THE EARLY HUNGARIANS AS MERCENARIES
860–955

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In the year 896 the Hungarians (also known as Magyars) crossed the Carpathian Mountains from the steppes adjacent to the Black Sea. They were primarily warriors, horse archers, when they settled on the plains of the middle Danube, whence they made periodic incursions into western Europe. Their invasions came to an abrupt halt in 955, however, when the East Frankish king, Otto I, annihilated their swarms in an encounter generally known as the battle of Lechfeld. Popular historians and even some scholars have echoed medieval annalists and hagiographers who portrayed the Hungarians as invincible hordes of wild and undisciplined barbarians whose incursions served no useful purpose. While Scandinavian and Muslim pirates were attacking Europe from the north, west, and south, Magyar horse archers began attacking from the east. Though independent of one another, all together their depredations putatively caused the collapse of the Carolingian Empire and arrested the political, economic, and social development of Europe for at least a century. The leaders of the Latin West could only respond, so the argument continues, by developing (heavy) cavalry forces of their own to deal with the invaders in the field and by studding the landscape of Europe with fortresses to protect their movable assets. From iron, stone, and mortar local elites in the Latin West fashioned the 'first feudal age' to deal with these invasions, a scenario still common in undergraduate textbooks.

Despite its persistence, this paradigm has been out of date for more than a half century—at least as far as the Hungarians are concerned. Already, in 1945, Gina Fasoli demolished the myth that Magyar predators were in any way arbitrary or capricious. The Hungarians were not a cause of the collapse of the Carolingian Empire. Rather they understood and profited from the rivalries and internecine conflicts that persisted as Charlemagne’s realm disintegrated in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. In 1968 Szabolcs de Vajay butressed Fasoli’s conclusions, arguing convincingly that as early as 860 (well before
they finally settled in the Carpathian Basin) the Magyars made their martial services available to the Moravian leader Rastislav and later to his nephew Sventibald both of whom were involved in conflicts with various East Frankish rulers. In 892, a late Carolingian king, Arnulf of Carinthia, turned the tables when he employed Magyar horsemen against Sventibald. In addition the Hungarians may well have been involved in Arnulf’s invasions of Italy that resulted in his imperial coronation in 896, the very year that they began to settle permanently in the Carpathian Basin. Recently, Aldo A. Settia has called attention to the fact that there is little evidence of massive destruction by the Magyars during their frequent incursions into Italy, and Barbara Rosenwein has observed that Berengar I, Margrave of Friuli and King of Italy, who had a terrible reputation as a warrior, prevailed against numerous rivals partially because of his skilfull use of Hungarians against his opponents. Most serious scholars no longer portray the Magyars as a gens detestanda, who brought only death and destruction, but rather as wily military entrepreneurs who knew how to exploit for gain the chaotic conditions of the late ninth and early tenth centuries. Moreover, after 955 they settled down to form a stable Christian kingdom, and from then on, as a gens ad fidem Christi conversa, they became a bulwark against further nomadic incursions from the East. Why this transformation?

As we have seen, when the Hungarians began their settlement in 896 they were no strangers to the Carpathian Basin. They had already used their martial skills in the service first of the Moravians and then, reversing themselves, in Arnulf’s wars against the Sventibald. This mercenary behavior was nothing new to them, for, while still in Ethelköz, the area north of the Black Sea, they had served the Byzantines for profit prior to their westward trek. The Hungarians made their decision to settle permanently along the middle Danube, when Petchenegs, in the service of Bulgars, attacked Magyar camps and absconded with their women and children, a practice that was not uncommon in most of the Eurasian steppes. The Hungarians continued their profession as classic nomadic mercenaries in their new homeland across the great forests of the Carpathians (Transylvania). Because they had martial skills that complemented those of indigenous elites who were warring against one another, Magyars could find willing customers for their 'service industry.' Although such terms as mercenarius, solidarius, and stipendarius are never used to describe the early Hungarians, they were mercenaries indeed, for they fought for material rewards that came most frequently in the form of precious metals (aurum et argentum). Economically it was