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The History of Hungary

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Introduction

Hungary, lying at the heart of Central Europe, has long occupied a unique and dynamic place in the continent's history. Known in its own tongue as Magyarország, the nation's story is marked by both its singular origins and its constant interactions with neighboring powers. From prehistoric times—when tribes moved across the vast Pannonian Plain—through to its present membership in the European Union, Hungary's history has been shaped by migration, conquest, adversity, and renewal.

Few European countries possess Hungary's remarkable blend of cultural distinctiveness and historical complexity. While surrounded by Slavic, Germanic, and Romance-speaking peoples, the Hungarians have retained their ancient Finno-Ugric language, signaling an identity set apart. Throughout history, this sense of otherness has often been sharpened by dramatic turning points: the arrival of the Magyar tribes, the baptism of their first Christian king, the trauma of conquest by both Mongol and Ottoman empires, and the trials of modern statehood.

The path of the Hungarian people from their earliest beginnings to the present day is a tapestry woven with threads of triumph and tragedy. Their medieval kingdom was a bastion of Christian Europe, an incubator of Renaissance brilliance, and a battlefield for the fate of the continent during centuries of conflict with the Ottomans. Later, Hungary would be both a pillar of the Habsburg Monarchy and a would-be independent nation, struggling for self-determination in a landscape shaped by empires, nationalism, and modern ideologies.

Twentieth-century Hungary saw some of the most profound upheavals in its history. The devastation of two world wars, a radical loss of territory and population, occupation by Nazi and then Soviet forces, and the crushing of the 1956 Revolution left indelible marks on its national psyche. Yet, out of these trials arose a society that strove to reclaim its identity, assert its sovereignty, and carve a path toward democracy and European integration.

Today's Hungary stands as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of its people. Now a member of the European Union and countless international organizations, Hungary continues to balance tradition and change, sovereignty and globalization. Its political and social evolution remains a matter of ongoing debate—echoing larger questions about the trajectory of Europe itself.

This book traces the rich and variegated story of Hungary from ancient times up to the present day. Through twenty-five chapters, it will explore the diverse peoples and powerful personalities who shaped Magyar history, the pivotal events that redefined

the nation's destiny, and the enduring spirit that enabled Hungary not just to survive but to flourish at the heart of Europe.

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CHAPTER ONE: Prehistoric Hungary: The Earliest Inhabitants of the Carpathian Basin

Long before the Magyars etched their name onto the map of Europe, the Carpathian Basin, with its fertile plains and protective mountain ranges, was a magnet for life. This region, encompassing much of modern-day Hungary, has been continuously inhabited for hundreds of thousands of years, a silent testament to its enduring appeal. The story of prehistoric Hungary is one of resilience, adaptation, and the slow, deliberate march of human progress, each era leaving its faint but fascinating mark on the landscape.

Our journey into Hungary's distant past begins in the Lower Palaeolithic, the earliest phase of the Stone Age. Evidence suggests that early hominids, specifically *Homo heidelbergensis*, made their appearance in the Carpathian Basin. While archaeological traces from this very remote period are scarce, the site of Vértesszőlős stands out, offering glimpses into the lives of these ancient inhabitants. It is here that researchers have unearthed not only the remains of early man but also thousands of tools, providing invaluable insights into their existence.

Following a considerable gap in the archaeological record, the Middle Palaeolithic brings us to the era of Neanderthals, who inhabited the region approximately 100,000 years ago. Their presence is attested to by findings in caves like Subalyuk and Jankovich, as well as open-air sites such as Érd and Tata. These early inhabitants crafted both unifacial and bifacial tools, adapting to their environment with ingenuity.

The arrival of anatomically modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, in the Carpathian Basin is a more recent chapter in this ancient story, occurring between 33,000 and 28,000 BC. These pioneers belonged to the Aurignacian group and left their mark in places like the Istállóskő Cave. This cave, it appears, served as a seasonal hunting camp, where these early *Homo sapiens* crafted bone tools and pursued chamois, red deer, and reindeer. The Szeleta Cave, located in the Bükk Mountains of Northern Hungary, further illuminates this period with its exquisitely crafted leaf-shaped spearheads, showcasing a remarkably advanced local Aurignacian culture around 30,000 to 20,000 years ago.

