

Doctoral (PhD) Theses

Eötvös Loránd University

Faculty of Arts

Doctoral Programme for the History of

Medieval and Early Modern Hungary

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***Haller Gábor – the Life and
the Ouvre of a Seventeenth-Century
Aristocrat from Transylvania***

Budapest, 2008

Biography, as the historical genre nearest to belletristic, in the last few decades regained its popularity. The new type of historical biography is based on totally different theoretical pillars from the biographies written in the age of historicism. Its subjects are not the lives of so-called great formative characters, but people coming from various layers reflecting their age and circumstances. In the background of this new tendency re-vitalizing the genre of social biography there stand the two trends appearing in the 1970-ies: microhistory and historical anthropology. According to them the small-scale and often qualitative researches have just the same reason for existence as the great-scale and quantitative ones. The informations unveiled through this method according to this theory couldn't be known by other means. The chronological order of the biography is often loose, but at the same time within its certain chapters narrative form – refused by the Annales school – plays an important role. In the present dissertation we attempt to describe the life of a Transylvanian aristocrat,

Gábor Haller (1614-1663) who became a man of political importance only in the last phase of his life. Therefore his life can be considered as a typical one within the circles of seventeenth-century Transylvanian aristocracy. Our choice resembles the one of Thomas Winkelbauer whose model was a second-rate Bohemian nobleman, Gundaker von Lichtenstein, but – at the same time – taking into consideration Haller's last years – also differs from it. A microhistorical approach was not made possible because of the small number of Early Modern Hungarian sources. The diary of Gábor Haller (1630-1640) could partially compensate these lacks. It was also our purpose to throw light upon various aspects of contemporary Transylvanian history, connected to the events of his life. Our interpretation is not only the biography of one certain person, but at the same time the biography of Transylvanian aristocracy and to a certain extent of the whole principality.

Surveying the life of Haller, or rather re-constructing it, we can announce that – though his career was an extraordinary one – his life illustrates some general features of his era. His family background distinguished him from an average Transylvanian nobleman, as he was born into

that Haller-family which originating from the patriciate of Nuremberg – through Buda and Hermannstadt – arrived to the Early Modern Transylvanian nobility and at the end of the 16th century found its place among the magnates. His father, István Haller (1591-1657) converted in the years of his studies at the university of Vienna, and became one of the most solid supporters of the Catholic faith. He and his brothers, György and Zsigmond, represented at the princely court the Catholic cause and later, under György Rákóczi I. attempted to re-organize a Franciscan friary in Fehéregyháza. The history of Gábor Haller's conversion – as the culmination of the continuous confessional changes happening within the family – was the truthful mirror of the policy-governed ecclesiastical life of Transylvania. The Calvinist antagonists of his father – as a counteraction of the Catholic circles playing an important role in Catherine of Brandenburg's conversion – influenced young Haller (serving at court then) during the spring of 1630 to become a Calvinist himself. This step proved to be later a crucial event of his life. All these events formed the overture of his unusually long peregrination: he spent more than five years at German and Dutch universities (1630-1635). Due

to the devastation of the University of Heidelberg (1622) the Hungarian and Transylvanian Calvinists – after visiting the universities of Frankfurt-am-Oder and Franeker – usually visited Leiden; Haller followed this general course. He – from financial reasons – was unable to copy step by step his direct model, the almost-princely peregrination of Péter Bethlen, son of governor István Bethlen (1625-1628). Not only the the planned French journey was neglected, but he became also heavily indebted. This financial difficulties meant something positive as well: as he had no money for a classical „grand tour,” he got a greater freedom than an average student, strongly restricted by the expectations of his supporters. It could be seen in his choice of the subjects which became much wider than that of an average Transylvanian student. That is why Haller and his later spiritual relative, Miklós Bethlen could study – besides theology – mathematics, military architecture and state theory. Gábor Haller’s peregrination is also an exceptional one, because his diary and commonplace book give a wide-range information about it. He had a much closer connection with the „outer world” of the visited countries than the Hungarian students of theology, and got acquainted

with some important personalities form the European Protestant elite, among others with Ludwig Camerarius, the Sweedish ambassador and Janusz Radziwill, the lithuanian prince.

