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Rác and Vlach people in the Northern-Bácska region during the Turkish rule

Summary

By the time of the first two-three decades of the 16th century, the area of the Northern-Bácska region had practically become a deserted, abandoned land, described in Hungarian with the term “puszta”: the inhabitants of the Hungarian villages moved to safer regions, taking refuge in bigger towns. The main thoroughfares, however, used by the Turks when they were crossing the region, were not safe, because of the continuous and ceaseless attacks made by the Hungarian military. It was for this reason that in the middle of the century, pursuant to the decree issued by Suleiman I, “a certain number of rája people coming from various places” as well as “tent-dweller wanderers”, out of whom a hundred people served as “free cavalry-men”, had settled in the three villages located in the area between the towns of Zombor and Baja.

The first incomers were soon followed by further new settlers, and by the time of the last decades of the century most of the depopulated villages in the Northern-Bácska region had been resettled. According to the few surviving defters dating from this period, that are known today, these new inhabitants had names of a mixed Serb-Rumanian-Bulgarian origin, their chiefs and principals held the ranks of kenéz and primikür, their religious life was organised by kalugyers. Although historical science is to this day at fault for a precise identification of their place of origin and ethnic group, this much can be regarded as certain that it was Southern-Slav and Vlach people – besides some Islamised communities – who constituted the Balkan population who settled in the region between the Danube and Tisza rivers as far as the vicinity of the town of Szeged. However, the fact that they settled here did not mean permanence and stability: parts of the population of the villages were often and repeatedly replaced, new settlers kept coming to take the place of those who had moved away.

The fate of the Balkan people who lived in the Northern-Bácska region, and who, by the end of the 16th century called themselves Rác (Serb), was, in fact, sealed by the 15-year war. For a while they managed to resist the efforts made by the Palatine Miklós Pálffy, who tried to make them settle in the vicinity of Esztergom. Nevertheless, many of them left their villages temporarily to settle somewhere else, in a safer region – just

temporarily, according to their original intentions. That is to say that according to the two contracts concluded with Miklós Pálffy in 1598 – which were signed by the inhabitants and the principals of the Rác (Serb) villages of the Northern-Bácska region – the Rác people swearing an oath of allegiance to the emperor Rudolf had thereby undertaken to pay taxes up until they would resettle in their villages, as well as afterwards.

There are no written records available dating from the first two decades of the 17th century, and not only records referring to small villages are lacking, but there are no records even of such a densely populated big town as Baja. We can only guess that most of the Rác (Serb) people who had left their villages never ever returned, or even if they did return, they did not stay there for a long time: by the year 1622 “the Bácska region had become a deserted land, a *puszta*.” Although there were some Serbs from Old-Serbia and Bosnia, who came and settled in this depopulated region, it was people engaged in agriculture, Christian peasants from Bosnia, who settled in some of the towns or bigger villages of the Northern-Bácska region. Efforts to identify the archaeological remains of the Bosnians have not been successful so far: these remains have as yet not been distinguished from those of either the Hungarian population who had survived the Turkish invasion, or from those of the Vlach-Rác population who had moved into the Bácska region around the middle of the 16th century.

When the Turkish troops withdrew from the country, yet another wave of devastation of both settlements and population ensued, so much so that in the region between the Danube and Tisza rivers, the area stretching from Kecskemét to as far as Szabadka and Szeged, became depopulated.

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The archaeological investigation of the remains of the Rác-Vlach population, who had lived in the Northern-Bácska region during the Turkish rule, started in 1993 with the excavation of the cemetery in Bácsalmás. Having relied on the results of the recently conducted archaeological investigation in Transdanubia (Dombóvár), the characteristic remains of the Rác-Vlach population have been successfully identified and distinguished from other remains, thereby several archaeological sites that had previously been associated with the Hungarian population of medieval times, have now become the subject of scientific investigation. On the basis of the analysis of the Rác-Vlach material of finds, a

clear distinction can be made between the cemeteries of a rural type of Rác-Vlach population, uncovered in Dombóvár as well as in the Northern-Bácska region, and those of the more urban type of “civil-military” Balkan people whose cemeteries have been identified so far only in Transdanubia (Győr, Esztergom).

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The Rác and Vlach people, who moved to Hungary around the middle of the 16th century, settled in depopulated Hungarian villages or in the close vicinity of these villages, but they buried the dead further away from the settlements, on a high hill. These cemeteries, in which no church buildings have been found, are one-layered, i. e. overburial was not at all, or just very rarely practised. The layout of the tombs shows a pattern of groups of relatively precisely arranged rows of tombs, supposedly these groups of tombs can be associated with one particular family each.

The grave pits which were usually of the shape of a rectangle, sometimes of a slightly trapezoid form, or of an oval form, were in most cases dug with an orientation of South-West-North-East and West-East, in some cases the orientation was North-West-South-East. The bottom of the pits are only rarely level ground or it is slightly bent; in the overall majority of the pits the characteristic architectural form is a particular way of shaping benches; but grave pits with side-recesses (niches) can also be found. The excavated part, i. e. the indentation between the two benches was usually in the middle of the grave pit (benches situated on two sides), whereas the asymmetrical arrangement (a bench formed only on one side), as well as the excavation of the bottom of the pit in the shape of a pointed, tapering cross-section, were less frequently applied features.

