

SUMMARY OF PHD THESIS

**CREATION HISTORY OF MÁTYÁS BÉL'S "NOTITIA  
HUNGARIAE NOVAE..."  
AND DESCRIPTION OF ITS MANUSCRIPTS**

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## 1. Genesis of *Notitia* by Mátyás Bél. Objectives of the thesis. Results of the scientific research thus far

The greatest initiative of Bél Mátyás (1684-1749), the exquisite historian and geographer, was the encyclopedic overview of Hungary's history and geography. However the county based descriptions are not only, as the title suggests "historical and geographical" (*Notitia Hungariae novae historico-geographica*), but also include educational- and literary history, folkloric approaches as well as thorough researches in the history of the church, genealogical studies, even treating archives and coat of arms descriptions. Bél differs from his contemporaries by *de facto* accomplishing his gigantic targets, although on some points incomplete due to reasons beyond his power. The printed volumes of his work prove his diligence and unique talent, his exquisite style and above all his universal perspective. The published volumes also show us that Bél managed to maintain a unified, clear structure, a solid order of topics in all the county descriptions despite the thematical abundance.

Certainly this achievement needed an organised network of data collection. Bél sent out questionnaires to his acquaintance, former disciples or to rewarded collaborators who gathered the necessary information about the people and communities all over the country from Trencsén county down to the Bácság. Nevertheless the completion of the project was delayed by many factors. Bél being an evangelical priest (and the Lutheran religion at the time only tolerated, not acknowledged in Hungary), his work was closely observed by the imperial authorities. The Hungarian Court Chancellery supervised the county descriptions from the beginning. The county authorities on the other hand probably cooperated following the appeal of Bél himself, who wanted them to correct and complete the texts regarding their own county. This proved to be a serious mistake since the county assemblies were perfectly incapable of such tasks and very often detained the manuscripts for years. Thus they blocked the publication of Bél's work and only 11 county descriptions could be published. 10 of those appeared in the 5 printed volumes of the *Notitia*, Szepes being published separately in the *Prodromus* dated 1723. The remaining 37 or 38 descriptions are only available in manuscripts, scattered into several Archives or other collections.

The research so far accomplished on the *Notitia* is rather peculiar. Apart from a few publications of a higher standard, the literature concerning this country overview are limited to mere translations and prefaces thereof. Still we have to rejoice in so little because it means that a considerable part of this huge undertaking are available in Hungarian or Slovak for the wider public. The problem of these translations is that - with few exceptions - they don't contain the original Latin text which one would expect in case of manuscripts. Furthermore there are wrong translations based on inappropriate manuscripts, most of the times accompanied by completely irrelevant prefaces. By inappropriate manuscript I mean the ones that are not the most recent. Inaccurate editions are mainly due to the fact that translations were not preceded by careful philological study that would have established the genealogical order of the manuscripts. As a result of the continual updating, the recurring corrections and alterations, the county descriptions exist in abundant contemporary variants out of which necessarily the latest needs to be translated. Further to this inadequacy of translations these editions lack the knowledge of other parts of the *Notitia* even though Bél often refers to other county descriptions saying "as we have already discussed there".

Good and thorough editions of county description from the *Notitia* shall be duly praised as rare exceptions. Generally speaking the fragmented, occasional publications of Bél's gigantic oeuvre

were driven by quickness and prompt need, lacking the required basics of such an undertaking. By basics – and **aims of the thesis** – I mean the following steps and tasks:

**I. Listing and classification of all the manuscripts of the Notitia including related documents**

**II. Based on the above, sketching the creation history of each county description, selection of the latest and most complete copy**

**III. Based on the above the genesis of the whole Notitia with the objective of a future critical edition of the entire oeuvre**

Hereby in my thesis I undertake to elaborate all of the above steps, since evidently this kind of study shall (should have) precede(d) the edition and translation of each county description (preferably accompanied by the original Latin text).

