

EVOLVING IDENTITIES: A CONNECTION BETWEEN ROYAL PATRONAGE OF DYNASTIC SAINTS' CULTS AND ARTHURIAN LITERATURE IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to provide a brief summary of a theory related to the origins of the famous Arthurian knight, Sir Lancelot, and his direct connection to Hungarian political movements taking place in the twelfth century. It is important to note that in the development and initial efforts at disseminating this theory to academic audiences for feedback, I received crucial support at CEU,¹ from the wider scholarly community,² and from the conference organizers at the University of Western Michigan.³ By the time I first presented these ideas, I could tell from experience what an advantage it is to belong to a community of scholars. Since then, I have been preparing a lengthier study that will focus much more on the driving forces behind the creation of Arthurian literature and its most celebrated figure. As that will be forthcoming, a detailed discussion here would exceed the scope and intention of the present paper. Regarding the hypothesis for a close connection between that Arthurian knight and the emergence of the cult surrounding *Szent László* (Saint Ladislaus/King Ladislaus I of Hungary,

¹ My thanks go to members of the CEU Department of Medieval Studies, including my supervisors, Balázs Nagy and József Laszlovszky, as well as Gerhard Jaritz, Katalin Szende, László Ferenczi, András Vadas, and particularly Marianne Sághy.

² My special thanks to ELTE's Levente Seláf who succinctly shared his expertise on twelfth-century French romance, providing many metaphorical missing pieces of the puzzle. As well, I wish to gratefully acknowledge Elizabeth Archibald (Durham), the editor of *Arthurian Literature*, who attended my presentation and encouraged the fuller study which I am undertaking.

³ I had the opportunity to take part in the 52nd International Congress on Medieval Studies (11–14 May 2017) in Kalamazoo on a panel which Gerhard Jaritz had assembled with the title, “Creating and Transforming the Image of Saints.” This was an eclectic panel, comprised of Kathleen Ashley (professor in the Department of English at the University of Southern Maine) presenting on the legendary Saint Foy and her cults, Martin Wangsgaard Jürgensen (Nationalmuseet of Denmark) presenting on depictions of saints in medieval Danish churches, and myself, a PhD candidate at CEU specializing on the Mongol Invasions of Europe. My sincere thanks to the conference organizers at Kalamazoo for awarding me with one of the handful of Congress Travel Awards.

r. 1077–1095),⁴ which is the argument I wish to outline here, we encounter a complex phenomenon. Any such hypothesis touches on a wide range of topics that ought to be addressed by a very diverse group of scholars. Thus, the Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU should offer an excellent basis for reaching these diffuse circles, while my later proposed study, focused on the creation of the fictional character of Lancelot himself, can raise interest particularly among specialists whose work relates to elements of Arthurian literature.

The first version of this study was presented as a conference paper entitled, “Evolving Identities: Connections between Royal Patronage of Dynastic Saints’ Cults and Secular Literature in the Twelfth Century.” Despite the vague title, I was presenting the above-mentioned theory centered on a very specific saint’s cult – that surrounding László – and a very specific body of secular literature – Arthurian poetry and particularly that composed by Chrétien de Troyes. If its focus is specific, the argument has wider implications related to the history of the medieval Church, the influence of political developments in medieval literature, the dating of Arthurian poetry, along with Hungary and the Byzantine Empire’s cultural connections with France and wider Latin Christendom. Since the initial foray, I have continued arguing for over a year for this ostensible connection between Sir Lancelot and László.⁵ Indeed, I have found evidence that the figure of Sir Lancelot, as he first appeared in the works of the French poet Chrétien de

⁴ There are many variations of the name of this eleventh-century Hungarian monarch and saint. This is because Ladislaus (from Vladislav) was a borrowed name of Slavic origin. In English literature and older Latin sources, it is most commonly rendered as Ladislaus or some slight variation of that. In vernacular Hungarian, the foreign name’s pronunciation was rendered as László. In this paper, I have opted to use the Hungarian version consistently because it is crucial to my argumentation. I believe that there was an oral (*viz.* not literary) transmission of the name László from Hungarian informants to the French in the 1180s which resulted in Chrétien de Troyes recording the name in the only slightly corrupted form of Lancelot.

