

“Spurred on by the Fear of Death”: Refugees and Displaced Populations during the Mongol Invasion of Hungary

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A contemporary witness to the military collapse and destruction of the kingdom of Hungary at the hands of the Mongols, the Dalmatian chronicler Archdeacon Thomas of Spalato, described the arrival of a disordered mass of refugees before the walls of Spalato in the following terms:

“Then at all the city gates there was a great throng of people fleeing behind the walls. They had left behind horses and animals, clothing and tools; not even waiting for their own sons, they ran for safer shelter, spurred on by the fear of death.”¹

Thomas of Spalato's *Historia pontificum Salonitanorum atque Spalatensium* (History of the Bishops of Salona and Spalato) contains extensive references to the plight of refugees in 1241 and 1242, when Batu Khan and his able lieutenants led several large Mongol armies through the Carpathian Mountains into the great Danubian plain. But Thomas is not our sole source. We possess several other equally valuable testimonies. The Italian-born Roger of Torre Maggiore, archdeacon of Nagyvárád in eastern Hungary, wrote a detailed account of the Mongols in Europe, known as the *Carmen miserabile super destructione regni Hungarie per Tartaros* (Song of Lamentation on the destruction of the kingdom of Hungary by the Tartars).² Like Thomas, Roger saw the Mongols first hand and had wide contacts with other well-informed observers, but equally important Roger was himself first a refugee from, and then a captive of, the Mongols. His *Carmen miserabile* is thus in part an autobiographical memoir of a thirteenth-century refugee. Beyond these two narratives our information is rounded out by epistolary evidence, royal charters, and monastic and urban records.

Sensitized by the grim headlines which daily announce the appalling plight of twentieth-century refugees in eastern Europe, I was motivated to investigate the behavior and conditions of medieval refugees fleeing the Mongols. In reviewing the sources I was struck by the abundance and vividness of the surviving evidence. My original plan was to study the Hungarian situation in comparison with similar experiences of