Concerning the first step, the listing of the manuscripts, previous study has achieved considerable success. László Szelestei N. excels as an eminent researcher who published a catalogue of Bél's manuscripts (*Bél Mátyás kéziratos hagyatékának katalógusa. Budapest 1984.*) and edited his entire correspondence (*Bél Mátyás levelezése. Budapest 1993.*). These two works are the most essential source for the research of Bél Mátyás's oeuvre.

As for the second step, the research of the genesis of the particular county descriptions, we can only enumerate a few good examples. Károly Lukács successfully established the chronology of the manuscripts regarding Somogy, Veszprém and Zala counties' descriptions (1943). Serious research preceded the publication of the Hungarian translation of Csongrád and Csanád (1984), Békés (1993) and Esztergom county (2001), however not free of errors or deficiencies. Another good example is Sopron county's bilingual description (2001–2006) where the publishers took great care to study its genesis (I had the privilege of being a collaborator of the enterprise, cf. Chap. 4. Bibliography nr. 1-3.)

Finally there are considerable works regarding the third step, namely the genesis of the entire Notitia even if they are not based on the examination of the whole scale of the manuscripts, therefore cannot be perfect in every respect. We have to mention the 'core' of modern Bél Mátyás study, the habilitation thesis (1879) of Mátyás Haan about Mátyás Bél. Equally important are the excellent treatises of Imre Wellmann (1979, 1984), where he elicits the scientific objectives, the limits of reach and the causes of partial failure of the undertaking of Mátyás Bél. In his precious essay (1984) István Zombori deals with the predecessors and the working methods of Bél. Finally we refer to the candidature treatise of László Szelestei N. (1989) about the initiatives of Hungary's literary and scientific organisation where a chapter dealing with Bél examines the creation history of the Notitia as well as the background of its research, especially the friends and colleagues who gathered the necessary information. The studies above, along with the whole reference literature concerning the Notitia - Slovak works included - were used during the work on the present thesis.

## **2. The studied resources and collections**

My first and most important step was to gather and to assess all the manuscripts left behind by Bél that are related to the Notitia. As I have already suggested above, it was a rather complicated task since Bél's heritage was scattered in to several different collections. In the following I draw a brief of my studies thereof.

The biggest part of the legacy was acquired by József Batthány, archbishop of Kalocsa, who

bought it directly from the widow of Bél in 1769. Enduring long trials it was finally hosted by the Church Library of Esztergom. This collection contains the majority of the county description manuscripts alongside with other documents, such as correspondance, questionnaires etc. Owing to the catalogue by Szelestei, these manuscripts are transpicuous, easy to study and the correspondance was even published. Therefore I researched the most in this collection.

A considerable amount of Bél manuscripts is kept in the National Széchényi Library. Several original county description items and a number of copies from 19th century, mainly due to György Gyurikovits (1780-1848), legal expert, who got copies made of the Esztergom items. These late copies can by no means be ignored since in several cases they conserve a later (and otherwise unknown) text version that were made from a contemporary but since lost specimen. Therefore the ones made by Gyurikovits or other late copies were as closely observed as any other and if I found that it maintained an unknown lost text version, I put it in the genealogy of the actual county description.

The third collection of importance about the Notitia can be found in the Library of the Pozsony Lyceum that is the Lutheran School presided by Bél himself. The manuscripts guarded here are solely the parts that were later published from the Notitia, Prodomus or any other of his works. Very probably Bél himself bestowed to the lyceum the manuscripts of his already printed works. These documents are significant chiefly regarding the collaborators, the authorship and dating of each manuscript, consequently in drawing the stemma of the descriptions. Here I find it indispensable to add that I included in my thesis the creation history of the 11 published county descriptions as well since they are part of the whole. Furthermore I found a precious addition to the research of the creation of the Notitia, a letter's draft dated 9 July 1732. In this letter Bél reports to the Governor's Council (*Consilium Regium Locumtenentiale*) and to its president, Francis of Lorraine about how he proceeds with each of the county descriptions. In Pozsony I was able to continue my research due to the Kunó Klebersberg Scholarship and the discovered material was published in a catalogue (cf. Chap. 4. Bibliography nr. 4.)

