

Book review

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Benkő, Elek, Sándor, Klára, Vásáry, István: A székely írás emlékei. Corpus Monumentorum Alphabeto Siculico Exaratorum (CMASE) [Relics of the Székely script. Corpus Monumentorum Alphabeto Siculico Exaratorum (CMASE)]. Edited by István Vásáry. Budapest: Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont 2021. 927 pages, illustrated. Hardback 8900 Ft. ISBN 978-963-416-267-4.

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The Székely people are a distinct group of Hungarians living chiefly outside Hungary, in the historical region of Transylvania in Romania. Various elements of their culture identify them as a distinct group among the Hungarians, the most characteristic of which is their Székely writing. This is a rune-like (also known as runiform) script resembling the Scandinavian runic script (futhark), with no historical affiliation between them. In earlier scholarly publications it was often referred to as the Hungarian or the Székely–Hungarian runic script, but there is a growing tendency among scholars to use the term Székely writing or Székely script since: 1) it is peculiar to the Székely; other Hungarian groups have not used it throughout their history, and 2) there is no need to specify runic or runiform in the name, because there has only been one Székely script.

The origin of the script is unclear, but due to its similarity to the Old Turkic runiform writing, some scholars view it as a continuation of the writing tradition of the Turkic-speaking nomadic empires of Eurasia, best known from the Orkhon inscriptions of the second Turkic Khaganate (682–744) and the Uigur Khaganate (744–840) in present day's Mongolia. It is equally unclear how long the script has been used by the Székely. The first authentic mention of the script is in the chronicle *Gesta Hungarorum* 'The deeds of the Hungarian' (1282–1285) by Simon Kézai, who states that the Székely had their own alphabet. This suggests that the script was already in use among the Székely in the 13th century. During the subsequent centuries the alphabet began falling almost into oblivion, but thanks to the efforts of János Telegdi (1575–1647), a Roman Catholic prelate of the first half of the 17th century, it gained popularity among the Protestant and Catholic literati. Besides Telegdi, the Lutheran pastor Mátyás Bél also significantly contributed to the popularisation of the alphabet. Despite its popularity among the literati, it became entirely dormant during the Hungarian reform era (1825–1848).

Today, the Székely script is enjoying a renaissance not only among the Székely but among all Hungarians worldwide. The script is even used in public spaces, including road signs bearing names of settlements. It is taught in traditionalist circles and by organisations concerned with culture and tradition. Since 2015 the Székely script – misleadingly referred to as Old Hungarian – is part of the Unicode Standard. For the basic letters and commonly used ligatures of the Székely script attested in authentic historical documents, see pp. 19–20 of the book reviewed here.

The scholarly documentation and description of historical sources written in the Székely script began with Károly Szabó's studies (1866 *a, b, c*). Six decades later appeared Gyula Sebestyén's (1915) seminal work entitled *A magyar rovásírás hiteles emlékei* 'Authentic historical documents of the Hungarian runic script', which represents a milestone of research. His ambition was to present a corpus of all documents known to scholarship in the beginning of the 20th century. Since then, new witnesses of the script have been discovered and the number of source materials has more than doubled. Continuous scholarly activity has yielded a huge amount of research articles and monographs

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(chiefly in Hungarian) over the past hundred years. On the history of research, see Sándor (2014, 289–314) and Tubay (2015). As a consequence of the rapid developments and new findings, the need for a new corpus has emerged. István Vásáry (1974, 168) argued as early as 1974 that a corpus of known documents should be established and published in the form of a philological edition. However, we had to wait until 2014 for the foundations of the project to be laid and the preparatory work started. The results of this enormous scientific undertaking finally appeared in 2021 in a 927-page richly illustrated monograph by Elek Benkő, Klára Sándor and István Vásáry.

The book by Benkő, Sándor and Vásáry provides the complete corpus of all known written documents considered historical testimonies of Székely writing. The material presented in the corpus is heterogeneous by nature and therefore divided into six groups (A to F) by the authors.

Group A (39 items, pp. 23–168) includes historical sources, handwritten or printed manuscripts, which provide information of historical and/or cultural relevance about Székely writing, but does not necessarily include texts in the script. They range from the 13th to the 19th century and are written mostly in Latin. Only a few are in Hungarian or in German. The authors always provide Hungarian translations of the Latin and German originals. A particularly interesting example (A2, p. 27) is János Thuróczy's *Chronica Hungarorum* 'Chronicle of the Hungarian' (1488), which states that *Hi, nondum Scythicis literis oblit, eisdem, non encausti et papyri ministerio, sed in baculorum excisionis artificio, dicarum ad instar, vtuntur*. 'These [i.e. the Székely], have not yet forgotten the Scythian letters, they do not even use ink and paper, but carve them in wooden sticks like runes.' (p. 27) This is the earliest description to mention the rune-like character of the script.

