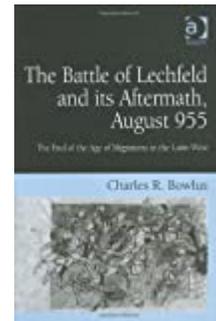




Charles R. Bowlus. *The Battle of Lechfeld and Its Aftermath, August 955: The End of the Age of Migrations in the Latin West.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006. xxiv + 223 pp. \$94.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-5470-4.



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A New Theory on the Campaign that Ended the Hungarian Invasions

In 955 Otto I, the ruler of the East Frankish kingdom, led an army comprised predominantly of Bavarians, Swabians, Franconians, and Bohemians against a Magyar (Hungarian) military force that had launched a raid into the south of the kingdom from the Carpathian basin. The two armies first came into contact with one another near the Lech River, in the region around Augsburg, in what is today the German state of Bavaria. Though few extant sources provide details about how the battle unfolded, it is clear that the encounter between the two sides eventually resulted in a decisive victory for Otto I. After approximately a half-century of raids into Italy and the East Frankish kingdom, the Magyars would never seriously threaten the Latin West again. Indeed, in subsequent centuries they would convert to Christianity and emerge as an important buffer between western Europe and other nomadic peoples from the steppes of Asia. For Otto I, the victory set the stage for his emergence as the dominant ruler in Latin Christendom. Seven years after the battle of Lechfeld, in 962, he would be crowned emperor by the pope, setting the stage for German, and later Austrian, control of the western imperial title until the nineteenth century.

Despite its unquestioned significance as a battle that helped to shape the history of western Europe, the battle of Lechfeld has remained a mystery to historians because of the scarcity of sources for its study. Various scholars have interpreted the few scraps of evidence in different ways and have arrived at a range of often contradictory conclusions. In this book, Charles Bowlus offers a new theory for understanding the events of August 955. He has brought together a remarkably diverse body of sources in order to argue that there was not a single decisive “Battle of Lechfeld” but rather a series of skirmishes that gradually decimated the Hungarians as they attempted to retreat back through Bavaria in the days after the initial encounter. According to Bowlus, a number of factors—ranging from improved Ottonian military tactics to rainy weather and flooded river valleys—all conspired against the Magyars in the fateful summer of 955.

The book is divided into six chapters that effectively lay out the central elements of this argument. In chapter 1, Bowlus summarizes many of the key points of his thesis and argues that the few written sources that provide evidence for the events of August 955 are all

fundamentally reliable, though they may seem at first glance to contradict each other on various points. Chapter 2 focuses on Hungarian society and military culture in the tenth century. Because written evidence is virtually non-existent, Bowlus employs a broad range of interdisciplinary approaches to explore this topic and to argue that, contrary to the assumptions of most historians, the Carpathian basin and western Europe were ill-suited for the type of warfare practiced by the Magyars. In chapter 3, Bowlus examines Ottonian military strategy in the decades leading up to 955 and suggests that German rulers had gradually adopted a “defense-in-depth” strategy during the first half of the tenth century to counter the threat of the Magyars. Chapter 4 looks at Hungarian incursions into the duchy of Bavaria in the years before 955. Bowlus argues here that the relationship between the Hungarians and the Bavarians prior to 955 was complex and that both sides understood each other very well on the eve of the Lechfeld campaign. Chapters 5 and 6 suggest a possible narrative for the events of August 955, with chapter 5 charting the activities of both parties in the days leading up to the so-called “main battle.” In chapter 6, Bowlus posits the theory that it was actually during the days after this battle that most of the Hungarian army was destroyed. The volume ends with a brief conclusion followed by a series of appendices with translated passages from the key written sources used by Bowlus throughout the book.

Much of Bowlus’s argument is appealing. For example, his discussion of the challenges the Hungarians would have faced trying to escape from the Augsburg region back to the Carpathian basin is excellent. As anyone who has traveled extensively in Bavaria and Austria knows, and as the book makes clear, the Magyars

would have had to make a series of difficult river crossings along the way. And if, as Bowlus argues, many of these rivers were overflowing with rainwater and key fords were well-guarded by garrisoned fortifications, the Magyars would have found the return journey to their homes extraordinarily treacherous in August 955.

In the end, however, because of the nature of the evidence Bowlus employs, it is very much in the hands of the individual reader to determine whether or not the book’s argument is believable. Even Bowlus concedes that he cannot prove his theory definitively. The entire book is filled with such phrases as “What probably happened is as follows” (p. 102); “the following scenario is very plausible” (p. 108); “It is highly probable that” (p. 139); and “It is logical to assume” (p. 147). The reader must, therefore, decide how convincing Bowlus’s interpretations of the written sources are as well as judge the credibility of his translation choices for some of the key Latin terms and phrases that have vexed scholars for decades, such as *agrarii milites*. Furthermore, as a result of the limited base of written sources for the battle, the reader must also decide how convincing Bowlus’s use of non-traditional historical sources is. Archaeology, geography, meteorology, climatology, ecology, animal husbandry, naming patterns, and archery are only some of the fields Bowlus mines in search of support for his theory. Since the majority of medievalists and other historians who are most likely to pick up this work are probably not experts in all these fields, each reader will be forced to accept or reject many of Bowlus’s key claims based on his or her own impressions of how the author employs his diverse body of evidence. Thus, while Bowlus’s theory is intriguing, I suspect that this book will ultimately not solve any of the long-standing disputes about the battle of Lechfeld.

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