⁵ Since the initial presentation in Kalamazoo, I have delivered two talks that have expanded on the theory. The first lecture: “László to Lancelot: Hungarian Kings, Arthurian Knights.” *A Magyar Hagiográfiai Társaság/Hungarian Association for Hagiographic Studies* – Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, September 14, 2017. <http://hagiografia.hu/hu/2017/08/29/laszlo-to-lancelot-hungarian-kings-arthurian-knights-stephen-l-pow-cloadasa/>. The second lecture was “László to Lancelot: Hungarian Kings, Arthurian Knights/De László à Lancelot: rois hongrois, chevaliers arthuriens.” *Hungarian Institute of Paris in collaboration with the International Medieval Society* – Institut Hongrois, Paris, France, November 10, 2017. <https://www.ceu.edu/article/2017-11-21/sir-lancelot-may-have-been-inspired-hungarys-king-laszlo-pow-says>. My sincere thanks to Marianne Sággy for having arranged these events and Dorottya Uhrin for her helpful assistant and feedback.

Troyes in the later twelfth century, was directly inspired by László, the eleventh-century ruler of Hungary. Furthermore, the inspiration seemed to be deliberately motivated by dynastic political developments of the period. Besides the obvious similarity between their names, and the fact that no convincing etymological or literary link exists that can attach Lancelot to the British Isles, I have noted other interesting links related to cultural trends. Though the evidence appears compelling, the idea of a Hungarian king being the inspiration for Lancelot has not been argued previously. The experts on Arthurian literature tended to comb the insular tradition in search of Lancelot's origins.⁶ Meanwhile, there is also a huge body of scholarly work on László as a historical personage, along with his afterlife in the *legenda* and as a dynastic saint, but researchers working on this have seldom sought or considered direct connections with Arthurian literature.⁷

⁶ The lively scholarly search for the origins of Lancelot in the nineteenth century encountered a great deal of frustration; the knight was a key figure and yet no sign of him emerged in the earlier insular British and Irish traditions predating the French works of the later twelfth century. By the first decades of the twentieth century, the consensus was that Lancelot must be sought in continental rather than insular traditions. See August Joseph App, *Lancelot in English Literature: His Role and Character* (Reprint: New York, Haskell House, 1965), 1–3.

⁷ The literature on László is vast and diffuse, being the product of different scholarly circles. For an exploration of the sacral charismatic aspects of Hungarian rulers and the pagan, steppic origins of this tradition, see József Deér, *Heidnisches und Christliches in der altungarischen Monarchie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchges., 1969). Regarding the frescoes depicting the legend of Szent László, nomadic motifs have been noted. See Gyula László, *A Szent László-legenda középkori falképei* [The Saint Ladislaus legend in medieval frescoes] (Budapest: Tájak-Korok-Múzeumok Egyesület, 1993). In discussing the legend of Szent László, including most famously his battle with a Cuman, Central European scholars continue to explore not only Eastern steppic influences, but also Western chivalric motifs. See András Vizkelety, “Nomádkori hagyományok, vagy udvari-lovagi toposzok? Észrevételek Szent László és a leányrabló kun epikai és képzőművészeti ábrázolásaihoz” [Nomadic tradition or courtly chivalric topos? Comments on St. Laszlo and the Cuman who abducted the maiden in epic and artistic depictions], *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 85 (1981): 253–75. The iconography found in artwork depicting the legend has also been explored at length. See Terézia Kerny, “Szent László egyházalapításai az irodalomban, képzőművészetben és a néphagyományban” [Church foundations of Saint László in literature, fine art and tradition], *Pavilon* 9 (1994): 12–19; Terézia Kerny, “A kerlési ütközet megjelenése és elterjedése az irodalomban, majd a képzőművészetben” [The emergence and dissemination of the Kerlés encounter in literature and later art], in: *Folklor és vizuális kultúra*, ed. Szemerényi Ágnes (Budapest: 2007), 202–57. Gábor Klaniczay has suggested that both steppic influences and notions of the type carried by troubadours in the Middle Ages seem to have exerted influences. See Gábor Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 190–4.

