ANDRÁS VADAS

Some Questions in the Early Modern Environmental History of Hungary

Border, Environment and Society along the River Rába in Vas County (1600–1659)

Theses of the PhD dissertation

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I. Subject of the Thesis

The aim of the dissertation is to reconstruct the environmental conditions of the settlements along the Rába in Vas county that mostly belonged to the Batthyány family in the first half of the seventeenth century with special regard to the problem of water management and water related problems. It aims to show if there is a connection between the environmental conditions and the changing political conditions in the region. The dissertation addresses if it is possible to demonstrate significant environmental transformation in the surroundings of the River Rába in the period of the presence of the Ottomans in the Carpathian Basin, if there is any detectable hydrological change, change in forest coverage, etc. It is also of primary importance to study how societies living by the Rába were affected by the presence of the Ottomans in the close neighborhood and how the fact that the river became an important element of the border protection changed their livelihoods. In the period of the focus of the present work, the Rába never was part of the frontier between the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary. However, because of its strategic location it still was one of the most important natural obstacles in the plain area of the Carpathians and as such had some strategic role already from the second third of the sixteenth century and particularly from the year of the falling of Kanizsa to the Ottomans (1600). As part of the reconstruction of the hydrological conditions the floods and the droughts are also studied in detail with special regard to the role of extreme hydrological conditions in the border protection. The dissertation also aims at focusing on the Rába as a source of energy, because in the study period – as well as up to the nineteenth century – it was one of the most intensely used rivers in the Carpathian Basin for milling. There were several water constructions along the Rába and the data referring to their destructions are indeed the most important sources of the local water related economic structures. The data on these material losses can be used to reconstruct the waterscape and to study the role of the river in the local economy as well to analyze the perception of floods and other related events in local societies. In the dissertation the study of floods is an important point. However, one might not assume that what present societies call a flood should be understood as a natural disaster, and it must be taken into account that floods in the Early Modern Times (as well as nowadays) were anything but unexpected events. Two questions are considered with regard to the floods: Were they expected events or not? and To what extent and, moreover, why did floods become
part of everyday life in societies along the Rába? Floods could be considered either as risks that actors were aware of, or as events that never were perceived as ‘normal.’

Béla Iványi in a monograph on the town of Körmend published in 1943 – solely from amongst the historians studied the town – already identified some of the problem discussed in the dissertation: “The burghers of Körmend had lot of troubles with the unregulated flow of the Rába […] the frequently flooding river caused huge loss on the one hand and did hold up the transport and the communication on the other.” Iványi, the archivist of the Batthyány archives at Körmend during the Second World War and emeritus professor of the Szeged University, drew special attention to the environmental phenomena and especially to floods. At that time the study of environmental problems in historical times was hardly in the interest area of research. Then why would Iványi draw such attention to the problem of floods? The dissertation aims to give a detailed analysis of the problem identified by him and some later scholars based on methods of environmental history, a field that became important in Western scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century.

II. Sources and the structure of the work

Western European environmental history scholarship uses more and more diverse source material, and especially pioneer research has been launched in the last decade. Despite this the study of private letters has not been in the focus of scholarship until now, because it is highly uncommon that private correspondences have been systematically preserved from the Middle Ages or Early Modern period from a narrow geographic area – e.g. a settlement or a micro-region. Without a relatively even distribution of letters sent from a place it is rather difficult to reflect on long-term processes. The private letter collection of the Batthyány family in this respect is certainly exceptional, and it is particularly true for the second third of the seventeenth century (the death of Ádám Batthyány in 1659 marks the end of this period). Western European and American scholarship with very few exceptions did not try to integrate this group of evidence when studying early modern environmental processes. The present dissertation, however, mostly uses this group of evidence: letters sent by local authorities (manorial administrators, captains, vice-captains, etc.) connected to Körmend, Csákány, Szecsőd, and other settlements in the hands of the Batthyánys. Not only were the letters sent from these settlements considered, but following the logic of the archival material all the letters sent by officials connected to these settlements were studied independent of the place
where they wrote or had the letters written. The studied number of letters is close to six thousand, but this still represents only about ten percent of all the sixteenth–seventeenth-century letters preserved at the Batthyány archives.