In the Ráday Collection we can find the manuscripts that were transmitted by Bél to his son, Károly András Bél and following the death of the latest (1782) Ráday Gedeon bought them at an auction. These were chiefly the manuscripts of the abandoned Natural Science Part of the Notitia, the very precious *De re rustica Hungarorum* among them. I also systematised these items in Chapter 2 of the thesis as contributions to the Notitia set aside later by Bél.

There are some Bél manuscripts in the Hungarian National Archives. These mainly historical parts were bought from the widow of Bél in 1762 by the eminent historian Ádám Ferenc Kollár. These titles were transferred after the death of Kollár first to the Staatsarchiv of Wien, then the Hungarian National Archives received it in 1926. The significance of these documents was the identification of a collaborator (András Czemenka) and the discovery of some manuscripts by Bél's hand.

I also made some research in county archives since Bél sent 28 county descriptions, as mentioned above, through the Governor Council to the counties' assemblies (*Congregatio generalis*) for inspection and supplement. The reports of the county assemblies provide a lot of information regarding the provenance of the manuscripts. If the additions, suggestions of the county assemblies are recorded in the reports, it is a tremendous help in the identification and chronology of the different manuscriptic copies. In some cases the counties made their own copies of the description (Baranya, Sporon, Szabolcs) which were duly discovered in the county archives. I personally made the research in several county archives and had a look at all the assembly reports of the concerned 28 counties, they are maintained mostly on microfilms about the protocolla in the Hungarian National Archives.

### 3. The results of the research

The most important result of the present thesis is the gathering of all the manuscripts (first step) and the creation history of all the Notitia which means 48 county descriptions together with the Jász-Kun districts (second step). I present the results firstly in genealogical trees including existing and missing copies and also related documents, such as questionnaires, correspondance or data check. Secondly I publish a review of the re-enacted creation history with details regarding who were collaborating, who saw the descriptions, what was disapproved by the authorities etc. Following to that I described each manuscript respectively identified by its mark in the genealogical tree. Finally a summary of the most important data closes each creation history in order to provide clear indications regarding the latest text version for a future publication.

I proceeded from the detailed inspection towards the broad, unified study of the entire Notitia. The respective study of each county description gave an excellent foundation for the analysis of the whole work. First of all the antecedents of the Notitia were examined whereas I proved with named examples the influence of German state theories on Bél. Previous studies suggested some Hungarian precursors but in these cases I proved that the relation is limited to the content without any similarities of the method or the structural characteristics. Afterwards I observed the first outlines of the Notitia and its continual alteration. I pointed out that Bél initially foresaw independent chapters of natural history, agriculture or early history (back to the Schytians). Although these plans were not realised, many chapters remain in manuscripts. These chapters and manuscripts were systematized in a table. Sunsequently I analyzed the geographical extent of the Notitia and deduced that Bél wanted to include Transylvania and the counties in Slavonia (Pozsega, Szerém, Valkó, Verőce), even North-Serbia and Oltenia, which were acquired in the 1716-1718 war against the Turks. He found gradually that he had to discard them.

Afterwards the next main subject was the data collection of Bél and the collaborators. First of all I studied the questionnaires as the substantial data discovering method of Bél. These questionnaires tell us what interested Bél about each county and how he wanted to get the information, the process changing in time. As for the collaborators the main achievement was to find in the person of János Matolai the chief aid of Bél Mátyás. He helped Bél by wandering along the Middle and Eastern parts of Hungary, thus providing information about 23 counties (plus the Jász-Kun districts). His contribution is just the more valuable since he prepared mostly the first versions of the copies! Without him there would be no Notitia, I am utterly convinced, since he was the one to inspect the most problematic territory of the country, the formerly Turk-conquered and the Trans-Tisza parts. These descriptions are the token of his assiduous work. Besides I systematized all the other collaborators and data providers according to their social rank, profession, the nature of their contribution or their relation to Bél. This discerns the background of Bél without what the Notitia could not have been created. Thereby I examined the preparation of maps belonging to the Notitia, an addition that Bél urged from the beginning and started to achieve with one of his disciple, Samuel Mikoviny. However the cooperation was amiss and not counting a couple of maps the two worked independently.

