latter also contains the most important pieces of literature on the topic.

4 Hermann R. (ed.), 2017. The part on the Mongol invasion is between pages 134–142 and it was written by J.B. Szabó; see also: Laszlovszky J., Pow S., Romhányi B.F., Ferenczi F., Pinke Z. 2018; Maiorov A., Hautala E. (eds), 2021.

5 Szabó B. et al. 2022.

6 Charters relating to the history of medieval Hungary are preserved in the National Archive in Budapest in two collections. Charters surviving in their original form are contained in the Diplomatic Archive, while charters preserved in other archives, but containing information on Hungarian history have their photocopies in the Diplomatic Film collection. Both collections are available online: <https://archives.hungaricana.hu/hu/charters/>

7 Hermann R. (ed.), 2017, 137.

of King Béla IV, who, in spite of several alleged threats on behalf of the Mongols, provided shelter for the Cumans, who had been defeated by the Mongols and were regarded by them as their serfs, and also defiantly included the title ‘King of Cumania’ (*rex Cumanie*) among his other titles. There are two other possible motives as well: firstly, that the Kingdom of Hungary was famous for her richness in all types of resources throughout the Middle Ages, and was regarded as a place where people could live without having to prepare for lack of food or other natural resources,<sup>8</sup> therefore offering invaders a lot of spoils. Secondly, taking this observation into account as well, the Mongols might have wanted to occupy this territory and create a base for further operations against western Europe. If this explanation holds true, the 1241–1242 campaign can be regarded as a huge-scale reconnaissance undertaking, which would also discourage the inhabitants of Hungary from further resistance.

King Béla IV took the Mongolian threat seriously: immediately after receiving news about the capture of Kyiv, he set out to overview the Carpathian passes and ordered them to be blocked with fallen trees and other types of obstacles, so that they could withstand or at least slow down the attack of the Mongols.<sup>9</sup> But he also knew that a passive defence alone could not stop the attacking forces, so he began to mobilise his forces, consisting of three parts. The best equipped and battleworthy element of the Hungarian army were the king’s own household warriors together with the Knights Templar and Knights Hospitaller. The second, most numerous, part of the army was provided by the combatants of counties, formerly led by *comites* (heads of counties) but now incorporated into the royal army. The third element was the most heterogeneous one, being composed of the retinues of powerful ecclesiastical and secular lords, the former being the more formidable fighting power.<sup>10</sup> Theoretically, there could have been a fourth possible element of Hungarian military power, which had been planned to be thrown in the *mêlée* against the Mongols: the Cumans, who had found refuge in Hungary from the Mongols. But before the Mongol invasion, however, a serious controversy evolved between the Hungarians and the Cumans, the former accusing the latter of being the scouts of the Mongols; Rogerius details additional conflicts as well.<sup>11</sup> In summary, the Hungarians (according to some pieces of information encouraged by Frederick II of Austria) had killed Kuten, khan of the Cumans,<sup>12</sup> who then turned against the Hungarians and fled to the Balkan Peninsula, looting and pillaging on their way, and even defeating the army of the bishop of the Csanád diocese, who had originally mobilised his forces against the Mongols, but clashed with the raiding Cumans instead.

8 Kristó G. 2003, 251.

9 CFHH 3. 1938, 2233.

10 Hermann R. (ed.), 2017, 144.

11 SRH 2. 1938, 554–556.

12 Szabó B. et al. 2022, 291–292.

King Béla IV collected his forces in the areas of Székesfehérvár and Esztergom, then moved them to Pest (present-day Budapest) with the intention to operate against the Mongols from there. On 12 March 1241 the Mongols broke through Hungarian defences at Verecke Pass and dealt a devastating blow to the troops of the Hungarian palatine Dénes Tomaj. The palatine himself managed to escape only with great difficulty and arrived in Pest three days later, having galloped day and night.<sup>13</sup> In his wake the first skirmishing Mongol troops arrived at Pest, having looted and burnt down the town of Vác. Although the king, aware of the Mongols' tactic, forbade his troops to engage with them, Archbishop Ugrin of Kalocsa and Frederick of Austria defied the king's orders and clashed with the Mongols. The Mongols feigned retreat, but at a marshland turned against their chasers, and killed many of them with arrows. The archbishop barely managed to escape with his life, but Frederick of Austria killed a Mongol leader in combat<sup>14</sup> and gained much popularity among the Hungarians, though he soon returned to Austria to prepare for the Mongol onslaught.

