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

rune-writing generally appear in the Latin alphabet, and while much is published about the runes, nothing is published in them. Nevertheless, rune-writers consciously cultivate linguistic skills. Historically, several language-cultivators have written books published in languages other than the object of adoration: for example, Joseph Jungmann, the famous Czech linguist, wrote his 1792 history of the Czech language and literature and 1809 Czech grammar in German. Since standardized literary codifications, not spoken language, are the true object of nationalist contention, the conscious cultivation of a different Hungarian script deserves attention, even if the script-cultivators do not see themselves as linguistic separatists.

This article examines the Hungarian rune-writing subculture. It begins with an overview of this script, the rovástrás (“rune writing,” from ró, “to carve”), a topic about which hardly anything has been written in English. The authors who promote this script promote what could be called a “revisionist” national cosmology incompatible with respectable Hungarian nationalism. Since interest in the runic script is highly correlated to revisionist ideological beliefs, I will also discuss the individuals espousing this national ideology and provide a brief sketch of their social and geographical distribution. Then I will discuss three contemporary specimens I encountered while living in Budapest. The conclusion situates the rovástrás subculture in the context of other national language-planning movements.

Before plunging into the analysis, perhaps it is worth stating what this essay overlooks. The reactionary politics of rovástrás enthusiasts could easily lead to a discussion of Hungarian right-wing politics generally, but I have restricted my attention to sources which discussed or employed rune-writing. The analysis also mentions analogous Turkish and Scandinavian rune cultures only in passing. Finally, I focus explicitly on contemporary rune-writing. Almost all the sources discussed here were less than ten years old at the time of writing; many come from online newspapers or webpages. This modern focus differentiates this paper from most scholarly literature on rovástrás, which typically discusses the script’s origins (e.g., Jensen 1935; Sebestén 1909; Németh 1971). This paper is primarily an analysis of a subculture, and its interests concern the present.

Rovástrás as a Writing System

Rovástrás is an alphabetic system of writing, several centuries old, of uncertain origin. Its historic use is strongly associated with the Seklers or Székely, a tribe of ethnic Hungarians living in the Székelyföld, in eastern Transylvania. Rovástrás letters can be written left-to-right, right-to-left, and also supports boustrophedon, i.e., text that runs back and forth down the page. Letters appear in a mirror image depending on which way the script is read (Rovástrás shares these features with Scandinavian runes; see Düwel 1968: 8; Morris 1998: 69–74). Modern enthusiasts generally declare right-to-left the correct direction, though contemporary specimens of rovástrás run in both directions. Cajoling my word processor to print right-to-left proved beyond my abilities; sample rovástrás texts in the text of this essay run left-to-right.

Rovástrás has never been what Benedict Anderson (1991) has called a “national print language.” To the best of my knowledge, no printer ever cut a typeface for Hungarian runes, nor has a book ever been printed in them. Rovástrás has no institutions serving as “authorities of prescription,” to use Ulrich Ammon’s (1987: 328) phrase: the linguistic division of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, for example, concerns itself only with the Latin alphabet. Hungarian state schools do not teach the runes, and Hungarian bureaucracies do not use them. No mass educational system has ever tried to make rovástrás the basis for mass literacy, though children attending Hungarian scouting camp in Canada learn to carve runic messages to each other (Siket, pers. comm., 2003). With the possible exception of children forced to attend Canadian summer camp, rune enthusiasts study voluntarily.

There are many variants of rovástrás. One popular instruction booklet, Klára Friedrich’s

2 Other examples are easy to find. L’udovít Štúr, the Slovak national leader and language codifier, received his primary education in Czech and even worked as a Czech language teacher in his youth. István Széchenyi, the “greatest Magyar” who established Hungary’s Academy of Sciences, also felt more comfortable in German than Hungarian.


4 Jensen (1935: 299) derives rovástrás from Siberian Turkish letters, with a few Greek and Glagolitic letters thrown in, noting C. L. Fehér’s hypothesis that Hungarian runes derive from Indian Bráhmi characters. Németh (1971: 39 f.) writes “The inventor of the Hungarian script ... was a learned man: to represent the sound a he took over the Greek ‘a’; for the e he the Glagolitic ‘e’; for the o the Glagolitic ‘o’,” showing that respectable Hungarian scholars, like amateur enthusiasts, derive national pride from the runes.
"Rovásdrásgyakorlatok, nem csak gyerekeknek" [Runic Writing Workbook, not only for Children] (2000) gives two different standard alphabets: Adorján Magyar's, which collapses short [u] and long [ő] into a single rune [ő]; and Sándor Forrai's, who distinguishes short [ő] and long [ő]. Robert Szabados' alphabet, again slightly different, is reproduced below.

When examining Szabados' chart, note that Hungarian in the Latin alphabet treats six digraphs {es}, {gy}, {ly}, {ny}, {sz}, and {ty} as single letters. Rovásdrásgyakorlatok has two different symbols for the Latin {k}: [k] and [o]. Magyar (1996) suggests that at some point in the history of the Hungarian language, the sound /k/ assimilated to /k/, and leaving two runes to represent one sound. Rovásdrásgyakorlatok literature has not preserved archaic spellings, yet contemporary rovásdrásgyakorlatok enthusiasts nevertheless strive to use both [k] and [o] in their alphabets. Some distribute usage according to position inside a given word, using [k] for final {-k} and [o] elsewhere. Others, including Szabados, distribute usage according to the vowel environment, writing [k] around back vowels, and [o] around front vowels. Szabados' alphabet, above, additionally has two symbols for [s] depending on the vowel environment, but this is highly unusual.

Rovásdrásgyakorlatok also has a system for numbers. Gyula Sebestén's 1909 "Rovás és Rovásdrásgyakorlatok" [sic], devotes a full seventy pages to the practice of runic counting. The runic number system resembles the Roman numerals in structure. The number 1378, for example, is XXXXXXVIII. [X] is a thousand, [I] is a hundred, and [V] is fifty.