Because of the sophistication of the Batthyány administration there is a significant number of surviving urbaria (terriers) from the settlements of the manors, and this also contributes to our knowledge of the environmental conditions along the Rába during the period in question. Apart from the terriers, minor accounts (building material orders, bills, etc.) have also been preserved thanks to the highly professionalized administrative system of the Batthyánys. Also one finds written reminders (memoriale) referring either to Kőrmend or Csákány – the two main settlements discussed in the dissertation – as well as (though only from the eighteenth century) maps representing the areas in great detail. The dissertation builds mostly on these sources listed here.

The work apart from being a source study, presents an environmental historical case study. Therefore, apart from reflecting on the problem of the changing environmental conditions, it aims at drawing attention to the potential of private letters in environmental history. The structure of the dissertation therefore tries to integrate both aspects:

The first chapter addresses the main problems the dissertation touches upon, and also lays down its main geographical and chronological frameworks. The second chapter discusses the most important research directions of Hungarian environmental history with special regard to the study of the Early Modern period. I chose to discuss three different directions: the climate and weather history, the forest history, and historical water management. The third chapter discusses the main groups of evidence the earlier research drew on and gives a detailed study of the sources analyzed in the present work.

Chapter four of the work addresses what the environment was like in the late medieval period and at the beginning of the Early Modern period by the Rába. In this analysis the dissertation draws on a special group of sources, previously used mostly by military historians: river surveys. The Rába-survey of 1543-44 and the one from 1594 are both suitable for the study of the natural and built environment of the Rába region before the Ottoman wars and the period of the so-called Fifteen Years War. As reflected in the studied sources and the previous scholarship the defensive system of Ottoman-age Hungary, apart from the chain of fortifications, was very much developed along the parallel use of forest and river resources. These means of border protection – the heavy usage of natural obstacles – clearly affected the face of the Rába-valley already from the late-1530s.
The falling of trees into the Rába could strongly influence the possibility of defending a border settlement. Therefore the local landlords, such as the Batthyánys, tried to hinder cutting out trees along the course of the river without permission. The surveys of 1543–44 and 1594 suggest that in the area surrounding the fords and bridges of the Rába the presence of forests was even more important. The watch-posts (góré) had to be protected by the forests and the easy crossing points may have had to be closed by cutting the trees into the river (so-called bevágás) which the locals could carry out much faster in case of the presence of trees by the river.

The two following chapters analyze the concrete physical environment in the period as described in the two above-mentioned surveys. The farming and economic possibilities of two significant settlements are analyzed here from the Rába-valley in Vas county, Körmend (chapter five) and Csákány (chapter six), where water had a key role. According to the sources, which discussed both settlements the struggles connected to the river were inseparable from the political changes along the river in the early seventeenth century.

The connection of the two settlements and the Rába becomes highlighted by sources related to economic questions, as both the letters and the terriers studied reveal some of the farming practices/allude to the farming practices at the manors of the Batthyánys. Most of our sources will be connected to the description of the damages to the buildings by the river. These data provided enough sources for both quantitative and qualitative analysis which is carried out in chapter seven. Apart from this analysis the data provided enough details to study the human perception of the losses to the mills, bridges, and other buildings along the river. The studied private letters made it possible to analyze the functioning of the local mills in a highly detailed manner.

The already mentioned chapter seven is dedicated to the analysis of the flooding of the upper section of the Rába in Vas county with special regard to the seasonality and the strength of these events. Chapter eight, sums up the most important results of the dissertation.

III. Main results

The dissertation aimed at understanding the changes of the water related economy in the seventeenth century in the valley of the Rába in Vas county, and its possible connections with the political situation of the period. The analysis demonstrated that from the seventeenth, but partly already from the mid-sixteenth, century it became a complex river, which not only had
a significant role in the economic life of the region but also in the border protection of the Kingdom. These two functions, however, were from time to time in conflict with each other:

Firstly, for the sake of border protection a minimal water-level was always necessary along the whole course of the Rába, for which the local nobility and the counties along the river made all the necessary measures. Of course the section of the river studied here, stretching roughly from Szentgotthárd to Szecsőd, was no exception. Different means were used to provide the constant and relatively high water level. River cuttings (bevágás) and fentős were essential in stabilizing a higher than average water-level, but mills and their dams also had an integral role in this process as these relatively evenly distributed constructions were also proven to be essential in regulating the water-level along longer sections of the river. In the case of Körmend one more factor has to be taken into an account. József Kelenik already raised the idea that the mill dam was not only meant to provide water for the mill, but it backed-up the water of the Rába, by supplying the ditch that surrounded the town with water. There is no direct evidence of such function of the mill dam at Csákány, but it is likely that from 1640, when the fortification of the settlement was surrounded with a ditch, its water was also originating at least partly from the Rába by the use of back-ups.