A separate chapter deals with the relation between Bél and the authorities, that is the official supervision of the county descriptions. The way of this supervision had also changed with time. Originally the Chancery of the Royal Court of Hungary (Cancellaria Regio-Hungarico-Aulica) was to control the descriptions and engaged Bél to gather genuine information from the counties beforehand. When the scientist realised that he could not attain it all by himself in case of the distant counties, he appealed to the Governor's Council to press the matter forward through official proceedings. As I have already pointed out, this was an utmost mistake, because the overloaded

county assemblies put Bél's work aside and despite the recurring warning of the Governor's Council, they detained it for years if they returned it at all. This was an obvious reason of the delay in the publishing of the Notitia that led to its wreckage.

In the last chapter of the thesis I draw the balance of the Notitia, aiming to review the saved manuscripts and their level of elaboration. This part also treats the manuscripts perished during their shipment on the Danube, when the first possessor, József Batthyány, archbishop of Kalocsa forwarded them from Pozsony to Kalocsa. I also considered the possibility of further, yet unknown copies of manuscripts existing in county archives. Finally based on the available manuscripts and the provenance of each description, I present in tables which manuscript means the latest, the most completed, the best text version. In consequence I ranked the descriptions according to their elaborateness and official supervision. As for the elaborateness, the picture is colourful. Even among the printed volumes Bél could find defective copies, but his greatest difficulty laid somewhere else – in the distant and in the counties formerly held by the Turks. Regarding the official check Bél was turned down even in relatively close counties, for instance in Árva. As we could see, the official check is also an important factor in the genesis of each county description.

I hope that the creation history of the Notitia was dealt with in every crucial point. There is certainly progress in the question of the questionnaires and official control. I also managed to discern the geographical extent of this prominent work. Nevertheless my greatest achievement shall be the discoveries about the collaborators, especially about the role of János Matolai. This helped to clarify the method of the data acquisition which is obviously the backbone of the creation of Notitia. Other values of the present thesis are the gathering and evaluation of the manuscript copies which makes a critical edition of the full text of the Notitia possible.

#### 4. Formerly issued publications in the subject

1. BÉL Mátyás: Sopron vármegye leírása. – Descriptio Comitatus Semproniensis. I–III. A latin szöveget gond. és ford. DÉRI Balázs (I.), FÖLDVÁRY Miklós (I.), TÓTH Gergely (I–III.). Szerk. KINCSES Katalin Mária. *Sopron város történeti forrásai. C/ sorozat, 2–4. kötet.* Sopron 2001–2006. (Továbbiakban: BÉL 2001–2006)
2. TÓTH Gergely: A kézirati hagyomány. [Sopron vármegye leírásának kéziratai. Tanulmány.] In: BÉL 2001–2006 I. 234–254.
3. TÓTH Gergely: Bél Mátyás leírása Sopronról és Sopron vármegyéről: a mű és forrásai. In: BÉL 2001–2006 III. 239–262.
4. TÓTH Gergely: Bél Mátyás kéziratai a pozsonyi evangélikus líceum könyvtárában (Katalógus). – Catalogus manuscriptorum Matthiae Bél, quae in bibliotheca Lycei Evangelici Posoniensis asservantur. *Nemzeti Téka.* Budapest 2006.
5. TÓTH Gergely: Bél Mátyás Sáros vármegyéről. A leírás keletkezése és vármegyei fogadtatása. In: *Gesta* 6 (2006) 2. sz. 30–49.
6. TÓTH Gergely: Bél Mátyás pozsonyi tanítványai. A pozsonyi evangélikus líceum anyakönyvének vonatkozó részei Bél és utódai megjegyzéseivel. In: *Lymbus. Magyarságtudományi Forrásközlemények.* Felelős szerk.: Kerekes Dóra. Budapest 2007. 179–208.