After his return he was under a great pressure of his circumstances. Because of the lack of estates and on the verge of being the „black sheep” of his family (due to his conversion) he had no other choice than to serve the prince first as „serving in” (1635-1636) and after a small interruption as one of the leaders of the young gentlemen serving at court (1637-1639). His diary-chapters from the years of this courtly service offer an excellent tableaux of the Transylvanian princely court which – in spite of having a main centre – Gyulafehérvár – and some smaller ones remained a somewhat medieval, itinerant one. Haller’s carreer sprung up form this moving court being always en route. From the beginning of 1638 its severe bonds disappeared, as from this tome on, until September 1639, until the end of his courtly service, he was military architect in several fortresses of Translyvania.

Gábor Haller, after his first leave of the courtly service, in 1637 got his small paternal share. While his

father, the severe and meticulous István Haller, with his 1500 peasants (serfs) exceptionally reached the financial niveau of the average Hungarian noblemen, and – just as the landowners of Transdanubia in the Kingdom – was involved in commercial activities, from his income had some estates in pledge and built some castles in late Renaissance style (1610– Kerelőszentpál, 1625– Fehéregyháza), his son, with his own 100-150 serfs remained a smaller estate holder. Though Gábor Haller from 1639 made serious efforts to enlarge his estates, but these were found mostly in the area of Marosszék, with an uncertain legal background, therefore the relatives of the previous owners of his estates and the Szekler village communities meant a great difficulty for him. Even the most important centre of his estates, Gyulakuta (in Marosszék) meant a great problem for him, because of a lengthy legal procedure with the other owner of the village, György Lázár of Gyulakuta. His agricultural problems derived from the sporadic nature of his estates within the whole of Transylvania, but within a certain village as well. It was a general phenomenon in Transylvania which could be only partially solved. One of these positive examples of

constructing a central settlement was Haller's building a manorhouse in Mezőgerebenes (county Torda). His planned marriage with Erzsébet Balási, the heiress of the neighbouring estate of Szentdemeter was also part of his financial ambition, the purpose of which was to reach an uplift for his family and for himself. This reasonable marital plan – partly because of the instability of his financial status – ended in a fiasco, in spite of the support of the Prince of Transylvania. Finally, Haller remained unmarried until the end of his life. In the meantime the private warfare between father and son couldn't come to an end, and István' Haller's second marriage with Annamária Barkóczi was a new burden on this connection.

Though Gábor Haller was present at the Transylvanian parliaments as a „regalist,” it didn't mean a more solid social status for him. He was the sprout of the most mighty families of Transylvania, but from 1644 on he had to begin a new phase of his courtly service. With the princely troops he took part in the Hungarian campaign of György Rákóczi I, and from 1645, with the ardent support of the Prince he started his military career and at the end (1652) became a member of his privy council.

Gábor Haller's military career began as the captain of the fortress of Szamosújvár, from the spring of 1651 it continued in Borosjenő (county Zaránd), and finally ended with the short-term commanding of the main bastion of Transylvania, namely the fortress of Várad, in 1659. While Szamosújvár was significant only as a secondary residence of the Prince, and as a center of the dominium belonging to it, Borosjenő and Várad were the two most important border fortresses of the state which were part of the defensive line against the Turks. It is not accidental, that Haller's service in Szamosújvár remained very poorly documented. Most likely, he was very often far from the stronghold, he often visited the princely court and in 1646 he was mentioned as one of the assessors of the princely Court of Law. Gábor Haller's service as a commander-in-chief of Borosjenő serves with further consequences. The border fortress system had great difficulties, mostly with the fact that – differing from the border fortresses of the Hungarian Kingdom – there was no real vertical distribution and therefore the frame could not be effective enough against the Ottoman raids. Though the military leaders of Borosjenő were called commander-in-chiefs, he

could command only a few fortresses. In spite of the disorganization Borosjenő had a great influence within the Turkish Conquest which spread over large territories of counties Arad, Békés and Csanád. The space of play of the Transylvanians was gradually tightening from Gábor Bethlen's time on. Due to the Ottoman attacks, the number of the inhabited settlements, the multinational population (Hungarians, Roumanians, Southern Slavs) gathered in greater centres, like Borosjenő. Haller's military activities came under the pressure of this framework. In spite of all these, the commander-in-chief had some certain outcome: he reconstructed the castle of Borosjenő, in 1652 he settled Southern Slavic soldiers along the fortress, with a legal status near to the Hajduks, but as a commander he could be hardly effective, in a confrontation with his local born vice commander, László Újlaki. We do not know much about Haller's strategical abilities, but from his diary it is evident that he had not such a theoretical background as Miklós Zrínyi.