The theory I have advanced is novel, so the question arises: If this theory has any merit, why was it not suggested previously? This was probably because I initially approached both subjects as an outsider, lacking familiarity with the scholarly work on these respective topics and without inherited preconceptions. A conference organized by Marianne Sághy in 2015 devoted to the topic of László's daughter, Piroska, provided an initial impetus to this theory by introducing me to detailed explorations of the medieval royal saint's cult that formed around László. Gábor Klaniczay's monumental study on this theme, including *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses*, provided crucial background on the very nature of the royal saint's cult in East Central Europe – information necessary for any theory to develop. Regarding the twelfth century, he notes, “the twelfth-century transformation of this cult, the holy ruler's metamorphosis into intrepid knight, reflects the new doctrines of secular power.”⁸ Concomitant with the rise of secular power in the period was the rise of secular literature. Moreover, the types of political forces and patronage that drove the creation of cults of saints were also driving the creation of secular literature such as Arthurian romance which was burgeoning in the later twelfth century. So, from the very beginning, one could see an interesting parallel there. Moreover, there were certain facts that are well known within the respective bodies of scholarly work related to László and Sir Lancelot. It is a commonplace amongst scholars of the Hungarian saint-king that he was recognized as an intrepid knight by medieval people in this region. That is clear from the artwork – frescoes, stove tiles, coins, etc. – besides the copious literature which testifies to his depiction as a hero in the chivalric mode.⁹ Turning to Arthurian scholarship, it is a long-recognized fact that Sir Lancelot's origins are mysterious and that no truly satisfying explanation yet exists for how he suddenly appeared as a foremost figure in literature. Being aware of those generalities, the two figures seemed to invite a comparison.

⁸ Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses*, 156.

⁹ For important works on the frescoes, see Zsombor Jékely, “Narrative Structure of the Painted Cycle of a Hungarian Holy Ruler: The Legend of St. Ladislav,” *Hortus Artium Medievalium* 21 (2015): 62–74; Béla Zsolt Szakács, “Szent László a XIV. századi kódexfestészetben” [Between chronicle and legend: Image cycles of St Ladislav in fourteenth-century Hungarian manuscripts], in *Csodaszarvas* III 111–23. (Budapest: Molnár Kiadó, 2009). On the topic of stove tile depictions, see Ana Maria Gruia, *Religious Representations on Stove Tiles from the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary* (Cluj: Bibliotheca Musei Napocensis, 2013). For an investigation of the imagery on golden coins, see Márton Gyöngyössi, *Mediaeval Hungarian Gold Florins* (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Bank, 2005); Márton Gyöngyössi, *Magyar pénztörténet: 1000–1540* [Hungarian numismatic history, 1000–1540] (Budapest: Martin Opitz Kiadó, 2012).

Outline of the László-Lancelot theory

One could begin any summary by noting that the most important period for the issue studied here is the 1180s and the context of it is the emerging new contacts between Hungary and France. The argued connection is fundamentally *political* in character, driven by the political and dynastic agenda of Béla III (r. 1172–1196) and the unprecedented Hungarian–French connections in the late twelfth century¹⁰ which culminated in the marriage of the Hungarian king and Margaret of France in 1186.¹¹ I would argue that in this historical situation, there exists an overlooked, but nonetheless intriguing, overlap between Béla’s prolonged effort to promote the dynastic saint’s cult of László – something which led to the conferring of sainthood in 1192 and the corresponding production of the hagiographic *legenda* for the canonization¹² – and the key developments of secular Arthurian romances in France during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Furthermore, an awareness of the startling connections between these two activities will enable us greater insight into the networks of royal patrons of courtly poetry and the interaction between distinct societies across both Eastern and Western Europe in the period.