King Béla IV decided to move his troops towards the main body of the Mongolian army, so he and his units moved eastwards from Pest. The number of his troops is a matter of debate, but according to the latest research the number could not have been more than 20,000–25,000.<sup>15</sup> Mongol skirmishers attacked the marching Hungarians from time to time, but not in great numbers, simply trying to disrupt the march. The Hungarian troops arrived in the vicinity of the Sajó River on 10 April and set up camp. The exact location of the Hungarian camp and the site of the ensuing battle has not yet been identified, but it can probably be located in the general area of the village called Muhi. The place was favourable for defence, because the Sajó River protected the army from a surprise attack, as the Mongols had to either cross the river by the bridge, which could be defended with relatively few forces, or ford the river upstream or downstream, which was not an easy task, as the river might have been swollen at this time in spring. The only disadvantage to the Hungarians was that the forests along the bank of the river covered the movements of the Mongols from the Hungarians, so it was difficult to deduce exactly when and where the Mongols intended to attack.

In the meantime, the Mongol forces attacked on the two flanks of the Carpathian Basin. The northern flank broke through Poland leaving destruction and smouldering ruins in their wake, and on 9 April defeated the Polish-German troops at the battle of Legnica in Silesia. This victory made it possible for them to enter Bohemia and, later, the north-east of Austria. Finally, these troops joined the main army of Batu through north-western Hungary, Vác, and Pest.<sup>16</sup>

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13 Szabó B. et al. 2022, 289.

14 Szabó B. et al. 2022, 290–291.

15 Szabó B. et al. 2022, 293.

16 Hermann R. (ed.), 2017, 140.

Led by Kadan, the southern flank crossed the eastern and southern passes of the Carpathians to south-eastern Transylvania, and on 31 March defeated the Transylvanian Saxons of Radna (Rodna, Romania) and on the same day crushed the army of Pósa, voivode of Transylvania. On 11 April they captured Nagyszeben (Sibiu, Romania), and after massacring the population, marched towards the Great Hungarian Plain in two columns, one along the Maros River and the other through Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca, Romania) towards Nagyvárád (Oradea, Romania).<sup>17</sup> Rogerius, who escaped from Nagyvárád only just before the Mongols arrived, provides a vivid picture of what happened there and in other settlements besieged by the Mongols: when they finally managed to break into Nagyvárád after a siege of several days, they slaughtered everyone, sparing only a few craftsmen and beautiful women. During the siege they used *baliste* as well, so they were prepared to crush fierce resistance.<sup>18</sup>

On the night of 10 April, King Béla IV's troops received word from a Ruthenian who had escaped from the Mongol camp that the Mongols intended to attack early the next morning. Archbishop Ugrin of Kalocsa and the king's younger brother Kálmán approached the bridge over the Sajó River with their best troops, among them the Knights Templar, and attacked the Mongol forward elements, who had already crossed the bridge in preparation for the attack the next day. The Hungarians managed to defeat these forces, killing 30 Mongolian heavy cavalrymen and their leader, pushing the Mongols back across the river. The Hungarians then left patrols at the beachhead and returned to their camp. However, the Mongols brought forward 7 *baliste* and began throwing heavy stones and a rain of arrows at the troops in the beachhead, forcing them to retreat, leaving a free pass for the Mongols across the bridge. Batu led his main forces to the battle over the bridge, and the Mongol right wing was able to ford the Sajó River; the left wing, however was less successful, and had to prepare makeshift rafts to cross, and so arrived at the site of the battle later, at about 9 o'clock the next morning, 11 April.

In the early morning, the battle began with Mongol archers hurling javelins and fireballs at the Hungarian camp, which had been strengthened by a *Wagenburg* and a wall of shields.<sup>19</sup> According to some historians, because of the surprise nature of the attack we cannot regard the clash as a real battle, since the Hungarians could not even form their army into battle order, the rain of arrows making every move within the camp next to impossible. However, this seems to be an exaggeration, because the Hungarian camp formed about a mile (1.6 km) by mile square, and as the Mongol arrows could be shot approximately 300–400 metres maximum, the entire camp

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17 Hermann R. (ed.), 2017, 140.

18 SRH 2. 1938, 576–580.

19 CFHH 3. 1938, 2234–2236.

could not have been covered by a rain of arrows.<sup>20</sup> The Hungarian troops broke out of the *Wagenburg* several times; the best of them, again led by Archbishop Ugrin of Kalocsa and Prince Kálmán, fought with the Mongols at close quarters, causing them such heavy losses that at one point of the battle, Batu Khan began to contemplate the possibility of a withdrawal, but another leader, Subetei, convinced him to continue the fighting.<sup>21</sup> By midday, more and more Hungarian troops became exhausted and the Mongols used a psychological method of warfare by opening a seemingly safe way for them to escape. In the second half of the day more and more Hungarian troops began fleeing from the battle, though the best remained. When the king realised that the battle was lost, he fled north with his household troops. His soldiers fought heroically as the Mongols gave chase, at least two of them offering the king their own horses to escape.<sup>22</sup> Archbishop Ugrin and Prince Kálmán, both severely wounded, fled west in the direction of Pest. Most of the fleeing warriors were brutally massacred by the Mongols during the chase.<sup>23</sup> According to a balanced and objective estimate, the Hungarians lost about 10,000 men total during the battle and flight.<sup>24</sup>