Before the corpse was rolled into the winding-sheet, or put in the coffin, the arms of the dead person had been adjusted to be placed in the traditional position. In most cases the forearms were placed in a position near to the waist, whereas forearms bent backwards right to the shoulders occurred less frequently. Burial using box- or case type coffins was observed only in a small number of graves; coffins of both the type of coffins fixed with some iron nails and the type of timbered wooden coffins were used. In the burying practice of the Rác population during the Turkish rule the most commonly applied method was the use of the so-called bench-coffins, i. e. using the excavated indentation between the benches as a coffin, and then covering it on the top. The indentation between the benches

had been lined with some sort of an organic matter, before the corpse was put in, then the indentation, depending on the depth of it, was boarded up with planks placed there either straight or diagonally, or with two planks placed in a way to form a pointed cross-section. In the latter case bulky branches, smaller tree-trunks, occasionally bundles of reed or brush-wood were placed on the benches in order to prevent the covering planks from sliding apart. The side-recesses were covered with planks placed on the bottom of the grave pit and leaned against the top of the side-recess. One dead person was buried in one grave; the number of group-burials is insignificant.

One of the characteristic features of the Rác cemeteries – though it has only been discovered in Bácsalmás so far – is the specific way of backfilling the grave pit. They did not throw earth directly on the corpse lying in the grave pit, already covered and thereby protected with planks, but the pit was first covered with bulky branches or smaller tree-trunks, then some sort of a textile was spread on top of the tree-trunks, and at last it was covered with earth only on top of the textile. This structure constructed on the surface soon collapsed right into the grave pit, thereby finally filling it up.

The graves, in all probability, were marked. The remains of the one-time wooden grave-posts are known from two of the graves, and the bricks and brick-bats found close to the surface of some of the graves can probably be associated also with grave markers. Some of the Rác cemeteries were surrounded by ditches, supposedly to protect the area from the grazing animals.

The features mentioned above reflect the characteristics of not only the traditions of the burial practices of the Rác population of the period of the Turkish rule, but also those of the Islamic traditions. Although the defters dating from 1570 and 1578 do not indicate inhabitants of the settlements of the Northern-Bácska region in question, who had converted to the Islamic faith, however, the ancestors of the Rác-Vlach people moving from the Balkan-peninsula to the Northern-Bácska region, had already been living for several generations under Turkish rule, where they could have easily adopted certain elements of the customs and practice of the conquerors.

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Characteristic items of the Rác-Vlach material of finds are the various pins, made from iron, decorated with small balls or beads, or sometimes with bigger hollow balls.

These pins were used to fix the shawl or veil to the simpler, less ornamented head-dress beneath. The Rác-Vlach people in the Northern-Bácska region did not wear that type of head-dress with which a large number of pins were used (the so-called “winding” head-dress). The head-dresses worn by the Rác-Vlach people were decorated with beads and also with kaori-shells and various metal- and glass objects – the latter being characteristic in the material of finds of this period only of the population of the Balkan. Among the pieces of their jewellery, the pair of earrings discovered in Katymár, which was made to be worn as a decoration on the temple, is unique, its shape reflects the characteristics of the hollow lunula that used to be worn in Macedonia and Serbia, whereas its ornaments show some sort of a relation with the disc-shaped earrings found in Serbia. Beads and pendants worn in the neck were less common, while fibulas have only been found in treasure-troves dating from the period. Rings with characteristically chiselled heads were among their most popular jewellery.

Only such finds as objects made from lasting materials provide some hints concerning these people’s clothes. They used buttons made from silver, bronze, tin, bone, glass, and seldom from lead and iron, as well as simple bronze and iron hooks to fasten the garment or the trousers around the neck or at the waist, respectively. The costume fastened with several buttons, hooks or copper rings in the front of the garment was another style, which was more popular among the urban type of Rác population in Transdanubia. In some cases they decorated their garments with metal- or glass plates, and stitched braid or lacing around the neck-line. It is only the iron heels once fitted on boots, found in bigger Rác cemeteries, which provide some sort of an indication of their footwear.

Utensils, tools and weapons have seldom been buried with the dead person, and it only occurred among the Rác and Vlach people in Transdanubia. However, giving money to the dead was known and practised also among the Balkan population of the Northern-Bácska region. It occurred both in Transdanubia and in the Bácska region that certain objects were thrown into the grave pit during the funeral. Similarly, the strikingly large number of the pieces of iron discovered in the Rác-Vlach graves, the function of which is impossible to identify by now, might be associated with some sort of a cult or ritual. In accordance with both the Christian and Islamic traditions, food and drink were never part of the grave-goods.

The objective of the dissertation was to identify and analyse the archaeological material of finds of the Balkan population who had lived here during the Turkish occupation of Hungary, together with those archaeological sites in the Northern-Bácska region which are located on the territory that is now part of Hungary, and can be associated with this Rác-Vlach population. May I express the hope that I have effectually performed my task. At the same time I also hope that on the basis of this paper the remains of the Rác-Vlach “tent-dweller herdsman”, who moved to Hungary in the 16th century, will be distinguishable among those sites which have been so far identified as the archaeological sites of the Hungarian population of the late medieval-early modern times of history.

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