6 A ligature is a single symbol combining two letters. Though not a prominent feature of the modern Latin alphabet, many typefaces employ [fi] for (f) + (i). Hebrew has the ligature [y] for (y) + (t). The Arabic alphabet has several, most notably [r] for (r) + (l), which, according to tradition, was declared a proper letter by the prophet Muhammad himself. Morris (1998:74, 99) derives Scandinavian rune ligatures from Greek and Latin examples.

7 Pál, a mid-century Hungarian mystic whose visions included a description of Atlantis, preached about the society of the ancient Hungarians and inspired a theater movement.
might once have marked the beginning of sentences.\textsuperscript{8}

The remaining discrepancies between rovásírás and the Latin-Hungarian alphabet concern phoneme length. Hungarian, as standardized in the Latin alphabet, distinguishes both vowels and consonants by length; rovásírás alphabet does not always maintain this distinction. Szabados does, but Magyar only distinguishes (a) and (e) by length, and conflates long and short \((i), (o), (\ddot{a}), (u), \text{ and } (i)\). The rovásírás cartographer who drew Fig. 3 (below) eccentrically rendered long vowels by repeating them: \textit{Erdély} (Transylvania) appears as \textit{Máco} (Erdeely). Finally, one contemporary rovásírás author, cited below, failed to distinguish long and short consonants, which the contemporary Latin-Hungarian alphabet denotes with double letters.

With the exception of the two symbols for Latin \([k]\), Hungarian texts in the Latin alphabet can theoretically be transliterated into rovásírás with a one-to-one correspondence. Hungary's 99\% literacy rate (\textit{World Bank} 2001) exists through the medium of the Latin alphabet; individuals who study rovásírás have already mastered Hungarian writing conventions in the Latin alphabet. Hungarians who study rovásírás encounter few new linguistic concepts: With the exception of the Latin letter \([k]\), the script can be mechanically transliterated. Of course, rovásírás aficionados can, if they chose, delete \([\ddot{e}]\), conflate long and short sounds, invent ligatures, use boustrophedon, or even devise a convention for use of the bug symbols. Nevertheless, a literate Hungarian can write functional rovásírás by memorizing the runic letters and transliterating.

Significantly, rovásírás enthusiasts hold no grudges against the Latin alphabet, which Hans Peter Willberg (1998: 49) has memorably described as "world type." Hosszú (pers. comm., 2002) writes that "current practical usage [in rovásírás] is almost nothing. But it is no problem, our Latin-based literacy is also very nice." Heves (1999) argues that the rovásírás letters "fulfill their function quite well," adding that runic writing "does not threaten the existing Latin-alphabet." Szabados (1996), seemingly the most ambitious rovásírás enthusiast, declares it the "intention of some Hungarian scientists and linguists to bring back the Runic writing," but only as a curiosity to be taught "in heritage classes." Alfred Hamori (1996) praises the runes for their lack of diacritical marks, but he also believes (pers. comm., 2002) that using the Latin alphabet is "no longer a problem" and "has the benefit of being internationally understood." He even added, in response to my questions, "I don't think using runic writing would be a step in the right direction, except it's good to be familiar with it."

If not as a replacement for the Latin alphabet, what social function is rovásírás to serve? If writing is a technology for efficiently communicating information, why not use the most accessible standard? John Austin (1962), observing that not all language is phatic, developed the concept of "performative utterances," alternatively "speech acts," which depend on more than the literal meaning of the words spoken. Where Austin suggests that the meaning of speech depends on the social context and the speaker's intent, I suggest that writing in rovásírás is an "orthographic act," dependant on extra-linguistic factors. To understand the intentions of rovásírás enthusiasts, let us now turn to the beliefs articulated in rovásírás literature.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig3.png}
\caption{Eccentrically rendered long vowels in rovásírás.}
\end{figure}

### Rovásírás and Revisionist Hungarian Nationalism

Interest in rovásírás is highly correlated with a specific ideology of Hungarian history and culture, characterized by extravagant claims to Hungary's antiquity and glory, which I will call "revisionist." Mainstream scholarship, both inside and beyond Hungary, does not so much reject as ignore revisionism. Revisionists, in turn, explain the skepticism of mainstream scholars with conspiracy theories. This section will sketch the salient features of the revisionist narrative and explore tensions between revisionist views of Hungarian history and those of mainstream scholarship. A subsequent section discusses the social context of three specific rovásírás "orthographic acts" in relation to revisionist beliefs.

Rune enthusiasts often justify interest in the script by appealing to Hungary's "heritage." Hosszú (1998b) describes the runes as a "special part of the Hungarian culture," and "part of the world's cultural heritage." Friedrich (2000: 3) calls rovásírás "our oldest and most valuable national treasure"; Attila Szekes, a Hungarian-American who only understands "a little bit of Hungarian," requested more material be translated into English: "I would be very interested in finding out more."

\textsuperscript{8} The most exotic of all historical rovásírás inscriptions, a Constantinople graffiti known through the 1550 travel diary of Hans Dernschwam, employs ligatures, [\ddot{s}] deletion, and the bug symbol [\textit{Zz}], which Jensen (1935: 299) transliterates as "[\textit{um}]". 
about my cultural heritage" (Heves 2000). Perhaps Szabados (1996) most eloquently captured the spirit of rovástrás enthusiasts: "The future of Hungary lies in its proud past!"

Extravagant claims concerning the putative antiquity of rovástrás characterize the revisionist version of Hungarian heritage. Different authors make various claims, but internal continuity is striking when comparing enthusiasts to mainstream scholars. Friedrich (2000) argues the runes are 6500 years old, i.e., as old as Sumerian. Magyar (1996) argues that 

[1]he Hungarians are the only nation in Europe who had their own writing ... which had not been received from others before they accepted Christianity ... In this respect, the Hungarians may be viewed as linguistically more sophisticated than the Greeks and the Romans, who had no letters of their own. The Greeks received their letters from the Phoenicians and the Romans took theirs partly from the Greeks and partly from the Etruscans.

