FEATURES

Genetic Study Confirms the Origin Ladislaus and Hungarian Dynasty

By Lorris Chevalier

Saint Ladislaus I of Hungary (c. 1040–1095) stands as one of the most revered figures in Hungarian history. Celebrated for his consolidation of Hungarian state power and the strengthening of Christianity, he was canonized in 1192. His remains, particularly the skull relic preserved in the Saint Ladislaus' Herma at the Cathedral Basilica of Győr, hold significant historical and genetic value. Ladislaus became a national saint-hero after rescuing a woman from abduction by a Cuman, a story that symbolised the defence of Hungary against invading enemies, whether pagan or 'Saracen'. However, according to a recent archaeogenomic analysis, Ladislaus himself was of Eastern genetic origin.

Recent scientific studies on his relics have shed new light on the origins of the Hungarian monarchy, reinforcing traditional accounts of Hun and Hungarian continuity.

A Relic's Journey: From Fire to Cathedral

The Herma – photo by Medieval masters / Wikimedia Commons

The Herma, a reliquary that contains the skull of Saint Ladislaus, has had a tumultuous history. Originally placed in a wooden container, the relic survived a fire in 1406 and was later encased in the current metal Herma during the reign of King Sigismund of Hungary. Over the centuries, the relic travelled through Prague, Pozsony (modern-day Bratislava), and Veszprém before reaching its final resting place in Győr in the early 17th century.

Given its turbulent history, historians and archaeologists raised questions about the authenticity of the relic. However, modern genetic research has provided compelling evidence supporting its legitimacy.

DNA Confirms: Saint Ladislaus Was an Árpád

In recent years, the Institute of Hungarian Research has conducted significant studies on the skull relic. In 2021, Endre Neparáczki collected a DNA sample from the relic, leading to the successful extraction of endogenous DNA. By 2023, a complete genetic analysis had been published, confirming that the Y-chromosomal lineage of the skull belongs to the exclusive haplogroup of the Árpád dynasty, R-ARP (R1a1a1b2a2a1c3a3b).

This Y-chromosomal haplogroup connects Saint Ladislaus directly to his royal descendant, King Béla III, confirming a five-generation distance between them. This not only authenticates the relic but also makes Saint Ladislaus the first historical saint whose identity has been verified through archaeogenetics.

From Huns to Kings: The Eastern Roots of Hungary's Dynasty

Scenes from the life of Ladislaus in the Anjou Legendarium

The genetic findings align with traditional Hungarian medieval chronicles, such as the Chronicon Pictum, which emphasise the continuity between the Huns and the Hungarians. The sub-haplogroup R-Z2123, to which R-ARP belongs, has been traced to Bronze Age cultures such as Potapovka, Sintashta, and Andronovo, later appearing among Scytho-Siberians, the Xiongnu (Asian Huns), and medieval Mongolian populations.

The earliest known presence of this haplogroup in the Carpathian Basin dates back to the 5th century among European Huns and persisted through 7th–8th century Avars. By the 9th–10th centuries, it was reintroduced by the conquering Hungarians, including Árpád and his family. These genetic links support the theory that the ruling dynasty of Hungary descended from semi-nomadic tribes originating in Central and East Asia.

How Royal DNA Changed Over Centuries

A broader genetic study conducted in 2022 analysed 113 samples from the Hungarian conqueror elite. Findings confirmed that the Árpád dynasty shared a common ethnic origin with these early Hungarian rulers. Interestingly, Saint Ladislaus exhibited a stronger Eastern genetic affinity compared to later Hungarian kings. On the PCA (Principal Component Analysis) genetic map, his genome shifted slightly eastward compared to modern European populations. In contrast, King Béla III's genome aligned more closely with modern Hungarians and Croatians, reflecting the dilution of Central Asian genetic influence through dynastic marriages with European nobility over the centuries.

The Genetic Legacy of Saint Ladislaus

The analysis of Saint Ladislaus' relics sheds new light on the origins of the Hungarian monarchy. His confirmed genetic link to the Árpád dynasty validates medieval historical accounts and refines our understanding of the ruling elite's ethnic roots. As the first saint identified through archaeogenetics, his case underscores the growing role of modern science in verifying history and preserving cultural heritage.

Beyond their religious significance, Saint Ladislaus' relics also stand as scientific proof of the Hungarian monarchy's genetic and historical continuity, from its nomadic beginnings to its medieval consolidation.

Dr Lorris Chevalier, who has a Ph.D. in medieval literature, is a historical advisor for movies, including The Last Duel *and* Napoleon. Click here to view his website.

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Further Readings:

Gergely I.B. Varga et al., "The archaeogenomic validation of Saint Ladislaus' relic provides insights into the Árpád dynasty's genealogy," *Journal of Genetics and Genomics*, Vol. 50:1 (2023)

Top Image: Coronation of Ladislaus I of Hungary in the Chronicon Pictum

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