Some research questions of the social organization and state of the Altai communities

In the discipline of Altai studies, in addition to linguistic research, archeology, history, and, recently, genetics also play an essential role, with results that came to shed new light on the ancient history of the peoples from the Altaic area. Thanks to the development of natural science, researchers are able to determine who are related to the individuals buried in each particular graveyard. Based on research conducted in recent years, it has been revealed that the ancestors of the first Hungarian royal dynasty, the Árpád, and one of the most distinguished Hungarian noble families, the Aba, originated from the territory of today's Mongolia and had Hun ancestors.

For us Hungarians, the research of the Altai region is important because of the Huns. We are proud that many Hungarian researchers played a pioneering role in Oriental research. Sándor Csoma Kőrösi, the founder of Tibetology and the author of the first Tibetan-English dictionary, Aurél Stein contributed to the exploration of the sand-buried cities along the Silk Road, and Ármin Vámbéry turkologist, who visited the isolated land of Central Asia as the first foreigner. Hungarian researchers thought that their ancestors were related to Inner Asia, specifically the Huns, as the ancient Hungarian chronicles and the folk tradition had recorded before.

Discovering the Altai region began in the 19th century; however, foreign researchers often described the peoples who lived there as barbaric and primitive. During the 20th century, thanks to archaeological, ethnographic and historical activities, the role of the steppe peoples in world history slightly changed, but even in the 21st century there are still some topics to reevaluate. Perhaps one of the most important subjects is the question of social organization, how the state was formed, and what democratic elements the Altai people, especially the Huns, had.

We can read a lot of theories in the related literature about the basis on which the Hun state operated. Up to this day, there is a debate among legal historians about when the first state was established and how ancient states can be considered a kingdom in the modern sense. There are two main theories about them: one part believes that the first states were created in ancient times, and then their structure and responsibilities underwent continuous changes. Georg Jellinek, Felix Ermacora, Roman Herzog, Max Weber and the Marxist authors considered all legally regulated political communities to be states. Some scholars think that only the modern kingdoms can be considered as states and do not accept the ancient kingdoms and empires as states. The horsemen people were largely left out of this research, which can be attributed to the late revealing of their history and the relatively late analysis of eastern historical sources. There have been no significant changes in this process, and the currently available summaries of state theories and legal history almost completely lack a thorough analysis of the nomadic state and the exploration of its characteristics and independent functioning mechanism. In most works, their society was compared in its functioning with the European principalities, which operated on completely different principles. In other cases, they want to draw conclusions from the fragmentary data of Chinese sources. All of these results are extremely inaccurate.

It is well known historical data that the Scythians/Sakas and the Huns created a huge empire in the Eurasian steppe region from Manchuria to the Carpathian Basin. (Unfortunately, we have no information about the organization of the tribes and communities of the Bronze Age due to the lack of written sources. However, considering the unified culture, they were able to create communities on large areas that they controlled. It is likely that they could have lived within an organized state framework.) Based on the research so far, it is certain that the statehood of the Altai people did not disappear after the declining of one empire, but the statehood tradition was inherited from one people to another and always adapted to the challenges of the given era. A similar thing could have happened in Europe with the Goths and Franks who had lived under the authority of the Huns for three generations and later also adopted many elements of the Hunnic state organization, as John Niles recently pointed out in his study.

Evidence that Huns had a developed statehood is provided by ancient Chinese historical sources, where the same word country/state (guo) was used for the organization of the Huns as for their own. In addition, it was mentioned that the main power is exercised by the shanyu, which firstly appeared in Chinese sources in 265 B.C. Among the ancient Chinese chronicles, Shi Ji, Han shu and Hou-Han shu report in detail on the organization and operation of the Hun state. Its first relatively thorough description was recorded by Sima Qian in the 2nd century B.C., who did not only write about Hun administrative leaders and Hun dignitaries, but also about the nature of the state and the Hun parliaments held annually. There is also information about the fact that the Huns and the Chinese concluded a treaty (heqin) in 200 BC, where the Chinese ruler recognized the Hun ruler as an equal partner. In the late Roman historical sources, the European Hun rulers - Ruga and Attila - were called Basileos, i.e. emperor, in the same way as the Eastern Roman rulers. Despite the above presented evidence, there are some researchers who do not accept that the steppe peoples, such as the Huns, were able to create and operate an independent state and presented theories that are far from reality. A wrong translation also contributed to the creation of such theories. When Watson translated the Chinese sources, namely Shi Ji, on the Huns, he used the term "chiefdom" instead of “country” or ”state” to refer to their state, from which many scholars inferred that the Huns had a primitive state organization. The most improbable theory belongs to Sneath, who stated that the Huns formed a "stateless state". The latter term is unintelligible in every aspect.

In researching the formation of states, the Hungarian legal historians of the 19th century stated the fact that a state was founded by the united equestrian peoples through their most important act of public law. This pact is still well known among the Altai peoples as the sworn brotherhood or “anda,” in Altaic languages. So, the Hungarian legal historians emphasize that the chapters of this pact were the first constitutions of the steppe state. This position has been accepted by Hungarian legal historians ever since. However, foreign researchers did not recognize the public law role of the blood contract, and therefore did not pay attention to its analysis by the Hungarians. Having compared the texts of the sworn brotherhood across the Eurasian steppe people and various ancient nations recorded, I agree with the Hungarian researchers--I believe that the blood contracts for the Altai peoples should be thoroughly studied, since the tribes were united into a state through it. Since rights and obligations were prescribed for both parties at the time of the blood contract, in it we can discover the discipline of responsible governance, the basis of which is that the ruler is responsible for his actions, and he can be removed if he violates the law.

Another important topic is the nature of the steppe state. The form referred to by Marxists as "nomadic feudalism" never existed, as we can assume from the contemporary historical sources that the statehood of the time contained democratic elements. Based on the historical sources, it is known that the earliest decision-making nations of the Altai peoples - the Huns and their descendants – had a tribal assembly, which developed from the early clan meeting, named Szer by Hungarians and referred to as Eye by the Early Mongolians. In the 13th century, the Mongols named this Kurultaj, a term that was adopted by the other Altaic peoples who came under Mongolian rule. Based on the social conditions of the time, it was a democratic organization, where the delegates discussed the affairs of the country and decided on the issue of war and peace and electing the ruler. The most important issues concerning the community were therefore not decided by the word of the ruler alone, but decisions were made together with the tribal leaders, generals and administrative leaders at the forum. The ancient historian Procopius, who lived in the 6th century, described this social system of the steppe peoples of Eastern Europe as a military democracy. According to him, the Sklavens living in the Lower-Danube region lived in a democracy, and they always consulted on war matters. Based on this, at the end of the 19th century, Morgan claimed that this ancient form of social organization, i.e. the so-called "military democracy," was a special organization of "barbarian" peoples. However, the concept needs to be adjusted to the extent that there is no democracy in the military but instead there is a strict subordinate and superior order, and no one can question the commander's order. On the other hand, a truly democratic character can be observed among the peoples of the Altai, which has mostly been accepted by researchers, including the famous Russian orientalist, Vladimirov.

In summary, we can say that the Altai peoples created a special form of statehood with democratic elements, the exploration and application of which in the modern age may be important for the democracies of the 21st century.