Csaba Varga (2001) takes this idea to its ultimate conclusion, describing the rovástrás as the origin of all human writing, including the nonalphabetic Chinese character system. Hosszú (1998b) contents himself with the comment that the runes date from "the oldest times," though he also feels that Chinese symbols are "similar" to Hungarian runes (1998a). Yves Kodratoff (2000), finally, attempts to decipher marks on Bronze Age archaeological finds on the assumption that the symbols are rovás ligatures.

The putative antiquity of rovástrás may explain its frequent association with paganism. Heves (1999) tells us that "with the adoption of Christianity the runic writing became labeled as 'pagan,' it was outlawed and all texts had to be destroyed." Magyar (1996) blames the Catholic Austrians for the script's persecution: "the Austrian rulers did not look favorably at the "pagan" Hungarian letters, [and] tried to outroot them." Hamori (1996) even points his finger at Saint Stephen, an iconic figure of Hungarian history, who allegedly "passed laws against [rovástrás] due to papal pressure," though the actual destruction was caused by "the foreign priest" who "burned and destroyed them whenever they [sic] found them." Several Hungarians in the Canadian diaspora view these pagan associations favorably. The Hungarian Folk Dance Chamber Group of Ottawa distanced itself from Hungary's Christian present by denouncing "centuries of persecution by a foreign forced Christianization" (Dombi 1998). Jessie Brown, a Saskatchewan folk dancer of Hungarian origin, is even more explicit: "being a Pagan, I take great interest in Rovasiras" (Heves 2000). Indeed, Brown's vision of rovástrás culture unites pride in Hungarian national origins with a New Age version of "the mystical and the spiritual" (Brown, pers. comm., 2002).

Enthusiasts attempt to counteract defiling foreign influences and restore the ancient glory of Hungarian culture, in part, through linguistic purism. Angela Molnos (2001), whose webpage is decorated with rovástrás inscriptions, suggests that several common Hungarian words, such as néger ("negro"), be replaced with more "Hungarian" equivalents, such as fekete, feketeszínű (literally, black, and blackskinned). Molnos attacks international words from English (nonsop, nonszensz), Russian (nómenklatúra), French (nîtan, nîvô), Sanskrit (nîvîra), and even technical terms coined from classical languages (nimfomînia, numizmarîka). The desire to purge Hungarian of foreign words, like the desire to attack "foreign Christianization," is obviously xenophobic, but Hungarians who accept or promote foreign influences are also a primary target.

Rovástrás enthusiasts often lament the "ignorance" of their countrymen, and what they see as the betrayal of Hungary. Hungarians in the north American diaspora are particularly bitter. One Canadian enthusiast, Charles Dombi (1998), accuses Hungarian academic institutions of complicity in an international anti-Hungarian conspiracy.

[W]e do not endorse the official historiographical version promoted by the currently ruling establishment in Hungary, by academic institutions and officially-recognized churches. This official version has been promoted in the past by foreign powers which have ruled over Hungary, with the objective of projecting an ideologically biased and inaccurate image of the Hungarians.

Sándor Forrai (1996), a rovástrás computer font designer whose webpage displays patriotic poems in runic script, similarly denounces nineteenth-century scholar Pál Hunfalvy for concluding that rovástrás finds were "forgeries." Forrai calls on Hungarians to
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Thusiasts' contradictory attitude toward establishing the borders of pre-Trianon Hungary.

Fig. 3 depicts the borders of contemporary Hungary inside Magyar (1996) also illustrates rovásirds everywhere the shepherds still used it. It was a big surprise to rediscover it in the "Land of the Székelys," where the kings' influence was far less. It was a big memory of the rovas had gone, except in Transylvania, and proclaims his devotion to both rovásirtcis and revisionist national history:

Kodratoff claims that only "a handful of faithful Hungarians" remain to "try to show the antiquity of their rovás writing." Such claims are particularly striking since Kodratoff himself claims "no personal interest whatsoever in Hungary" (pers. comm., 2002).

The revisionist history popular among rovásirtcis enthusiasts differs considerably from the generally-accepted narrative of Hungarian origins. This incompatibility reflects a differing approach to historical truth: Ádám Varga, for example, rejects a critical sifting of evidence, insisting that the "true" history of rovásirtcis can only be found "in the heart." While praising a rovásirtcis webpage (Heves 2000), Varga rejects Hungarian school narratives and proclaims his devotion to both rovásirtcis and revisionist national history:

... not only can the rovásirtcis be brought to the "true" light of day, but also the true Hungarian history, since in the recent past ... many bad concepts and misinterpretations of our ancestral history have been perpetuated. They are taught in middle schools, high schools, and university classrooms, and in my heart I bear the memory of previous generations.

Sebesten (1909) theory of cultural transmission similarly rejects teachers and schools in favor of shepherds.

The Árpád dynasty kings saw the ancient Hungarian religion and the rovás as a threat to the nation's unity, and prosecuted its carriers. By the 17th century, all the memory of the rovás had gone, except in Transylvania, where the kings' influence was far less. It was a big surprise to rediscover it in the "Land of the Székelys," where the shepherds still used it.

Magyar (1996) also illustrates rovásirtcis enthusiasts' contradictory attitude toward establishing scholarship. Describing the work of Gyula Sebestén, author of a 1909 book on rovásirtcis, Magyar has "a simple Hungarian farmer" lead Sebestén to wisdom (1996):

He showed the scientist how the stick must be turned for reading or carving letters or numbers. ... Gyula Sebestén then wrote a book about this, and by his work, the scientists of the world learned the solution of this puzzle from a simple Hungarian farmer. But they keep silent, just as they keep silent about the book of Gyula Sebestén, "Rovás and Rovás Writing."