It has been amply demonstrated by Gábor Klaniczay that royal patronage often lay behind the canonization of dynastic saints in the Middle Ages. Royal patronage played no small part either in the cults that sprung up around the saint kings who were being portrayed increasingly by the twelfth century as examples of Christian piety *and* chivalric virtues. The concomitant processes of royal patronage and cult-building were often directed at serving a propagandistic purpose – the royal exempla of the past served to legitimize the authority of the present rulers in various states and particularly in Hungary. As Klaniczay puts it: “The holy ruler’s special relationship to the powers on high [...] guarantees

¹⁰ There are entire books now devoted to exploring the topic of Hungarian–French relations in the Middle Ages. For two important examples see Attila Györkös and Gergely Kiss, eds., *Francia–magyar kapcsolatok a középkorban* [French–Hungarian relations in the Middle Ages] (Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, 2013). See also this recent collection of essays in French by leading scholars on the topic: Attila Györkös et al. (eds.), *‘M’en anei en Ongria’: Relations franco–hongroises au Moyen Âge II*. Memoria Hungariae 4. (Debrecen: MTA, 2017).

¹¹ Gábor Barta, “Royal finance in medieval Hungary: the revenues of King Béla III,” in *Crises, Revolution and Self-sustained Growth: Essays in European Fiscal History, c. 1130–1830*, ed. W.M. Ormrod et al., 22–37, (Stamford: Paul Watkins Publishing, 1999).

¹² The original version of the *legenda* was likely composed for the canonization and does not survive but two adaptations of it, a shorter version and a longer with some additions and edits composed around 1204, have survived. See Kornél Szovák and László Veszprémy, “Krónikák, legendák, intelmek – Utószó” [Chronicles, legends and admonitions – postscript], in Imre Szentpétery, *Scriptores Rerum Hungaricarum*. V. 2 (Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 1999 reprint), 783.

his country's welfare in some mysterious way. What all of this adds up to is the religious legitimization of secular power in terms of *royal and dynastic sanctity*...¹³ Simultaneously we are aware of the crucial role that royal patronage played as well in the emergence of secular literature in the twelfth century, particularly chivalric romances which were quickly emerging as a very popular form of popular literature across Latin Christendom in the same period. This includes the royal patronage that lay behind Chrétien de Troyes' composition of several romances pertaining to the Arthurian court and the "Matter of Britain." To be sure, the *Vitae* of László produced around the last years of the twelfth century and the chivalric, secular poems describing the warlike exploits of the heroic Sir Lancelot represent totally different genres of medieval literature with different aims. The argument is not being made that one set of these respective texts exercised a formative influence on the other. Rather, it appears that these very different literary creations were byproducts of the same quasi-propagandistic activity emerging from the court of Béla III in the later 1100s, aimed ultimately at shoring up that king's shaky claims to the legitimacy and *idoneitas* of his rule through evoking the sanctity and glory of a dynastic predecessor. The activities and efforts that directly drove the Church's acknowledgement of László as a saint appear to have less directly resulted in the creation of perhaps medieval literature's most enduring and celebrated figure.

Turning from the underlying drivers to the actual evidence for the proposed connection, it should be noted that any argument that Sir Lancelot was inspired by an eleventh-century Hungarian king seems on the surface improbable, particularly if one presupposes that this suggestion is challenging older accepted wisdom on the knight's origins. So, the first point of my argument was that there presently exists no convincing explanation for his abrupt appearance in literature as a fully formed figure or even the etymology of his name.¹⁴ Scholars who have sought Lancelot's origins are unanimous that the first literary appearance of the figure we can find is in the works of Chrétien de Troyes, but the proposed dates of composition for the Champagne poet's Arthurian romances lack scholarly consensus.¹⁵ Beyond that, Lancelot retains an element of mystery, being absent from any older Arthurian accounts even in the mid-eleventh century and from any Arthur-related texts of an insular origin.¹⁶ Scholars' inability over the last couple

¹³ Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses*, 2.

¹⁴ Dominique Boutet, "Lancelot : préhistoire d'un héros arthurien," *Annales* 44, no. 5 (1989): 1229–44.

¹⁵ Based on evidence in the poet's works, there is agreement that the earliest possible date for his first extant Arthurian romance is 1159 and his last work was certainly written before 1191.

