



Contemporary Hungarian Rune-Writing

Ideological Linguistic Nationalism within a Homogenous Nation

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Abstract. – This article analyzes Hungarian rune enthusiasts as a nationalist subculture. It gives a brief explanation of the Hungarian runes as a writing system, explaining different degrees of competency with which the script can be written. Rune-writing enthusiasts typically have a high level of education, and have organized a semischolarly journal, a bookstore, and a dense correspondence network. Interest in the runes is strongly associated with a revisionist cosmology. The ideological nature of this script community shows that nationalism emerges spontaneously, but the limited social basis of the movement suggests that ideology is insufficient for a mass national movement. [*Hungary, runes, nationalism, sociolinguistics, graffiti*]

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Rune-Writing Enthusiasts as a National Intelligentsia

The operation of nationalist intelligentsias in states unreceptive to their claims has been the subject of a tremendous literature. Particular national movements have been explored in innumerable case studies, the details of which in turn sharpen theoretical understanding. Miroslav Hroch (1985: 23), focusing on the nineteenth century, schematized the development such groups from "scholarly interest" to "mass national movement" in a famous state theory which continues to attract admirers among East-European specialists.¹ Ernst Gellner

(1983), even developed a generic "Ruritanian" national movement to discuss its historical development inside the Empire of Megalomania. Globalization has not done away with particularist nationalism, merely internationalized the arena in which nationalist symbols are contested (see especially Danforth 1995). This literature, however, starts from the assumption that minority and majority national cultures objectively differ, though this difference is routinely acknowledged to be socially and historically constructed.

Hungarian rune-writing enthusiasts are a self-selecting group with a distinct nationalist ideology emphasizing autochthony and antiquity. They promote a national myth through popular cultural products, propaganda tracts, and even a semischolarly journal. Their social composition resembles those of other modern nationalist movements; they even have their own diaspora in North America. Hungarian rune-writers invent traditions and imagine communities, and so would seem to form a nationalist intelligentsia. Yet their movement is directed against a state bearing the same name and claiming to speak for the same nation.

Hungarian rune enthusiasts also form a borderline case in the degree to which they form a linguistic minority. Hungarian rune-writers are universally familiar with the Latin orthography used by other Hungarians, and do not claim any linguistic distinctiveness. Books on Hungarian

1 Magocsi 1989: 50; Kaiser 1994: 34; Johnson 2001.