The skepticism of professional scholars, who lack true national knowledge, derives from malevolent intentions or national treason. Yet, scholarly unwillingness to accept the revisionist cosmology ranks.

Rovásirtcis enthusiasts extend their sense of grievance to modern Hungarian history, particularly the 1919 treaty of Trianon, which cost Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory and most of its national minorities. Trianon is generally a black memory in Hungary, but rovásirtcis enthusiasts are obsessive even by Hungarian standards. Consider how Szabados (1996) leaped from a discussion of a pre-Christian medallion found in Transylvania, supposedly bearing a rovásirtcis inscription, to the treaty of Trianon:

More scientific research is needed to support the belief of many scholars that the medallion originated from Magyars who were possibly living in the area thousands of years prior to Árpád and the A.D. 896 Hungarian settlement of the Balkans, which included the largely dismembered (In Trianon) territory of present day Hungary! [sic, bold face in original text]

Two other informants, in response to questions about rovásirtcis, mentioned Trianon without prompting (Hamori, pers. comm., 2002; Hosszú, pers. comm., 2002).

Even the "Institute For Hungarian Studies" echoes this anti-intellectual current. The charter of this revisionist organization expresses the desire "to help standardize new Hungarian words covering subjects specific to our century" and to "promote awareness of the evidence of Hungarian origins within the Carpathian basin." The institute publishes a journal with the format of a scholarly publication. Nevertheless, the October 1996 issue, devoted to rovásirtcis, proclaimed the motto "while scholars debate, people live, remember and preserve."

10 Fig. 3 depicts the borders of contemporary Hungary inside the borders of pre-Trianon Hungary.
The established Hungarian academy, for its part, rarely deigns to refute revisionist claims: the Hungarian academy denies that ethnic Hungarians lived in the Carpathian basin in antiquity, that Hungarian runes are the origin of all human writing, or that Hungarian runes are related to Chinese characters. On the other hand, Kodratoff demonstrates that revisionism can spread beyond Hungarian nationalist circles, though Kodratoff’s thought contains several revisionist elements.

Describing rovásírás artifacts as “popular culture,” distinguishable from the Hungarian academy’s “high culture,” would be mistaken. Even if differentiating between low and high culture were unproblematic, the rovásírás subculture denies the legitimacy of the hegemonic academy: it views itself as the “true” Hungarian scholarship. That rovásírás lore does not compete with the Hungarian academy on equal terms is irrelevant: The conflict is not between low and high culture, but between two incompatible versions of high culture.

Social Networks of rovásírás Enthusiasts

Interpreting Hungarian rune-enthusiasts as a nationalist movement suggests a social analysis of this movement’s members. Rovásírás institutions exist, but they are small: more insight comes from studying the social networks of enthusiasts. Individuals who show dedication to revisionist Hungarian culture by writing a book, webpage, or pamphlet could be described as political entrepreneurs, selling a certain ideological package; but this paper will refer to them as “agitators.” By contrast, the branches of the network consist of “dabblers,” people who purchase or otherwise consume the agitators’ cultural products. Individuals, of course, may blur the line between dabbler and agitator. Both dabblers and agitators are important to the rovásírás movement: all movements need both leaders and followers. Dabblers, however, are more difficult to study, because their participation is passive by definition: people who read rovásírás webpages and purchase rovásírás books do not expose as much of their thought or social status. This section will examine agitators first, and then try to examine dabblers by examining the branches of rovásírás networks.

Rovásírás agitators form an intelligentsia. This word is justified not only in the sense that they espouse a nationalist ideology but also because they boast a high educational standard. Several teach at universities: Hosszú is an electrical engineer at Budapest’s Technical University, Molnos is a psychologist, and Kodratoff, the non-Hungarian enthusiast, teaches informatics in Paris. Elmer Nagy and Erdélyi Tibor, judging by their email addresses, are chemists at the University of Szeged. Karoly Lázár is a professional translator; Charles Dombi (pers. comm., 2002) teaches languages for the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade in Ottawa. Dávid Tisch (2000), whose homepage contains rovásírás inscriptions as well as a sample alphabet, is a mathematician student.

These educational achievements, note, do not contradict the antiacademic strand of rovásírás revisionism. Even those rovásírás agitators who are professional academics participate in Hungarian revisionism as amateurs. No rovásírás agitators are professional linguists, archaeologists, or historians; engineers and computer experts outnumber language teachers two to one. The typical rovásírás agitator was trained in physical sciences, and has an amateur interest in linguistics, archaeology, and history. Agitators even proclaim amateur status: Tomory (1996) reports that rovásírás inscriptions in Pincehely were “collected by the amateur linguist-archaeologist, who was also the town’s pharmacist.”

A handful of nationalist stores in Budapest sell rovásírás products, but the Budapest “Fehérlőfia nemzeti könyvesbolt” (National Bookstore) appears to be the primary venue for revisionist literature. Indeed, its fame has spread to North America: Susan Tomory (pers. comm., 2002), writing from Wisconsin, recommended it to me as a place “to find source materials” on Hungarian history. Fehérlőfia explicitly proclaims revisionist politics: An anti-Trianon “Justice for Hungary!” poster overlooks the cash register. Watercolors of ninth-century Hungarian warriors hang on the ceiling, their names written in both rovás and Latin letters. As well as the inevitable anti-Trianon books (sample title: Trianoni Ledõntjük. A magyar fájdalom versei. “We’ll break down Trianon. Poems of the Hungarian Pain”), Fehérlőfia also sells Hungarian fiction, folkloric books, war memoirs, and Anti-Semitic tracts. In contrast to the Canadian diaspora’s interest in paganism, Fehérlőfia’s books proclaim an extremist Christianity: The work “Zsidó volt-e Jézus?” (Was Jesus a Jew?) (Röck 2001) argues that Jesus was Sumerian, and that the ancient Sumerians were ethnically related to Hungarians.