¹⁶ Boutet, "Lancelot : préhistoire d'un héros arthurien," 1229–31.

centuries to attach Lancelot to anything substantial in the “Matter of Britain” has resulted in elaborate but unconvincing etymologies, proposals of convoluted composite characters, and suggestions that Lancelot was merely an amalgam of Indo-European motifs or that he stems from some non-existent work featuring some otherwise unattested hero. Thus, the new suggestion that the narrative and etymological origin of “Lancelot” lies in “László” is not really challenging any established or convincing consensus. Furthermore, I was able to demonstrate an actual etymological connection. The fact is that real, non-fictional kings with the name of László/Ladislaus stemming from Hungary or having Hungarian origins, such as László V Posthumous (1444–1457), were subsequently recorded for posterity as “Lancelot” in French and Italian texts, including the work of the fifteenth-century poet, François Villon.¹⁷

There are other important arguments related to the context. For instance, Chrétien de Troyes’ first Arthurian romance in which Lancelot plays the starring role, *The Knight of the Cart*, is centered on an abduction in which Lancelot performs the rescue after a lengthy pursuit and deadly single combat with the abductor. This all bears a rather remarkable resemblance, at least at its base narrative, to the story of László and the Cuman which has survived in the fourteenth-century Hungarian Chronicle.¹⁸ The episode, along with much other material about László’s younger years as duke and military leader in Transylvania, appears to stem from a lost eleventh-century “gesta of Ladislaus” document to which the later Chronicle refers.¹⁹ As outlined previously, this Cuman abduction and rescue story is also one of the most important visual elements of depictions of the legend, reflecting certain elements which differ from or build on the textual tradition. Moreover, I argue that if the notion seems implausible that a character of Hungarian origin would merely be inserted into French Arthurian poetry, then one must account for Sir Sagremore, another major character who appears alongside Lancelot in

¹⁷ On the topic of the French tendency to yield the name as Lancelot, see Sándor Eckhardt, “Lancelot magyar király,” *Magyar nyelv* 33 (1937): 151–157. My subsequent work on the Arthurian aspects of this theory will explore in detail these late medieval references to certain kings, clerics, and others from Hungary called Lancelot in Western European settings. For the account of a little-known Hungarian friar in Italy whose name was rendered as Lancelao, see Eszter Konrád, “Blessed Lancelao of Hungary: A Franciscan Observant in Fifteenth-Century Italy,” *The Hungarian Historical Review* 5:3 (2016): 645–674.

¹⁸ For the primary source account of that abduction episode, see János Bak and László Veszprémy (ed., trans.), *Chronicle of the Deeds of the Hungarians from the Fourteenth-Century Illuminated Codex* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2018), 196–199.

¹⁹ László Mezey, *Athleta Patriae: tanulmányok Szent László történetéhez* [Athleta Patriae: studies of the story of St. Ladislaus] (Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 1980), 21–23.

Chrétien's romances. In the Lancelot-Grail Cycle, Sagremore is described as the son of the Hungarian king and his mother was the daughter of a Byzantine emperor; for a time in his youth, this Arthurian knight was even heir to the Byzantine throne. It all sounds rather like the decidedly non-fictional background of Béla III, the Hungarian king and one-time heir to the Byzantine throne who I argue had a role in the creation of Lancelot.²⁰ That relates to what is the crux of my argument. In the 1180s, there emerged a close and unprecedented connection between Béla III and Marie of Champagne, the patron of Chrétien de Troyes, because the Hungarian king was engaged in protracted negotiations to marry her half-sister. Moreover, the marriage agreement was successfully concluded with Margaret of France going to Hungary to marry Béla in 1186. These connections and their cultural effects have been discussed for quite some time in Hungarian historiography, for instance by András Kubinyi and István Hajnal who analyzed the evolving writing culture in the royal chancellery and among graduates of the universities.²¹ I suggest that the close connections between French and Hungarian courts through the negotiations and marriage are the context in which the story of László could have been transferred by Hungarian nobles who were exposed to Arthurian romance as they were actively promoting a cult of the heroic Hungarian king. That Marie of Champagne commissioned and even provided her court poet with materials for a romance featuring Lancelot is clear from Chrétien's preface. She probably saw it as a political favor and honor to her new Hungarian brother-in-law to write his illustrious ancestor and his most celebrated act of heroism into the cycle of the Knights of the Round Table. If we imagine that Chrétien's romances could have been composed anywhere between 1159 and 1191, then this argument is not entirely persuasive. However, if we take the viewpoint on dating proposed decades ago by Claude Luttrell that the Champagne poet composed all five of his extant romances between 1184 and 1190, with *The Knight of the Cart* being written perhaps in 1187, then my argument fits well with the chronology

