Description of Abaúj, Gömör, Tolna and Borsod counties

Matthias Bel: Notitia Hungariae novae historico geographica. Comitatuum ineditorum tomus sextus, in quo continentur Comitatus Abaujváriensis, Gömöriensis, Thornensis et Borsodiensis. Edited and with introduction by Gergely Tóth, Published by Bernadett Benei, Zoltán Gőzsy, Rezső Jarmalov, Gergely Tóth, Péter Tóth. Institute of History of the Research Centre for Humanities, Budapest, 2020. 478 pp, ISBN 978-963-416-221-6.

Attila Restás

Institute of Hungarian Research, Budapest, Hungary

The manuscript legacy of Mátyás Bél has already provided work for generations of historians and philologists. Most recently, at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, there was a wave of research on Bél's works, and several compilations of his works were published[1]. However, the plan to publish Mátyás Bél's manuscripts, including the most important ones, the descriptions of the counties, by a working group on the basis of uniform criteria did not materialise.

Gergely Tóth has now undertaken to finish the previously backlogged works, who collected and reviewed variants of the manuscripts of the county descriptions in his doctoral dissertation[2], then participated in the bilingual (Latin - Hungarian) edition of the description of Sopron County[3], and finally was one of the translators of the description of Ung County into Hungarian[4]. He then organized a group of his colleagues and students at

1 Mátyás Bél: Magyarország népének élete 1730 táján. Ed. by Imre Wellmann. Gondolat, Budapest, 1984; Mátyás Bél: Hungariából Magyarország felé. Ed. by Andor Tarnai. Szépirodalmi, Budapest, 1984.

2 Gergely Tóth: Bél Mátyás „Notitia Hungariae novae…" című művének keletkezéstörténete és kéziratainak ismertetése. Volumes I–II. ELTE Faculty of Humanities, Budapest, 2007. 184+340 pages.

3 Mátyás Bél: Sopron vármegye leírása – Descriptio Comitatus Semproniensis. I–III. Ed. Katalin Mária Kincses, transl. Balázs Déri, Miklós Földváry, Csilla Tuza, Gergely Tóth. Soproni Levéltár, Sopron, 2001–2006.

4 Mátyás Bél: Ung vármegye leírása. Transl. Bernadett Benei, Gergely Tóth. Argumentum, Budapest, 2014.

the Institute of History of the Research Centre for Humanities to publish a critical edition of the county descriptions in Latin that had not appeared in print during Bél's lifetime. This planned series of 10 volumes has now reached volume 6 (describing the counties of Abaúj, Gömör, Torna and Borsod).

Mátyás Bél (1684-1749) was educated at the University of Halle; after his return home he became rector of the Lutheran school in Besztercebánya (Neusohl, Banská Bystrica) and priest of St. Elisabeth's Church, later he was appointed head of the school in Pozsony (Pressburg, Bratislava), and after a few years he was elected pastor of the German Lutherans in Pozsony. Born in Ocsova, Zólyom County, in northern Hungary, he knew and used all three languages spoken in his environment: Hungarian, Slovak and German, as well as the language of education, church and state: Latin. As he wrote about himself: "*lingua Slavus, natione Hungarus, eruditione Germanus*". His monumental work, only a few parts of which appeared in print during his lifetime, and the greater part of which remained in manuscript, *Notitia Hungariae novae historico geographica* (Historical and Geographical Description of the New Hungary), as its subtitle indicates, describes "each county's location, boundaries, mountains, fields, rivers, lakes, medicinal waters, climate and soil, the great and terrible natural phenomena; its inhabitants of different nationalities and their customs; the officials and famous families; the towns, castles, boroughs and almost all villages; and the origin and development of each, their changes in war and peace, and their present state." It is also clear from the list that Bél aimed at completeness in his presentation of the country, and in addition to the historical parts, his main goal was to survey his own time.

However, he did not cover the whole country (Transylvania and Croatia, as well as Slavonia, i.e. the Dráva-Száva area, were left out); he finally managed to publish the description of 11 counties in print during his lifetime, but the description of 37 counties and the district of Jászkun (*Districtus Cumanorum et Jazygorum*) remained unpublished in manuscript. The fate of the manuscripts was also adventurous. After Bél's death, most of them were bought from his widow by Count József Batthyány, Archbishop of Kalocsa and later of Esztergom, who took the manuscripts with him to his new residence, but they were partially damaged and soaked during their voyage on the Danube. Copies had to be made of the water-damaged copies, in which copying errors were made. Bél himself had previously prepared several versions of his works, and his legacy also included preparatory works and drafts for the county records, which were often sent to him by his assistants and data providers. Lastly, it should be borne in mind that later copies were made of the completed and definitive text, which, when updated and supplemented with current data, reflect the state of the copyist's own time rather than that of the author. The publishers and typesetters of the county inscriptions had to sort through this huge amount of Latin manuscript documents in order to reconstruct a text that could correspond to the original ideas of Mátyás Bél.

