

Some say the Szeklers are the oldest established inhabitants of the province; the Rumanians, as we know, fiercely contest this. The Szeklers were wrongly thought, in earlier times—like the Magyars themselves, indeed, but very much later—to have descended from the Huns. Others held that when Charlemagne swept the Avars from the Great Plain some of them might have landed up in these mountains. Or, it was wondered, could they be the offspring of the bellicose Kabars, a splinter-tribe that had joined the Magyars—later forming part of the vanguard of Arpád's host—during their cloudy sojourn in the Khazar empire? The most recent theory, I think, supports their Magyar beginnings: somehow they became separated from the main tribes when they moved west from Bessarabia with the Pechenegs at their heels; they must have made their way straight through the nearest passes to their present habitat, while the others pursued their more roundabout paths to the Great Plain. If this were so, the expanding Magyars, when they moved eastwards again and into Transylvania, would have found their Szekler kinsmen already settled. There is convincing evidence that the early Hungarian kings established or confirmed them along the Carpathian border as permanent frontiersmen, on the watch for the inroads of later barbarians; and there is nothing incompatible in the two last theories. At any rate, all through the Dark and Middle Ages they were the wardens and the light-horsemen of the eastern march, and in battle, when the main Hungarian cavalry took the field in full armour, they stuck to the fleet Parthian tactics of their nomad past. The Hungarians, the Szeklers and the Saxons were largely self-governing under the Hungarian crown, and many of the Szeklers, even if they were moccasin-shod and still signed their names with their thumbs, were ennobled *en masse*; all three nations—or rather, their leaders and nobles—had a voice in the councils of Transylvania.*

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

* 'Nation' has a special sense in this context: it means the noble legislating minority. Hungarian serfs, not being part of it, were no more represented than the similarly placed ancestors of the Rumanian majority. It was position in the hierarchy not 'nationality' that counted. There were Rumanian nobles who had a voice, but they invariably became absorbed into the Hungarian nobility and were lost.