²⁰ For the topic of Béla the III and his Byzantine connections, see Ferenc Makk, "Relations hungaro-byzantines à l'époque de Béla III," *Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 31 (1985): 4. See also Ferenc Makk, *The Arpads and the Comeni, Political Relations between Hungary and Byzantium in the 12th Century* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1989).

²¹ See András Kubinyi, "Királyi kancellária és udvari kápolna Magyarországon a XII. század közepén" [Royal chancellery and court chapel in Hungary in the milieu of the twelfth century], *Levéltári Közlemények*, 46 (1975): 59–121. For a work in English on a similar topic related to the emerging universities, see István Hajnal, "Universities and the development of writing in the XIIth–XIIIth centuries," *Scriptorium* 6 (1952): 177–95.

of the works.²² Indeed, in such a chronology, it seems that the poem's chosen narrative is connected to the recently concluded nuptials between a Hungarian king and the sister of Chrétien's patron.

Conclusions

This must remain a very cursory exploration of a theory that aims to tackle the etymology and origins of a rather mysterious figure in medieval literature. Etymologically, I propose that "Lancelot" really is nothing more than a twelfth-century Romance-speaker's attempt at the vernacular Hungarian form of "Ladislaus." The origins of the fictional Knight of the Round Table seems to be tied to the Hungarian-French exchange in the 1180s that manifested itself in many additional ways "during an epoch of strong French influence in Hungary," when the chancellery system of Hungary was altered, Cistercian institutions arrived in the kingdom, and Hungarian officials and clergy regularly went to study in the great universities of Paris and Orléans.²³ The French influences on Hungary during the time are not contested in the academic discourse; it might generate more surprise to consider that Hungary seems to have worked a meaningful role on French literature, providing the inspiration for perhaps the most celebrated fictional character of the Middle Ages. It seems that the prevailing view in modern scholarship on medieval Europe is that there has only ever been a West-East transmission of culture. The idea that powerful and influential cultural products could have moved the other direction still seems to be a somewhat alien notion to scholars – on both sides of that West-East divide moreover.

It is a further surprise for readers who must now consider that Sir Lancelot's creation was *political* in nature, perhaps something we could term a "cross-promotion" aimed at warming up a new ally for France in East-Central Europe. Coincidentally, when I was first working on this theory, I realized to my shock that the Hungarian government happened to be promoting 2017 as the year of the commemoration of the saint-king László. In my own case, no cross-promotion came to be. Nonetheless, the argument that the creation of Lancelot had political motivations might seem more plausible when we consider

²² For a discussion of Claude Luttrell's theory which he outlined in 1974, "one that has not been refuted so much as neglected," along with much more recent evidence in support of it, see Stephen Mark Carey, "Chartrian Influence and German Reception: Dating the Works of Chrétien de Troyes," *Arthuriana* 20, no. 3 (2010): 21–44.

²³ József Laszlovszky, "Nicholas Clericus: A Hungarian Student at Oxford University in the Twelfth Century," *Journal of Medieval History* 14, no. 3 (1988): 225.

that even the development of a small paper discussing that possibility emerged in a larger context which saw László, still in modern times, being used as a sort of inspirational figure to shore up national feeling and political support for the government. The truth is that he continues to generate great interest among general readers and researchers alike. This historical figure along with the fictional Sir Lancelot – and the strong indications of a connection between the two – are such fascinating topics that the interest they attract can hardly be confined to a single year. If a connection between them is only being made now, this testifies to the fact that any such theory must accommodate itself to very different scholarly circles who have pursued very different research questions up to the present.