As the last Ice Age gradually receded, giving way to a warmer, more hospitable climate, the Mesolithic era dawned, roughly between 9000 and 4000 BC. This period saw a shift in lifestyle from nomadic hunting to a more settled existence, although foraging remained a primary means of sustenance. The Tardenoisian culture, characterized by its distinctive microlithic tools, represents this transitional phase in

the Carpathian Basin.

The true revolution in human existence, however, arrived with the Neolithic period, often dubbed the "Neolithic Revolution." Beginning around 6200 BC, this era marked a fundamental shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture and settled village life. The Carpathian Basin proved to be an ideal location for these innovations, with its fertile river valleys providing excellent conditions for early farming communities.

One of the earliest Neolithic cultures to flourish in the region was the Starčevo culture, dating from approximately 6200 to 4500 BCE. This culture introduced farming and ceramics, spreading from Anatolia into the Balkan Peninsula and eventually reaching the Carpathian Basin. It was closely followed by the Criș-Körös culture, which also appeared around 6200 BC, and the Linear Pottery culture, active from 5500 to 4500 BC, both instrumental in bringing agriculture to the region.

The Neolithic period also witnessed the emergence of other significant cultures, such as the Vinča culture (5400-4500 BC), the Tisza culture (5400-4500 BCE), and the Sopot culture. The Tisza culture, in particular, left behind intriguing artifacts, including the "sickle god" figurine found at Szegvár-Túzköves. These communities, living in permanent settlements, developed new tools and produced pottery, fundamentally transforming their environment through specialized crop cultivation. Genetic studies suggest a prolonged period of interbreeding between these early farmers and local hunter-gatherer populations, with about 10% hunter-gatherer ancestry found in Hungarian farmers by the late Neolithic.

Transitioning from the Stone Age, the Copper Age, beginning around 4500 BC, brought with it new technologies and cultural developments. The Tiszapolgár culture (4500-4000 BC) and the Bodrogkeresztúr culture (4000-3600 BC) are key representatives of this era. A notable development during this period, particularly associated with the Baden culture, was the improvement of metalworking techniques and the introduction of cremation. These communities also engaged in long-distance trade, reaching as far as the Baltic and even Iran.

The Bronze Age, starting around 2600-2500 BC in Hungary, marked another leap forward in technological advancement. This period saw the widespread use of bronze for tools, weapons, and ornaments. The Carpathian Basin became home to several distinct Bronze Age cultures, each leaving its unique archaeological signature.

The Early Bronze Age, roughly 2600-2100 BC, saw cultures like the Mako and Nagyrév flourish. The Middle Bronze Age (2300-1500 BC) included the Csepel, Ottomány (or Otomani-Füzesabony), and Vátya cultures, sometimes overlapping in their presence. Fortified settlements, often with meticulously planned layouts and rectangular timber and daub houses, characterized some of these cultures, such as the Hatvan culture. These settlements sometimes included deep sacrifice pits containing animal remains,

suggesting ritualistic practices.

During the Late Bronze Age (2000-1200 BC), the Bell-beaker culture and later the Tumulus culture and Urnfield culture became prominent. Archaeological discoveries from this period, such as a vast hoard of ancient treasure on Somló Hill in western Hungary, reveal elaborate bronze items, including axes, amber beads, gold hair ornaments, and spearheads. The presence of bronze-working workshops suggests a highly skilled metallurgical tradition.

The transition to the Iron Age, commencing around 800 BC in the Carpathian Basin, brought with it new populations and further cultural transformations. This era saw the emergence of the Hallstatt culture, an agrarian society that greatly advanced metalwork in Central and Western Europe. Fortified centers, often built on earthworks, were characteristic of this period, particularly in Transdanubia.

Concurrently, the Great Hungarian Plain and the northern mountainous regions were inhabited by the Scythian Vekerzug culture. These Iron Age inhabitants, believed by some to be ancient Iranian tribes, were often equestrian nomads, introducing new cultural elements and forming distinct groups like the Mezőcsát culture. The Carpathian Basin, by this time, was truly a crossroads of cultures, attracting migrations from all directions.

By around 750 BC, the Hallstatt Celts arrived from the west, becoming a significant influence. They were followed by other groups, including the mysterious Sigynnae around 500 BC, and the Pannonians, an Illyrian tribe who would later lend their name to a Roman province. Before 100 BC, much of the area was settled by various Celtic or "Celticized" peoples, including the Taurisci and the Boii, further enriching the cultural tapestry of prehistoric Hungary. This period of early human habitation, spanning countless millennia, laid the foundation for the complex history that was to unfold in the heart of Europe.

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