Fehérlőfia sells many rovásírás products, including a workbook, histories of the script, and postcards explaining the runes. Fehérlőfia promotes revisionist culture through a variety of commercial products, including rovásírás postcards.
belt-buckles in the shape of pre-Trianon Hungary, and T-shirts. T-shirts with rovdásrés inscriptions are sold only seasonally, from "march until fall," though the shopkeeper refused to estimate monthly sales, he claimed the shirts provoked "great interest."

I will use two sources to examine the network of rovdásrés enthusiasts: contributors to Rovásrés újság (Rune-writing Newspaper), a listserver; and visitors to Gábor Heves’ webpage, "A magyar rovdásrés" (The Hungarian Rune Writing), which has a guestbook (Heves 1999). These two sources overlap very little; Brown is the only person I could confirm from both groups. Nevertheless, Brown is not the only point of connection between them. Consider that Csaba Varga used Rovásrés újság (2001, no. 354)11 to request the email address of Zoltán Fűr. Fűr, author of a rovdásrés title and thus an agitator, composed the longest single entry to Heves’ guestbook; an entry which, moreover, refers to Hosszú’s homepage. Fűr never contributed to Rovásrés újság, but he demonstrably knows of its existence and is presumably known to its contributors. Heves’ webpage (1999) also explains how to subscribe to Rovásrés újság. These two sources, therefore, do not form two distinct networks, but provide instead information about different sections of a single network.

Hungarian academics interested in rovdásrés, significantly, are not connected to the rovdásrés network. None of the seven contributors to Klára Sándor’s 1992 edited volume “Rovásrés a kárptármendencében” (Rune-Writing in the Carpathian Basin) posted entries to Rovásrés újság or wrote comments in Heves’ guestbook. This is not true among other linguistic sources on the internet: For example, Mendelelist, devoted to Yiddish, attracts postings from both academics and amateur enthusiasts.

Rovásrés újság is the brainchild of Gábor Hosszú, an agitator who has written several webpages on Hungarian runes. In 2001, Hosszú contributed roughly 40% of total entries to Rovásrés újság.12 Nevertheless, most entries come from dabblers contributing one or two messages a year. Typical postings include links to rovdásrés or Hungarian-themed webpages and announcements concerning rovdásrés software.

In examining dabblers vis-à-vis agitators, I focused on possible ideological discrepancies. However, dabblers’ postings on Rovásrés újság articulate the revisionist ideology. Measured by reader response, one particularly successful posting was David Csaba’s denunciation of English loanwords, including “energy drink,” which sparked two follow-up postings (Rovásrés újság 2001, nos. 381–383): dabblers thus show an interest in language purism. Another common theme is the so-called “Turanian” thesis, which posits an ancient Central Asian civilization from which the Etruscans, Turks, Mongols, and Hungarians descend. Rovásrés újság (2000, no. 289) discussed the Mongolian script and its possible relationship to Hungarian runes, and even inspired a contribution from a Turkish rune enthusiast. Doğuzoğlu Tahıçan, the only contributor who did not post in Hungarian, encouraged Hungarians to examine a webpage on Turkish runes (Rovásrés újság 2002, no. 389).13

Visitors to Heves’ webpage also articulated revisionist views. Sipi wondered whether the direction of rune-writing show that rovdásrés is “related to the Chinese or Japanese systems of writing? (I think so).” Other Hungarian respondents made their dissatisfaction with Hungary’s borders clear by described their country of origin as Nagy Magyarország (Great Hungary), Csonkanagyország (Ramp Hungary), and mi kis országunk (our small country).14 Criticism and

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11 Rovásrés újság is cited in this article from its old web server, http://minrud.et.bme.hu/rovacs. This server is now defunct and the texts cited in this paper exist only in the author’s personal collection. However, the list is now offered at a new server: [WWW document] URL http://groups.yahoo.com/group/rovacs. To read the archive, one must join the group by sending an email to rovas-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

12 Rovásrés újság first appeared on February 2, 1999. In 2000–2001, an average of twelve messages appeared each month, excluding spam. In 2000, Hosszú’s contributions were not so overwhelming, but he still was the top contributor: 14 out of 81 postings (17%), excluding spam. Some postings to Rovásrés újság have more than one contributor, and these figures should be treated as approximations.

13 Tahıçan sought to derive Hungarian runes from Turkish runes: “Gokturk writings which have been found in Central Asia called Orhon writings should have been taken into account ... it would be very helpful to look at Gokturks and Shkits instead of ‘Indo-European’ languages.” Tahıçan posted to Rovásrés újság in English, but a list member translated his comment into Hungarian. His webpage is in Turkish. The Turanian hypothesis, incidentally, also influenced the books published Fekete Kállás’s "Magyar Könyv" (“Hungarian Book”) described its date of publication as 1361 of the “Turan peoples book printing year.” I do not know how to translate this date into the Julian calendar.

14 The names Pannonia, Hunnia, and Magyarhon were also represented. Additionally, four Hungarian-language respondents described their location with the English word “Hungary,” and another seven with “hun” Hungary’s internet domain.
Rovásírás újság appears in Hungarian, but since Heves’ page includes information in English, his guestbook attracted much admiration from several Hungarians in the American diaspora. Steven Miksey, for example, thanked Heves for “the effort to preserve our Nations [sic] history and treasure.” Brown declared her “love and respect for the people and culture that I am descended from and related to.” A Hungarian living in New York claimed that he and some friends had learned rovásírás from the webpage, thus casting Heves in the role of national enlightener. He praised Heves’ work “for Magyarságért.”

Stephen Paulovitch, writing in the guestbook of a rovásírás homepage (Heves 2000), gives a uniquely Hungarian-American version the “parochial fetishization of national history” (Tismaneanu 1998:92). John Kelleher has spoken of “the there’s-always-an-Irishman-at-the-bottom-of-it-doing-the-real-work approach to American history” (see Schlesinger 1991); Paulovitch similarly posits ubiquitous Hungarians.