Mátyás Bél collected his data using questionnaires (with the help of his former students, local acquaintances or other qualified collaborators) according to a preliminary

 https://doi.org/10.53644/EH.2022.2.123

plan to ensure a coherent structure and structure. Each county description is divided into two large sections: the *Pars generalis* and the *Pars specialis* ('General section' and 'Special section'). In the latter section, the counties are presented by district. In accordance with Bél's original draft, the present volume is published as part of "the region west of the River Tisza (*Trans-Tibiscana*)", following the administrative division of the time.

Bél discusses the presented areas in different lengths: in the new critical edition, Abaúj is given 152 pages, while Gömör is described on 55 pages, Torna only on 38, and Borsod also on 55. The differences in length may be due to the fact that the counties with larger areas have been given more space, and the author also writes extensively about the most important city in the region, Kassa (today: Košice, Slovakia). But the length also depended on the amount of information available to Bél. In the case of Kassa, for example, the historical part is more elaborate (especially the movements of István Bocskai, Gábor Bethlen and Ferenc Rákóczi II are covered at great length), while there is little information about his own time. In contrast, the rest of the county – thanks to its contributors – is richly documented concerning his own period, making the work an important source for the conditions of the early 18th century. Three preliminary sketches and drafts of the description of Abaúj are known, and there are also preparatory works by unknown hands for the individual districts. But there are also two longer manuscripts in which – since Bél had to obtain the approval of the Chancellery and the counties through the Council of Governors – their additions and comments were already included. The text to be published was to be determined on the basis of these sources.

There are also several versions of the text on Gömör County: one was written by an unknown person, another by Mátyás Bodó, a legal scholar from Nagyszombat, but the final version hardly includes any of their data. The text that may reflect Bél's ideas is very detailed and "the description of the villages has considerable source value for the period. One can conclude from this that the elder Bél received a good collection of data from someone, which he processed in his own style." (210.) Who Bél's assistants might have been, may be deciphered from a hitherto unverified reference. Ladislaus Bartholomaeides (1754–1825), a pastor from Gömör, who was also Lutheran and who prepared his own description of Gömör (*Inclyti superioris Ungariae comitatus Gömöriensis notitia historico-geographico-statistica*, Lőcse, 1806–1808), writes in the foreword that Pál Lányi, the deputy-lieutenant of Gömör, a former iron inspector of Rákóczi, described Gömör County in 1731 in order to be used by Bél; and as for the district of Kis-Hont, Bél used the work of Bartholomaeides' grandfather, János, pastor of Klenóc, and his uncle Samuel. "We have the proof of this at home" (*domestica habeo indicia*), Bartholomaeides adds.

As for the manuscripts of the description of the county of Torna, no contemporary copy has survived, only a so-called 'archbishop's copy', which may have been made of the water-soaked, damaged manuscript. On the other hand, we do have the preparatory work for the description of Borsod County: János Matolai, a colleague of Bél, prepared a preliminary draft, and Ferenc Aszalay, assistant deputy-lieutenant, sent a drawing and a description of

the castle of Diósgyőr. The most complete text, however, is also preserved in a late copy, which, according to the volume, was found in the library of a small village parish by a local historian who took it to the county archives, where a Xerox copy was made in the 1970s. "However, when we were preparing to publish the county records, our search for the original manuscript was in vain" says the introductory study. Fortunately, however, the manuscript was not completely lost; it has since been found. Exciting surprises like this often await researchers.

Gergely Tóth's aim was to provide a high-quality and reliable Latin text in the critical edition, which could serve as a basis for later Hungarian – or possibly Slovak – translations (the modern Slovak translations of Trencsény/Trenčín and Árva/Orava counties were based on Gergely Tóth's edition). The four county descriptions have survived in different textual versions of varying quality: some contain what Bél considered to be the definitive text; others include only preliminary drafts or later additions. The authors/publishers of the volume have therefore included a detailed critical apparatus to help the reader to follow the process of the improvement of the text. Gergely Tóth and his colleagues have carried out the philological analysis that has hitherto sometimes been lacking in the editions. We are given an overview of the relationship among the manuscripts, their quality, and the circumstances under which the texts were produced. The edition contains three types of notes: on the one hand, it retains the footnotes written by Bél, and on the other, the editors have added both textual and subject notes to the Latin text. All this convinces the reader that he is reading the most authentic version of the text possible, based on the original manuscripts. The publication follows even the typographical features (font colour, page layout) of the copies printed during the lifetime of Bél.

The international public can use the Latin text, and the introductory essays are also available for them in English. The contributor to Volume 6 is Péter Tóth, who has already worked extensively with Bél's texts, translating several excerpts from the description of Borsod County into Hungarian, and publishing the complete county descriptions of Gömör and Torna in Hungarian translation. The present critical edition in Latin is intended primarily for specialists. It does, however, make possible the translation of Bél's county descriptions into Hungarian or other living languages, based on the reliable version of the text. ■

 https://doi.org/10.53644/EH.2022.2.123