A NOTE ON THE “HUNGARIAN SABERS” OF MEDIEVAL BULGARIA

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Ever since the late nineteenth century, a group of sabers have been singled out, which have been found in late ninth- or tenth-century assemblages attributed to the Hungarians of the “conquest age” (honfoglaló). These long sabers of between 750 and 950 mm have therefore been dubbed “Hungarian”, mainly because they shared a number of peculiar characteristics, such as hilts set at a sharp angle to the blade and equipped with a pear-shaped head; hand guard bars flanked by spherical, bead-like ornaments bent towards the blade; slightly curved blades; and edge extensions in the lower third of the saber, where the single-edged blade becomes double-edged (elman).¹

The idea that such sabers were typically Hungarians and used only by Hungarians has been seriously challenged in the 1950s and 1960s especially by Soviet archaeologists.² Nikolai Merpert summarized the criticism by categorically rejecting the idea of a single place of origin for the “Hungarian sabers” and of a single tribe having a long-term monopoly over such weapons.³ Irrespective of the ethnic attribution, the so-called “Hungarian saber” is nevertheless a distinct weapon, which appears with a great degree of consistency in mid- to late ninth-century burial assemblages in the steppe lands north of the Black and Caspian seas, as well as in the Carpathian Basin from the late ninth to the mid-tenth century. On the basis of their respective distributions, Mechthild Schulze-Dörrlamm distinguished two main types of “Hungarian sabers”: the Koban type, and the saber without scabbard with lavish gold or silver decoration.⁴ Best known among specimens of Schulze-Dörrlamm’s first type are the

¹ Tóth 1934, Arendt 1934, and Fettich 1937.
³ Merpert 1955, 166. To be sure, Merpert dealt in his study with two chronologically different types of sabers found on the territory of the Soviet Union.
⁴ Schulze 1984, 477 and 506 fig. 5; Schulze-Dörrlamm 1988, 460–62 and fig. 19. For the Koban type, see Schulze-Dörrlamm 1988, 393–98 and 459–60 with fig. 19. For sabers without scabbards with gold or silver decoration, see Schulze-Dörrlamm 1988, 394–401 and fig. 22.
lavishly decorated, so-called “Charlemagne saber” now in Vienna; the Gesztered saber; and a number of specimens from the Karos cemetery in Hungary.\(^5\)

So far, no scholar studying the “Hungarian sabers” took into consideration specimens from Bulgaria. To be sure, only a few sabers are known from that country, in sharp contrast with over 150 specimens (88 of which are “Hungarian sabers”) from Russia, Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Austria. In fact, until recently, only one whole saber was known from Bulgaria, namely that from grave 27 of the Novi Pazar cemetery. Blade fragments have also been found in the same cemetery, as well as in Pliska.\(^6\) The recent publication of two whole sabers, as well of other fragments, increased the number of specimens already known from the collections of the Archaeological Museum in Varna, as well as from other museums and private collections, and now invites a re-examination of the problem.

One of the two recently published sabers was found within the ancient hillfort site near Debrene, in the Dobrich district (Fig. 1).\(^7\) This well-preserved saber is 860 mm long and has a curved blade, of which two thirds are single- and one third is double-edged. The hilt is pronouncedly tilted towards the blade edge and ends in a pear-shaped pommel. The wooden or bone grip must have been held together by two ferrules with spools of coiled wire. The guard is a little thickened in the middle, with shoulders bent towards the blade and spherical quillions. Under the guard, there is a laminated piece serving as langet. On the edge, there are remains of the wooden scabbard, to which belonged a cylindrical top mount, as well as a box-like appliqué for attaching the scabbard to the belt. The archaeological evidence from the Debrene excavations, including four unique coins struck for Emperor Leo VI (886–912) strongly suggests that the hillfort was occupied between the late ninth and early tenth century. A similar date may be advanced for the saber. This is further substantiated by a belt set found next to the saber, with good parallels in early tenth-century burial assemblages in Ukraine and Hungary, which have been attributed to the conquering Hungarians.\(^8\)

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\(^5\) For the “Charlemagne saber”, see Hampel 1897–1899; Tóth 1934; Kirpichnikov 1965. For the Gesztered saber, see Fettich 1937, pl. 68; Dienes 1972, fig. 4. For the Karos sabers, see Révész 1996, pl. 73/2, 82, 122.

\(^6\) Stancho and Ivanov 1958, 9 and 103 with pl. 27.1; Shkorpil 1905, 506 and pl. 113.

\(^7\) Iotov 1992.

\(^8\) Iotov 1993.