... “we” are taught that the Norwegians only reached Nova Scotia ... ah, but no further. Bull! A Magyar sailed with Eric the Red, spelled “Turrik” ... Torok? [Torók, a common Hungarian surname] Also, these same Runes have been found up in Wisconsin and Minnesota. My goodness, the first US reg’t to engage in fighting at the battle of Gettysburg was the 54th NY Vol Inf Reg’t, command by Col. Istvan Kovacs ... az igaz! [it’s true]! The first words of the battle could well have been Magyar. My point? Magyars have been around for a very long time ... and their presence has been ignored (Heves 2000).

This reference to Minnesota surely refers to the Kensington Rune Stone, a famous hoax of Scandinavian runology. Paulovitch thus links Hungarian amateur runology to its Scandinavian counterpart. Heves’ guestbook, unlike Rovásírás újság, asks contributors to state their location, allowing an estimate of the rovásírás network’s geographical extent. Of 192 respondents, 139 (72%) come from the modern Republic of Hungary, and at least 47 (24%) from Budapest. Budapest is probably even more central than Fig. 2 suggests: of the 44 respondents listed on the map as “other Hungary,” 14 revealed no city of origin. Some probably hail from Budapest. Another 25 respondents (13%) live in Anglophone countries.

The lack of rovásírás enthusiasts in Transylvania contrasts strikingly with the imagined homeland of the ancient Hungarian culture. Consider Fig. 3, adopted from an agitator’s map depicting rovásírás archaeological finds: Only three of these finds (numbers 5, 6, and 7) lie within the borders of modern Hungary. The clump of sources in the east of the map depicts the Székelyföld. Returning to Fig. 2, note that only five (2%) visitors to Heves’ homepage come from former Hungarian lands lost after the treaty of Trianon; and only two (1%) come from the Székelyföld.

The contrast between Figures 2 and 3 suggests a discrepancy between the geographical origin of rovásírás heritage, as enthusiasts imagine it, and the actual social network of enthusiasts. Such a discrepancy, while noteworthy, is theoretically unproblematic: As Dan Ben-Amos (1983) has suggested, the European “urbane literati, who conceived the idea of folklore,” attributed to it the quality of rurality. The countryside and the open space of wilderness was folklore’s proper breeding ground. Man’s close contact with nature in villages and hunting bands was considered the ultimate source of his myth and poetry.

Figures 2 and 3 support both of Ben-Amos’ claims: Rovásírás enthusiasts live in the cities of the modern Republic of Hungary, specifically in Budapest, but nevertheless attribute their heritage to rural Transylvania.

The institutions and social networks of rovásírás enthusiasts support a coherent national ideology, shared by dabblers and agitators alike. Indeed, ideology defines the movement. Even enthusiasts working in higher education reject the Hungarian academy, presumably since the revisionist cosmology conflicts with accepted historical narratives. Despite the mythic origins of the script in rural Transylvania, this culture has its centers in urban areas, particularly Budapest. Nevertheless, its social network has branches on every continent. Rovásírás revisionism, in conclusion, constitutes “Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World” (cf. Danforth 1995).

**Rovásírás Usage in the Twenty-First Century**

The strong ideological meanings of the script transform it into a symbol of a specific nationalist
myth proclaiming the antiquity and glory of the Hungarian people. Hungarian runes are not cultivated as a vehicle for literacy, but as a patriotic "orthographic act." To test this hypothesis, consider a series of rovástrás texts in actual use. During two years' residency in Budapest, I encountered three specimens of rovástrás by chance. After I began researching this article, of course, I encountered many more: who seeks, finds.

My first specimen comes from the Mesterségek Únnepe (officially translated as the "Festival of Trades and Crafts"), which I attended on August 20, 2001. During the festival, the grounds of Buda castle hosted live music, folk dancing, food stalls,
and various handcraft stands. The main entrance boasted a székelykapu, a "traditional" wooden gate common in Transylvania. The székelykapu bore the inscription TÁNC P*+ BÉKÉ BFP#M! (Isten add megy a Magyart!, God, bless the Magyarl, the first words of the Hungarian national anthem). The second specimen graces the cover of a tape cassette I purchased in Duna Plaza, a modern shopping mall. The New Age band Lux decorated their album "Ethnosfera" with the words БУДНЯ (Magyar zene, Hungarian music) next to the same phrase in the Latin alphabet. Both of these "folkloric" specimens were written right-to-left. Neither used ligatures, neither deleted },. The székelykapu text included a double letter, {k}, which was written twice. Neither text contained a [k]. Both specimens, in other words, could have been mechanically transliterated by a rovásírás novice.

Both specimens have primarily decorative functions; both created folkloric cultural associations. The székelykapu inscription was carved into wood, supposedly the original medium for rovásírás inscriptions; the Lux cassette includes a picture of a stag, an animal of symbolic national importance. These specimens, however, adapt the putative "ancient tradition" to a contemporary context: a cassette tape, like the rovásírás postcards in Fehérlofia, is a modern cultural artifact. The Hungarian national anthem, furthermore, dates from 1823, well after the putative golden age of rovásírás. Historical accuracy is, of course, irrelevant to the experience of authenticity: as demonstrated in Trevor-Roper’s famous essay on the English invention of the Scottish kilt (1992), traditions can be invented. The székelykapu lent an atmosphere of a timeless national tradition to the Festival of Trades and Crafts, and thus fulfilled its function.