Secondly, the regulation of the water, the possibility to influence the water-level fluctuation, was essential in successful economic activity in the settlements along the Rába. However, the mill dams could have had serious consequences by backing-up the already too high water as the sluices could not necessarily lead away the water surplus in time of floods. It is also an important question, how the water surplus let out during floods influenced the downstream settlements. It is especially interesting in light of the fact that in Vas county one finds several Batthyány estates with mills all along the Rába. Accordingly, the losses caused by a miller’s bad decision at the downstream settlements and waterside buildings affected the incomes of the same – the miller’s own – landlord.

Thirdly, despite these hardships, the hydrographic situation very much determined the construction of mills on the major rivers of the region, such as the Rába. As it is demonstrated in the present dissertation the millers of the period were at least as much the leaders of construction works as the ones with the duty of grinding. Knowledge of the local geographical conditions was essential in this work, which is why István Nemsem, the bailiff of the manor of Körmend, suggested that the landlord Ádám Batthyány should send a miller
to the local mill who had learned the profession at the Rába. Nemsem makes a comparison with an insignificant tributary of the Rába, the Lapincs, by contrasting the difficulty of milling at a major river to a minor affluent. The Rába, despite its obvious difficulties, was one of the most significant water flows of the whole Western Transdanubia and as such was a perfect place to construct mills.

Apart from dealing with the destruction of the floods, the basic function, the grinding, had to be carried out in the mills. The complexity of milling can be demonstrated by the fact that in most parts of the year the mill, or some of its wheels at least, did not work. It is almost unprecedented that the mill was working without any problems and with all its wheels.

The research carried out in the dissertation aimed at demonstrating the research potential of the environmental history of a river, or a micro-region in Early Modern Hungary, and that such research may have complex economic, social, political, and military historical lessons. The archive of the Batthyány family provides an exceptional basis for such investigations, and the geographical and temporal broadening – for instance by integrating the Rábaköz region – of the research scope may significantly contribute to the understanding of the complexity of the everyday life and the environment of the Ottoman-Hungarian frontier zone.
IV. Publications in the subject of the dissertation

A. Monographs


B. Studies in journals and edited volumes


C. Conference papers


- „ide olyan molnár kell, aki 30–35 esztendeig a Rábán való malomban tanult, s a víznek a csínját tudja” – a körmendi uradalmi malom és az árvizek (16–17. század) [“here we need a miller who has learned at the Rába for 30 or 35 years, and known the way the water behaves” – the manorial mill of Körmend and the floods (16th–17th centuries)] – Középkorral foglalkozó doktoranduszok konferenciája (Graduate conference in medieval studies), ELTE BTK, Budapest, 17–18 May 2012

- „által mennék én a Tiszán” – jégjelenségek a középkori és kora újkori Kárpát-medencei folyóvizeken [“may I pass the Tisza” – icing of the rivers of the Carpathian Basin in the Early Modern Times]– Középkorral foglalkozó doktoranduszok konferenciája (Graduate conference in medieval studies), ELTE BTK, Budapest, 30–31 May 2013

- The “waters leave their beds frequently” – A Western-Hungarian town and the flooding of the Rába/Raab River in the Seventeenth century (1600–1659) – VIIth ESEH Conference, Rachel Carson Center, München, 20–24 August 2013

- „Rába soha olyan kicsi nem volt mint most” – a Rába-mente a török árnyékában [“the Rába never has been so small as it is now” – the course of the Rába in the shadow of the Ottomans] – Az ESEH magyarországi tagjainak 4. magyarországi konferenciája (4th conference of the Hungarian members of the ESEH), SZIE, Gödöllő, 16 November 2013
- Vízgazdálkodás és háborús védekezés. Csákány és a Vas megyei Rába-mente a kora újkorban (1600–1658) [Water management and war defense. Csákány and the course of the Rába River in Vas county (1600‒1658)] – Víz és társadalom Magyarországon a középkortól az államszocializmus időszakáig (Water and society in Hungary from the Middle Ages until the age of state socialism), Budapest Főváros Levéltára, Budapest, 31 January 2014

- A River between Worlds Environment, Society and War along the River Raab/Rába (1600–1664) – Man, nature and environment between the Northern Adriatic and the Eastern Alps in Pre-Modern Times, Univerza v Ljubljani, 29–31 May 2014