King Béla IV escaped via the north-western parts of Hungary first to Pozsony (Bratislava, Slovakia), and from there went to Hainburg, Austria at the invitation of prince Frederick of Babenberg. This turned out to be a trap, because the prince robbed the king of all his valuables, and forced him to hand over counties in western Hungary as ransom for his freedom. From there, Béla IV went to Záhgráb (Zagreb, Croatia) to organise further resistance.

At Pest, the main army of the Mongols was joined by the forces of their northern and southern wings. They occupied the city, causing heavy loss of life – according to our sources they killed everybody without respect to age or sex.<sup>25</sup>

With this, the Mongol invasion of Hungary came to a halt: they made their next move only in January, 1242, leaving King Béla IV and the Hungarians in the western parts of the realm more than half a year for defensive preparations. Why did they not cross the Danube and finish off further resistance immediately? The sources are silent on this point, but we can attempt an indirect and complex answer to this question. First, we have to bear in mind that the Mongol army had been fighting for a long time from the beginning of the occupation of the Russian principalities and eastern Hungary without a strategic pause to rest and replenish the exhausted units.<sup>26</sup> The Danube formed an obstacle which was relatively difficult to cross, especially when

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20 Katona T. (ed.), 1981, 402.

21 Katona T. (ed.), 1981, 33.

22 HNAB.DA. 70 587; 58 388.

23 CFHH 3. 1938, 2236.

24 Hermann R. (ed.) 2017, 139.

25 CFHH 3. 1938, 2236.

26 Hermann R. (ed.) 2017, 136–137.

the Mongols knew that the Hungarian army still possessed substantial intact forces in Transdanubia, i.e. the western parts of the realm. They probably also knew about a possible crusade against them, which had just been declared and was being organised in Germany.<sup>27</sup> We also have to take into consideration that Mongol troops attempting to occupy northern Austria were driven out of that country by Prince Frederick of Babenberg, who – despite robbing King Béla IV – still put up a fierce resistance against the Mongols, thus preventing the strategic encirclement of Hungary from the west. Perhaps the most serious argument against a quick crossing of the Danube was that resistance in eastern and central Hungary was stronger than the Mongols had expected. According to latest research, strongly supported by archaeological evidence, at several points in the Great Hungarian Plain and Transylvania, village churches were strengthened by ditches and palisades, and people fled to islands in rivers or to mountaintops in Transylvania, where they put up heavy resistance to the Mongols and caused them serious losses, from which the Mongols could only slowly recover.<sup>28</sup>

Because of all these circumstances, the Mongols started the second phase of their campaign only in January 1242, when – even by medieval standards – a very cold and freezing winter had set in. Although the Danube froze over, the Hungarians broke the ice every day to prevent the Mongols from crossing. To determine whether the ice was safe to cross, the Mongols employed a trick: they marched a lot of cattle and horses to the riverbank and left them for three days, seemingly unattended. When the Hungarians crossed over and marched the animals to the other bank, the Mongols realised that the ice was thick enough to carry the weight of horsemen, so they crossed the river themselves, and began the second part of their campaign.<sup>29</sup> In this phase the main strategic aim was not occupation and pillage, but to capture the king. The Mongol leader Kadan and his army chased King Béla IV from Zággráb to Spalato (Split, Croatia), and then on to Trau (Trogir, Croatia). At first the Mongols thought that the king was in the castle of Klissza (Klis, Croatia), and they began a siege, but when they learnt that the king was not there, they abandoned the siege. When Kadan realised that his troops could not cross the muddy waters around Trau (an island at that time) and the Hungarian king fled to another island further away called Čiovo, he gave up the chase. Kadan led his troops through Dalmatia, Bosnia, and Montenegro to Bulgaria, where he joined his forces with the rest of the Mongol army.

While Kadan was chasing the king, the rest of the Mongols were pillaging and looting the western parts of Hungary. They besieged several castles and cities with modest success, only managing to occupy unfortified places. Some castles and cities

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27 Szabó B. et al. 2022, 321–330.