The next rovásírás specimens differ significantly from the other two, both in content and technical sophistication. In Hungary’s national library, the “Országos Széchényi Könyvtár,” on a toilet paper dispenser in a seventh floor men’s restroom, I observed three rovásírás graffiti.17 Judging by the handwriting, they were written by two different authors. Both made extensive use of ligatures and {k} deletion. The longest of the three (Fig. 4) used several ligatures that do not occur in Hosszú’s rovásírás freeware, including a single character for nem (no/not) arguably forming an ideograph. Note also that the rune {X} appears in mirror image in ligatures for {vö} and {ös} (both in the first line), suggesting that the author is familiar with boustrophedon. The orthographic sophistication of this text inspired me to reproduce it by hand, thus Fig. 4 runs from right-to-left. The difference between the two [it] ligatures (in the first and last lines) reflects a discrepancy in the hand-scrawled graffiti.

![Fig. 4: Rovásírás graffiti in National Széchenyi Library, Budapest, 2001.](image)

The graffiti (Fig. 4) means: “What good is a red [degree of distinction] if the person owning it is a giant nothing? The paper is not everything, in truth, it matters only here [in the library].”18

The two other rovásírás graffiti responded to an English inscription: “pornchicks RULE!” The author of Fig. 4, in the same sophisticated, ligature-employing handwriting, commented “this is the only comment worth anything, the others are weak.” The second rovásírás author, with different handwriting, responded “I agree” (Isten add megy a Magyart!, God, bless the Magyarl, the first words of the Hungarian national anthem). The second rovásírás author, with different handwriting, commented “this is the only comment worth anything, the others are weak.” The second rovásírás author, with different handwriting, commented “this is the only comment worth anything, the others are weak.” The second rovásírás author, with different handwriting, commented “this is the only comment worth anything, the others are weak.” The second rovásírás author, with different handwriting, commented “this is the only comment worth anything, the others are weak.” The second rovásírás author, with different handwriting, commented “this is the only comment worth anything, the others are weak.” The second rovásírás author, with different handwriting, commented “this is the only comment worth anything, the others are weak.” The second rovásírás author, with different handwriting, commented “this is the only comment worth anything, the others are weak.”

These graffiti differ from the folkloric specimens not only in their technical sophistication but in their content: at first glance, nothing about them seems particularly folkloric, cultural, or Hungarian. Hungary’s national library is itself a symbol of Hungary’s cultural heritage, yet Fig. 4, mocking as it does the value of a distinguished degree, apparently rejects scholarly values, particularly in conjunction with admiration for pornographic actresses. Indeed, a Latin-alphabet graffiti in the same bathroom stall, “Élenek a könyvtárhoz méltó megjegyzése!” (Long live comments worthy of the library!), shows more apparent appreciation of the library’s symbolic value.

Yet the tension between mainstream scholars and the rovásírás subculture suggests that this rejection of book learning is instead a rejection of Hungary’s academic institutions: do the graffiti’s sophisticated ligatures and {k} deletion not stake a
certain claim to erudition? By displaying advanced knowledge of rovásírás, the author implicitly poses as the guardian of a national tradition more genuine than of Hungarian universities. The runes, therefore, form an integral part of the graffiti's meaning: the same sentence in the Latin alphabet would not evoke revisionist claims.

Modern Hungarian rune-writing thus acquires meaning from the script itself. With the exception of the pro-pornography messages, which may have been meant ironically, nationalist connotations dominate the specimens of rovásírás I encountered. In the officially-recognized Mesterségek Ünnepe, Hungarian revisionism coexists peacefully with more moderate visions of Hungarian culture and history, and the script serves as folkloric decoration. Ideological meanings cannot be ignored in the bathroom graffiti, however: conflict between the revisionist and academic cosmologies proved essential to decoding the text.

The “Vernacular Academy” and Typographical Nationalism

How does the rovásírás movement compare to linguistic nationalism elsewhere in Europe? Several movements promoting a specific language have developed into full-fledged nationalist movements: The Czech and Slovak national movements, for example, both began with the cultivation of Slavic literature at the end of the eighteenth century and ended forming nation-states at the end of the twentieth (Hroch 1985). Yet this hardly seems a model for rovásírás culture: a Hungarian state already exists.

Rovásírás contest Hungarian national discourses from within. Domestic struggles within a nation can also take national and linguistic form: Serbs may choose either Cyrillic or Latin letters; Norwegian, famously, has multiple alphabets, with different political forces supporting one or another script (Haugen 1966); and Germans have even debated the merits of the Roman type and black letter (aka “Gothic letters”) in the Reichstag (Bain and Shaw 1998; Wehde 2000). Yet these disagreements concern state sponsorship of one or another official standard alphabet for use in schools and administration: rovásírás enthusiasts apparently reject the Hungarian state in toto. Susanne Wehde (2000:252 f.) has suggested that “nation and people not only be considered as a language community, but also as a script community,” whose “typographical culture” forms the subject of analysis.

Like Serbian Cyrillic or German black letter, rovásírás typographical culture finds itself in binary opposition to the Latin alphabet. Hungarian runes are highly ideological, even by the standard set by other languages with several scripts. Cyrillic is the default script used in Serbia; use of Latin letters indicates a conscious commitment to cosmopolitanism. In contemporary German, black letter is also popular in folkloric or heritage related contexts. Heavy metal fans, both in Germany and worldwide, also use black letter. Yet black letter scripts also appeal to German revisionists and hyper-nationalists, despite having been denounced by Hitler as "Jewish letters" (Willberg 1998:48; Schwemer-Scheddin 1998:63). These multiple and ambiguous national meanings reflect much wider use: black letter dominated German publishing as recently as the nineteenth century. Yvonne Schwemer-Scheddin (1998:66) has dismissed modern German black letter as "ghetto-ized" in comparison to the Latin alphabet, since it "lacks a connection to current sociopolitical reality." However, this critique seems even more applicable to rovásírás.

A script can sustain a pure ideological meaning only if restricted to ideological contexts: general use would inevitably dilute ideological associations. That rovásírás enthusiasts do not aspire to replace the Latin alphabet, therefore, is highly significant. The subculture restricts itself to self-selecting enthusiasts: by limiting its scope, it maintains its ideological purity. Rovásírás is much more ghettoized than German black letter, yet boasts a more coherent sociopolitical meaning: revisionist nationalism.

