BOOK REVIEW

Hungarian ethnographic research traditionally focuses on the 18th to 20th centuries, for which better sources are available. This volume, by University of Pécs lecturer Gábor Máté, is unusual in this respect, since its subject and setting are events that took place during the War of Reconquest (1683–1699). The decisive defeat of the Ottomans in the Battle of Vienna (in 1683) paved the way for liberation from the Ottoman occupation, the precondition for which was the retaking of Buda. At the time of the first, unsuccessful siege of the former capital of the Kingdom of Hungary (July–November 1684), troops from the Christian border fortresses along Lake Balaton systematically attacked Southern Transdanubia, which was then in the hands of the Ottomans. However, the offensives against the region, which was known at the time as Somogyság, were not so much military operations aimed at weakening Ottoman rule as spontaneous raids by soldiers from the Hungarian border fortresses, who took advantage of the chaotic situation to procure loot.

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As stated in the introduction, the volume came about thanks to a unique source, which had been hidden in the archives of the family of Prince Esterházy, awaiting discovery by researchers. The source had come to the attention of the historian Ágnes R. Várkonyi, and subsequently the ethnographer Lajos Takács, who both made reference to it. It was Gábor Máté’s one-time mentor, the ethnographer Antal Filep, who drew his attention to the witness interrogation record, a copy of which was also found in Takács’s heritage. This should come as no surprise, bearing in mind that this type of source has been used to date not so much by historiographers as by ethnographers. In 1685, records of evidence were taken at the request of Pál Esterházy, Palatine of the Kingdom of Hungary, who had suffered the greatest damages as a result of the destruction caused by the border troops. Even in terms of their volume, these records stand out from among witness testimonies: the Hungarian-language text corpus contains the names of no fewer than 421 individuals, 122 settlements, and 12 regions. Besides the publication of the source, this volume offers an exemplary parsing — an ethnographic reading one might say — of the *protocollum*, using the means and methodology of ethnography and cultural anthropology. Mention should be made here of the fact that the study and the source were previously published in yearbooks 39 (2017) and 41 (2019) of the Mór Wosinsky Museum in Szekszárd, thus what we have here is an expanded and revised edition, which has been supplemented with a user-friendly chronological table, as well as a list of personal names and indexes.

The author’s declared objective was not to provide a historical reconstruction of the (almost unknown) events. Instead, by placing himself in the position of the perpetrators and their victims, he endeavors to bring to light through their narratives the radical upheaval in their living conditions that took place in the final days of the Ottoman era. Indeed, the subtle distinction, according to which the book seeks to answer the question “How did it happen?” rather than “Why did it happen?”, indicates a distinct disciplinary demarcation. While historical studies typically adopt a structural approach “from above” — that is, from the perspective of power — within a broader temporal and geographical framework, ethnography focuses on understanding how individuals respond to stimuli from their environment. The volume presented here, however, forms a bridge between the two related disciplines, which typically pursue separate paths, filling the gap between macro-level (national) historiography and micro-examinations, which are traditionally locally oriented and less prestigious in Hungarian historiography.

After the requisite overview of the genre, conceptual system, and chronology of the source, the author moves on to the historical and geographical presentation of the venue of the events, Southern Transdanubia. As highlighted by Ferenc Szakály’s earlier research, the region was far “tougher” than the rest of the occupied territories from a Hungarian military perspective. The bulk of the Ottoman army was stationed on the western border, where the natural environment also offered greater opportunities to fend off Hungarian attempts to penetrate into Ottoman territory. The mostly Orthodox Balkan settlers, who were referred to at the time by the collective name *Rác*, were also known to have established closer relations with the occupiers, while they regularly attempted to evade Hungarian efforts to impose taxes and legal authority based on their earlier sovereignty in the area. Besides the Rác settlements, which became increasingly dense to the east of the Kaposvár–Fonyód line, it is also important to mention the *Tötös* (a Hungarian term used at the time to refer to the Slavs of the Carpathian Basin, and here probably meaning Slavonians) living in the more western parts of Somogy County, who were distinguished from the other groups of Balkan immigrants largely by their Catholic faith.
It was not only the ethnic character of the province that changed under Ottoman rule, of course. Due to the prolonged absence of the Hungarian authorities, the secular and ecclesiastical administrative structures — which had anyway been unstable — were further weakened, becoming dysfunctional and being replaced by others. New geographical terms were coined to meet the needs of everyday life, which explains why words such as tartomány [province], táj [area], and mező [field] became the prevalent toponyms. These same terms were used by the witnesses questioned during the interrogations to describe the region between Lake Balaton and the rivers Sió and Kapos, where the raids took place. However, the use of Somogyaság as a geographical term from that time is misleading, since it also included the villages of Tolna County, whose earlier affiliation had waned by then.