28 SRH 2. 1938, 580–583; Szabó B., János J., Uhrin D. (eds), 2022, 315–320.

29 SRH 2. 1938, 583–584.

managed to defend themselves: although the Mongols broke into the city of Esztergom and killed a lot of people, they were unable to take the castle itself defended by *comes* Simon and his Spanish crossbowmen,<sup>30</sup> though they deployed no less than 30 siege machines, probably trebuchets and *baliste*.<sup>31</sup>

In case of Székesfehérvár, which was surrounded by marshes at the time and could only be approached on a dam, the Italian (Latin, as they were called in medieval Hungary) inhabitants put up a fierce resistance; when a sudden and unexpected thaw melted the ice on the surface of the marshes, it became pointless for the Mongols to continue the siege.

In the spring of 1242 the Mongols withdrew from Hungary; historians have long speculated as to the reason for this move. In December 1241, Ögodei Khan died, and some historians conclude that the Mongolian withdrawal was due to the fact that Batu Khan wanted to participate in the election of the next ruler. However, this was hardly the reason for the withdrawal, as the election took place only in 1246, and Batu did not participate in it. According to other historians, by the spring of 1242, the natural resources of the Carpathian Basin were so overstretched that it could no longer support the Mongol army and especially their many horses. However, probably the most serious argument for retreating from Hungary was the fact that by that time the army was several thousand kilometres away from the centre of the Mongol Empire, and between them there were many unpacified, only partly occupied territories populated by restless serfs, so Batu had to strengthen his hold over these territories in order to solidify his power. One final argument can be added: after leaving Hungary the Mongols went to Bulgaria, and looted and pillaged it in the same way, which shows that the 1241–1242 campaign must be evaluated in a broader perspective: it was not a campaign only against Hungary, but a raid on Central Europe and the Balkan Peninsula as a whole, which further stretched the military resources of the Mongols. It became obvious that the rate of expansion could not be kept to the same pace in Eastern Europe as in Asia.<sup>32</sup>

To summarise the results of the latest research, we must re-evaluate the previously held conclusion that King Béla IV's conduct as the leader of the realm and the performance of the Hungarian military system during the Mongol invasion were complete failures. In fact, the king was aware of the danger caused by the Mongols, consciously prepared for the defence of the country, managed to mobilise a substantial military force, and put up a very serious resistance at the battle of Muhi, causing the Mongols very heavy losses. The Mongols themselves considered this fight the heaviest they had so far encountered. The military orders in particular fought bravely – the Knights

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30 HNAB.DA. 256.

31 SRH 2. 1938, 583–584.

32 Szabó B. et al. 2022, 340–347.

Templar were killed to the last man – but the other Hungarian troops, especially those under the leadership of Archbishop Ugrin of Kalocsa and prince Kálmán, also fought well. Another partially overlooked fact (now brought to the forefront by archaeological evidence) is the spontaneous popular resistance of the common people who prepared makeshift strongholds in defence of their families. Though the Mongols mercilessly crushed these points of resistance one by one, these little strongholds were so numerous that they caused the conquerors serious losses. It also should be stressed that the Mongols were unable to achieve their strategic goal: because they could not capture the king, make him their vassal, or kill him, the country under King Béla IV's leadership was able to rise from her ruins and become strong again. For this reason, Béla IV is regarded, after King Saint Stephen I, as the second founder of Hungary. No less important is the fact that the Mongols could also not annihilate the Hungarian military system. Even while the invasion was ongoing, the Hungarians were able to recapture Győr from the Austrians, maintained heavy resistance in the castles of the western and northern parts of the country, and managed to lead a campaign against the prince of Austria immediately after the Mongols had withdrawn.

Finally let me draw attention to two observations, which have never before been discussed in Hungarian historiography. The first is in connection with the role of Prince Frederick of Babenberg of Austria. The prince is usually portrayed in Hungarian historiography as a negative figure who played a controversial part in the events leading up to the massacre of the Cuman chieftain Kuten and his warriors. After blackmailing King Béla IV in Hainburg after his defeat at Muhi, Frederick occupied some Hungarian counties in the western parts of the realm. But it must be stressed that he contributed to the success of Christian resistance in Austria, and by doing so, he prevented a strategic outflanking of the whole of Hungary. If the Mongols had been able to achieve this, further resistance in the western part of Hungary would probably have collapsed as well, and the effects of the Mongol invasion would have been even more disastrous.

My second observation is in connection with the fact that King Béla IV emerged from the effects of the Mongol invasion unscathed as far as his power is concerned. One of the main reasons the Mongols attacked Hungary was Béla's decision to offer secure shelter for Cuman refugees and convert them to Christianity, and use the title *rex Cumanie* among his other titles. Even after the Mongol invasion, King Béla IV was adamant to continue using the title *rex Cumanie*, declaring to the world that he was uncrushed and would defend his rights at all costs. According to an Armenian source, after more than fifty years the Mongols still remembered how hard they had to fight in Hungary, which is a true praise coming from the enemy.<sup>33</sup>

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33 Hermann R. (ed.), 2017, 142.

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