HUNGARY’S EARLY INHABITANTS

The Carpathian Basin, in which Hungary lies, has been populated for at least half a million years. Bone fragments found at Vértesszőlős, about 5km southeast of Tata (p159), in the 1960s are believed to be that old. The findings suggest that Palaeolithic and, several hundred millennia later, Neanderthal humans were attracted by the area’s hot springs and the abundance of reindeer, bears and mammoths. Stone Age pottery shards and bone-tipped arrowheads have been found at Istállóskő Cave near Szílovárvárad (p338).

During the Neolithic period (5000–2500 BC), climate change forced much of the indigenous wildlife to migrate northward. As a result the domestication of animals and the early forms of agriculture appeared, simultaneously with the rest of Europe. Remnants of the Körös culture in the Szeged area of southeast Hungary (p263) suggest that these goddess-worshipping people herded sheep, fished and planted crops.

Indo-European tribes from the Balkans stormed the Carpathian Basin in horse-drawn carts in about 2000 BC, bringing with them copper tools and weapons. After the introduction of the more durable metal bronze, horses were domesticated, forts built and a military elite developed.

Over the next millennium, invaders from the west (Illyrians, Thracians) and east (Scythians) brought iron, but it was not in common use until the Celts arrived at the start of the 4th century BC. They introduced glass and crafted some of the fine gold jewellery that can still be seen in museums throughout Hungary (eg the Mór Wosinszky County Museum in Szekszárd, p281).

In about 35 BC the Romans conquered the area west and south of the Danube River, and two dozen years later occupied the Danube Bend. By AD 10 they had established the province of Pannonia, which would later be divided into Upper (Superior) and Lower (Inferior) Pannonia. Subsequent victories over the Celts extended Roman domination across the Tisza River as far as Dacia (today’s Romania). The Romans introduced writing, viticulture and stone architecture, and established garrison towns and other settlements, the remains of which can still be seen in Óbuda (Aquincum in Roman times; p94), Szombathely (Savaria; p182), Pécs (Sophianae; p298) and Sopron (Scarbantia; p173).

THE MIGRATION PERIOD

The first of the so-called Great Migrations of nomadic peoples from Asia reached the eastern outposts of the Roman Empire early in the 3rd century AD, and in 270 the Romans fled Dacia altogether. Within less than two

<table>
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<th>Timeline</th>
<th>AD 106</th>
<th>Late 430s</th>
<th>895–96</th>
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<td>Roman Aquincum (in today’s Óbuda) is named the administrative seat of the province of Pannonia Inferior.</td>
<td>Huns raze Aquincum, forcing Romans and other settlers to flee.</td>
<td>Nomadic Magyar tribes enter and settle in the Carpathian Basin.</td>
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centuries they were also forced to pull out of Pannonia by the Huns, whose short-lived empire had been established by Attila. (Attila had previously conquered the Magyars near the lower Volga River and for centuries these two groups were thought – erroneously – to share a common ancestry.)

Germanic tribes such as the Goths, Gepids and Longobards occupied the region for the next century and a half until the Avars, a powerful Turkic people, gained control of the Carpathian Basin in about 580. They in turn were subdued by the Frankish king Charlemagne in 796 and converted to Christianity. By that time the Carpathian Basin was virtually unpopulated, except for groups of Turkic and Germanic tribes on the plains and Slavs in the northern hills.

THE ORIGIN OF THE MAGYARS

The origin of the Magyars is a complex issue, not helped by the similarity (in English) of the words ‘Hun’ and ‘Hungary’, which are not related. One thing is certain: Magyars are part of the Finno-Ugric group of peoples who inhabited the forests somewhere between the middle Volga River and the Ural Mountains in western Siberia and began migrating as early as 4000 BC.

By about 2000 BC population growth had forced the Finnish-Estonian branch of the group to move westward, ultimately reaching the Baltic Sea. The Ugrians migrated from the southeastern slopes of the Urals into the valleys, and switched from fishing, hunting and gathering to primitive farming and raising livestock, especially horses. The Magyars’ equestrian skills proved useful half a millennium later when climatic changes brought drought, forcing them to move north to the steppes.

On the plains, the Ugrians turned to nomadic herding. After 500 BC, by which time the use of iron had become widespread among the tribes, some of the groups moved westward to the area of Bashkiria in central Asia. Here they lived among Persians and Bulgars and began referring to themselves as Magyars (from the Finno-Ugric words mon, ‘to speak’, and er, ‘man’).

After several centuries another group split away and moved south to the Don River under the control of the Turkic Khazars. Here they lived among different groups under a tribal alliance called onogur (or ‘10 peoples’). This is the derivation of the word ‘Hungary’ in English and ‘Ungarn’ in German. Their last migration before the conquest of the Carpathian Basin brought them to what modern Hungarians call the Etelköz, the region between the Dnieper and lower Danube Rivers above the Black Sea.

THE CONQUEST OF THE CARPATHIAN BASIN

Nomadic groups of Magyars probably reached the Carpathian Basin as early as the mid-9th century AD, acting as mercenaries for various armies. In about 889 the Pechenegs, a fierce people from the Asiatic steppe, allied themselves with the Bulgars and attacked the Etelköz settlements. When they were

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Although Hungarians are in no way related to the Huns, Attila remains a very common given name for males in Hungary today.

If you’d like to learn more about the nomadic Magyars, their history, civilisation and/or art, go to http://ancientmagyarworld.tripod.com, which also offers a number of useful and interesting links.