His activities as a military architect are more interesting: in the period of his courtly service he planned at Fogaras, Görgény, Várad, Gyalu, Sárospatak, Székelyhíd.

and besides all these, naturally, at Szamosújvár. the scenery of his commander-in-chief position. At most of these sites he spent a short term and after completing his plans left the scene. But he followed his most important plan step by step as the commander-in-chief of Borosjenő; including the reconstruction of inner and outer elements of the defense line. Throughout his peregrination in the Netherlands Haller got acquainted with the book of the Prussian military architect, Adam Freitag, namely with his „*Architectura militaris nova et aucta*” (first published in 1631) and probably with the author himself too. He used its Latin version as a handbook. Due to Freitag’s work he got acquainted with a more developed form of the old-Dutch fortress system. Unfortunately, his still existing buildings do not make evident, if he was a follower of this architectural school, or not. As his plans were realized by his serfs, and not by skilled workers, he had few opportunity to use any modern technique.

After György Rákóczi II unsuccessful military campaign in Poland in 1657 Gábor Haller became one of the few formative personalities of the Transylvanian political life. This warfare meant the end of the so called

second golden age of Transylvania and awakened the political self-awareness of noblemen which almost totally disappeared under the reign of the Rákóczi’s. One of the leaders of this awakening became Haller himself, the other his friend, János Bethlen. According some gossips they instructed form the background the deeds of Prince Ferenc Rhédey and also the ones of Ákos Barcsai who came upon the throne after the Turkish-Tartar invasion of 1658. Parallel with these events Haller had to abandone his commandership of Borosjenő and the fortress became in 1658 an Ottoman propriety.

Consequently, from 1657 on Gábor Haller was not a man (*familiaris*) of the Rákóczis any more, but the defender of the rights of the Transylvanian nobility. He was a man of discontent even before, and he was also steadily frustrated by the modest number of his estates which offered to him a very mediocre financial status within Transylvania. Probably it was the influence of his Leiden studies that he agreed with the ideas of a de-centralized (aristocratic) state, which was the clear-cut counter-example of the medieval centralizing efforts of the Rákóczis. His ideas about state and warfare were very far from the concept of a strong

monarchy and a steady modern army. The feudal noblemen's party, led by Haller and Bethlen, between 1657-62, under four different princes, was continuously fighting with the former Rákóczi-followers and Catholic aristocrats. In 1659 Gábor Haller for a long time solidly refused the demands of György Rákóczi II who wanted to take over the commandship of Várad. Both their inner and foreign policy totally differed, neither Haller, nor Bethlen could accept the realities of an anti-Turkish league, confrontates with the superior numbers of Ottoman Empire they rather tried to find the ways of survival.

Anyhow, Haller remained a „lonely player,” he was not strengthened by the widely accepted „clan-system”, partly because he remained unmarried, partly because of his family conflicts. Besides, even his party itself neglected this traditional „clan-system.” Haller's tragic end is finally due to his central position which proved to be a very risky one. Prince Mihály Apafi (installed by the Ottomans in 1662) treated him from the very beginning as a potential rival of his and that is why he sent Haller as an envoy to Ali Csengizáde, the Pasha of Temesvár, in 1662. Ahmed Köprülü, the Grand Vezier too looked upon him as the

possible follower of Prince Apafi in 1663, as he was convinced of the disobedience of the governing prince. This diverse and gloomy story ended with Haller's death. In the background of his execution we can feel the intrigue of Mihály Apafi and Pasha Ali Csengizáde as well. We could easily draw a parallel between the might of the outer circumstances and Gábor Haller's personal determination (lack of marriage, service at court etc.) and finally, between his „double-dealing,” in the last period of his life. We do not intend to follow this rather cheap logic and do not play the dubious role of a „must-sage” while interpreting the events of Haller's life. We emphasize that our personal interpretation is just one of the possible ones. We also have to take into consideration the itinerant lifestyle of our „subject” who was moving on the map to and from, more often than any of his Transylvanian fellow-noblemen.

The world of Haller and his contemporaries is a strange, despite its all marvels rationalistic world. His deep faith and his bibliolatriy ran parallel with several so called „superstitions.” In the mental-spiritual world of the 17th-century Transylvanian nobility a thunder was as significant as an invitation to the parliament. It would be good to

understand the cause or the background of many of Haller's deeds, decisions and weaknesses (as his often mentioned and documented alcoholism) Finally, it would be great to understand his complex world as a whole. The imagineable but unreachable wholeness (entity), the key of which was not possessed by him, as his lifestory that was just a construction, just like our biography written on him. The most important result of this humble work is that through the procedure of collecting its material we could come closer to some aspects of the life of Transylvanian nobility and state in the early modern era.