The most important and thoroughgoing chapter of the book explores the contemporary workings of violence, although the testimonies also shed light on the presumed motives of the perpetrators. Some offered existential reasons — the lack of supplies in the camp — as an excuse for what they had done, although in most cases their actions could be imputed simply to a desire for material profit. The responsibility of their officers was also undeniable, since these officers were frequently the instigators of and/or participants in the incidents, or they turned a blind eye to what was happening in exchange for a share of the loot. During the village raids, the border troops who were in the king’s pay and the armed men of the manorial military settlements used various kinds of verbal and physical coercion to force the victims to hand over their valuables. The apparently routine self-defense mechanisms of the victims were equally varied, ranging from spontaneous flight through entreaty to armed resistance. This last response, however, was doomed to failure due to the superior strength of the looters, thus such cases are rather the exception. To the author’s credit, he draws attention to the different gender roles in these confrontations. When the attacks took place, the men were typically absent from the settlement, or hurriedly abandoned it, thus obliging the women of the family to endure the violence. The most likely explanation for this is that it was the men’s task to hide and save the livestock kept on the outskirts of the settlement, which were the assets that ensured the family’s survival, while the women verbally attempted to moderate the looters’ aggression, thus essentially acting as the first line of defense. In fact, the victims were frequently able to name the perpetrators after the event, which is no surprise given that they were often recognized as former fellow villagers. In many cases, the latter had left their native villages due to conflict with the local community and had become soldiers in the border fortresses. These Hungarian, Rác, and Tót armed men played a key role in the attacks on the Ottoman-held villages, due to their familiarity with the area. The presence and importance of the Southern Slavs serving in the Hungarian border posts has only recently been recognized by historians, partly as a result of the studies by Gábor Máté.

The chapter on the crime scenes and stolen goods introduces the reader to the built environment, the material culture, and, implicitly, the living conditions of the Hungarian and Balkan populations. As the title of the volume suggests, the greatest losses were caused by the driving away of the most valuable and easily mobilizable cattle and livestock (sheep and goats). These latter were typically looted in greater numbers in the Rác villages, while in the Hungarian villages they were of far less importance than cattle, which were the main meat-producing livestock of the time. The source suggests that the cattle were kept in farmyards (szálláskert) at some distance from the settlements, rather than near the dwellings. Horses were typically taken along with carts, thus they were primarily used for transportation. Grazing livestock were easy to sell in Royal Hungary. After several transactions, the illegal means by which they had
been obtained were shrouded in obscurity and they became almost impossible to trace. Other stolen goods were typically taken not from the houses but rather from secret stores and cellars, from which the raiders looted not only produce and wine but also other goods, mostly clothing, work tools, and cash. During the raids, which often lasted for several days, the soldiers not only took the goods but also consumed, or destroyed them for no reason, making it impossible for the victims to survive. These examples apparently disprove the axiom accepted in the literature that the Rác villages in this region were inferior to the surrounding Hungarian settlements in terms of their economic potential.

No less edifying is the analysis of the ways in which the victims attempted to trace and recover their stolen goods, to obtain compensation for them, and to bring the perpetrators to justice. It is certain that the claimants very rarely recovered their valuables, or even a part of them. In most cases, the injured parties returned home unsuccessful, although there are even examples in the records of how the quest for justice cost several people their lives. Their failure was due not only to the resistance put up by the border fortress soldiers, who formed an era-specific social group (“the Valiant Order”), and the counter-interests of the large number of people involved. The explanation lies not so much in the context of (historical) ethnography as in that of the history of the age. The source has captured the changing system of relations at the moment of its disappearance, when the mechanisms of survival, ingrained in successive generations over a century and a half of Ottoman rule, were no longer functional, while the new sphere of power, whose labyrinthine paths had to be negotiated by the individual, was still in its infancy. The common people of the time were unable to find their place in a system of norms that had been turned on its head almost overnight. The volume presented here conjures up the colorful everyday life and somber mood of this vanishing world. Besides its innovative approach, Gábor Máté’s insightful descriptions of the period and his captivating narrative style make this a truly exceptional monograph.