Some scholars might hesitate to classify such a cultural phenomenon as "nationalism," believing that the desire for one’s own state is the “core doctrine” of nationalism (Smith 1983:21). Breuilly (1993:5) even suggests that “identifying and describing certain sorts of national consciousness ... should not be confused with nationalism.” Nevertheless, Hungarian rune enthusiasts they deploy nationalist arguments and terminology “as practical category, as classificatory scheme, as cognitive frame,” to use Brubaker’s reformulation of nationalism (1996:16; see also Porter 1996:1472). Any definition of “nationalism” which excludes Hungarian rune enthusiasts is probably too narrow.

Nevertheless, Yulian Konstantinov’s (1997:36) concept of a “vernacular academy” may clarify the status of the rovásírás movement without provoking endless arguments about what the word "nationalism" should denote. Konstantinov devel-
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The church finds are in Bonyha, Bőgöz, Dálnok, Gelence, Honorjdkasiponyávala, Közep-ajta, Nagykásoyn, Pomáz, Szentmihály, and Széketdérzs. According to Dáwel (1968:4), Swedish runic inscriptions are also regularly discovered in churches.

opped this term to discuss the Pomaks, Bulgarian-speaking Muslims living under hostile Bulgarian administration, who are obsessed "by a passionate search for 'proofs' which are better than those of the official academy" in "reaction against nation-state monopoly over identity-affairs." Konstantinov (1997:37) also tells us that "the main sources of 'proofs' are artifacts, documents and books which have ... been found (while repairing the mosque in the village)."

Rovávidás enthusiasts resemble Konstantinov's Pomaks: they show the same obsession with "proofs," and the same hostility toward the existing state academy. Though rovávidás inscriptions never appear in mosques, Ferenc Fodor's (1996) list of rovávidás artifacts includes ten specimens discovered in churches.\footnote{19 The church finds are in Bonyha, Bőgöz, Dálnok, Gelence, Honorjdkasiponyávala, Közep-ajta, Nagykásoyn, Pomáz, Szentmihály, and Széketdérzs. According to Dáwel (1968:4), Swedish runic inscriptions are also regularly discovered in churches.}

Opposing all these parallels between the Pomaks and rovávidás enthusiasts lies a decisive contrast: Pomaks have a different ethnonym vis-à-vis the Bulgarians. Their culture is more "viable" in the Gellnerian sense, since the ethnonym and rovávidás enthusiasts consider themselves to share the same national category with other Hungarians. Non-revisionist Hungarians may be unawakened and ignorant, or "human zeros," or traitors to Hungary's true national interest, yet remain Hungarians.

The concept of a "vernacular academy" captures the antistate motives of the rovávidás movement without implying hidden desires for independence. Konstantinov coined the term to describe a group whose cultural distinctiveness vis-à-vis their state is unproblematic, though they share a spoken language with the dominant group in their state. The term "vernacular academy," however, can describe any group contesting the validity of official state pronouncements. Perhaps the difference between Hungarian rune enthusiasts and the embryonic nineteenth-century Slovak and Romanian national movements lies in their potential for expansion: Rovávidás enthusiasts, by accepting the Latin alphabet, acquiesce in their marginalization. Nineteenth-century Slovak and Romanian language enthusiasts tried to expand their script to a mass national movement. The rovávidás vernacular academy thus sheds light on the ambiguous role ideology plays in linguistic nationalism. Whether from feelings of cultural inferiority, or some variety of collective paranoia, the motives of Hungarian rune enthusiasts must be sought in the beliefs of enthusiasts. Theoretical literature on nationalism, however, tends to emphasize material causes. The great Marxist scholars of nationalism, for example, derived nineteenth-century nationalism from the social consequences of industrialization (Hobsbawm 1992; Anderson 1991). Vladimir Tismaneanu (1998:83), comparing the "messianic, self-indulging fantasies" of the rovávidás type in several post-socialist societies, suggests "the main difficulties of the transition" explain their emergence. Gellner (1983:124) even declared that nationalists' "precise doctrines are hardly worth analyzing."

Yet if, as Gellner argued, "nationalism has no grip" between groups that share "access to education or to a viable high culture . . . because there is no cultural differentiation," (1983:95, 89, 97), how can the rovávidás vernacular academy have come into being? Electrical engineers, computer scientists, chemists, psychologists, and so forth have access to the same education and viable high culture as other Hungarians. Clearly, the journals, consumer products, and cultural institutions based around rovávidás constitute a self-induced "cultural differentiation." Nor can one fully explain the rovávidás culture through social class. Rovávidás enthusiasts are mostly urban, college-educated Hungarians, but neither characteristic is causal: urban, educated Hungarians most typically support the Liberal-left Alliance of Free Democrats (the SZDSZ, see Bozóki 1999:110). Revisionist Hungarians presumably vote for the far-right Hungarian Truth and Life Party (MIÉP). Revisionist Hungarians share a self-glorifying ideology devised to meet psychological needs.

When all other sources of self-pride and collective identity have vanished, the past becomes a principle of legitimation, myths are resurrected to justify ... historical primordiality, cultural preeminence, and superior claims to territorial domination (Tismaneanu 1998:92). Tismaneanu's reading of the nationalist motives may have its faults, but psychological profiling is clearly the right path.

The self-limiting aspirations of the rovávidás movement, however, suggest that ideology is not sufficient on its own to transform a vernacular academy to a mass national movement. The rovávidás vernacular academy, in its present form, is not "viable" in the sense that independent states were founded on Czech or Slovak high culture. Nor do rovávidás enthusiasts aspire to make the
runes the basis of Hungarian literacy or state administration; indeed, many participants are not even Hungarian citizens. Thus the rovásírás vernacular academy, though permeated by political claims, will probably remain mostly cultural and intellectual, not political.

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