Group B (20 items, pp. 169–222) contains the epigraphic examples of the Székely script. This is the most valuable part of the corpus, including inscriptions carved in plastered wall, stone, brick, and wood, or painted by brush on those same materials. The earliest inscriptions are from the 13th and 14th centuries and found in Homoródkarácsonyfalva (Rom. Crăciunel) in Harghita County, Vargyas (Rom. Vârghiș) in Covasna County, and Székelydála (Rom. Daia) in Harghita County in Romania. Although there is scientific consensus about the connection of these early inscriptions to the Székely script, they are difficult to interpret. For instance, the inscription at Homoródkarácsonyfalva (B1, pp. 171–174) is still considered to be undeciphered. In this group of inscriptions, there is only one (B18, pp. 215–218) located outside the traditional Székely territories. This inscription was carved into the wall of the Catholic church at Moldvabánya (Rom. Baia), in Suceava County, Romania. It is a good example of the difficulties scholars often face when trying to describe and analyse a fragmentary, partly damaged inscription: the dating of the inscription is very problematic, no reliable reading of the letters is available, and there is not even a consensus about whether it represents Székely writing. Nevertheless, the authors decided to add it to the corpus.

Group C (3 items, pp. 223–284) presents materials which have been preserved as transcriptions in handwritten manuscripts, i.e. copies of original epigraphic materials. The Bologna manuscript (C1, pp. 225–250) is one of the most valuable manuscripts of the entire corpus. It presents the letters of the alphabet and a small set of the ligature signs with their transcription in Latin letters. The manuscript also includes an incomplete calendar of the 15th century, which is the longest known text of Székely writing and is of major cultural significance, see further Sándor 1991.

Group D (44 + 4 items, pp. 285–667) is the largest part of the corpus and includes both handwritten and printed manuscripts in the Székely script. At the end of the section, under No. D45, four manuscripts are jointly described: these are authentic sources of the script mentioned in several publications but now considered to be lost. Some of the manuscripts, such as János Telegi's *Rudimenta* from 1598 (D3, pp. 299–481), are available in several copies. In these cases, a critical comparison and commentary of the different copies would be feasible. The authors have not undertaken this complicated and time-consuming task. They present each copy in diplomatic fashion one after the other and

provide a short description (simple stemma) about the relationship between the individual copies in the corresponding introduction.

Group E (3 items, pp. 669–812) includes longer theses about the Székely script from the 18th century onwards. One of them is Mátyás Bél's *De vetere litteratura Hunno-Scythica exercitatio* 'A treatise on the ancient Hun-Scythian writing' from 1718, which not only contributed to the popularisation of the script among the contemporary literati but had a clear impact on the later use and application of the script.

The final group F (21 + 9 + 5 items, pp. 813–828) is a concise description of 1) sources of doubtful authenticity, 2) sources wrongly attributed to the Székely script, and 3) some forged documents from the 18th to 20th centuries.

Following the main chapters of the book, the authors provide a short summary (pp. 831–836) in which the origin of the script is briefly discussed. Since there is no consensus among scholars on this question and the authors have differing opinions, the summary presents only one of them, that of István Vásáry. Due to the lack of early materials, both the ethnic origin of the Székely and the origin of their script can only be hypothesised. He argues (p. 834) that the Székely script belongs to the family of the runiform writing systems used in the Turkic-speaking nomadic empires of Eurasia. More specifically it was derived from one of the runiform alphabets used in Eastern Europe, perhaps that of the Khazar or the Avar alphabet, but the development of the script cannot be described in detail. Vásáry thinks (pp. 834–835) that the script was most likely created in the 10th century after the Székely settled in the Carpathian basin. However, he argues that the huge time gap between the suggested creation of the script (893–1000) and the earliest known witnesses renders it impossible to build a detailed picture of its development.

The book ends with an extensive bibliography (pp. 837–891) of the relevant literature, a list of illustrations (pp. 893–907), a list of personal names (pp. 909–920), a list of geographical names (pp. 921–926), and an English summary (p. 927).

As already noted, the individual witnesses are presented in a fashion resembling a typical diplomatic edition of any textual material. The presentation of epigraphs, for example the inscription of Vargyas (B2, pp. 175–177), begins with the description of the historical and cultural setting, the description of the object and the environment in which it is situated, and the history of research. The language of the description is easy to follow to also enable readers without expertise in the field to understand it. However, it is unfortunate that the aforementioned topics are presented in a long text without clear and visible internal segmentation. One could envisage three separate sections, preferably in this order: 1) the pure epigraphic description of the given object (support, material, provenance, date, place of origin, GPS coordinates etc.) as the established standards of epigraphy would dictate, 2) contextualization, i.e. the description of the historical-cultural setting and its implications (in my view, these passages are the most enjoyable and inspiring parts of the book), and 3) the history of research with accompanying references. This initial part of the presentation is followed by the rendering of the original text using a computer font as accurately as possible, along with the transcription in standard Hungarian orthography, i.e. an interpretation of the text in form of a possible reading. The presentation ends with references relevant to the given inscription. Witnesses on paper are presented in a slightly different way: entire manuscript pages containing passages with Székely letters are transcribed (and translated into Hungarian) because they contain explanations, analyses or interpretations about the Székely texts. Each description is then accompanied by high-quality photos and/or facsimiles of the witnesses, which will enable palaeographic research, for example.

This enormous undertaking by Elek Benkő, Klára Sándor and István Vásáry certainly fills a significant gap in scholarship and establishes a standard for future publications on the Székely script. I am sure that the book will be used intensively by scholars of various fields and that it will also inspire future generations of researchers. Traditionalist circles and organisations concerned with cul-

ture and tradition could also add this book to their teaching materials, which may contribute to a more scholarly and grounded discussion about the history of the script. Although the book is in Hungarian, the texts in Latin and German offer interesting insights into the cultural history of the period for international readers.

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