Bel's Notitia of the County of Nitra in Relation to the History of Transylvania

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Matthias Bel, the author of a monumental work charting the history of the individual counties of the Kingdom of Hungary naturally did not omit the history of Transylvania. Based on a selected part of the Notitia of the County of Nitra, the subject of the given paper is to point out its connection with the history of Transylvania.

Keywords: Matthias Bel, Notitia, Nitra County, Transylvania

In 1714, Matthias Bel (1684–1749), a Lutheran pastor, pedagogue, philologist and historian, started to flirt with the idea of documenting the history of the Kingdom of Hungary. This pioneering decision was supported by his careful study of archival and literary sources. By the end of the 1720s, during his pedagogical work at an evangelical college, he asked his students to fill in a questionnaire he had prepared, based on the example of his compatriot from Ružomberok, Cristopher Parschiti. The questionnaire was also filled in by his academic colleagues. Afterwards, Bel was accused of espionage and he had to defend his actions in front of the palatine, Miklós Pálffy. After convincing him of his innocence, and based on Pálffy's intercession, Bel presented his academic work to the emperor, Charles VI. The working title of his book was *Hungariae antiquae et novae prodromus* and he published it in 1732 in Norimberg.[1]

Bel realized that completing such a vast project would take an enormous effort, both on his part and that of his potential colleagues. Therefore, he started to focus on one particular area – a historical-geographical description of the Hungarian counties.

He submitted the first volume of the impressive *Notitia Hungariae novae historico-geographica* to the emperor at a solemn audience with him in May 1735. In November 1736, the emperor was also given a second volume by Bel. The third volume was published in 1737 and the fourth not until 1742. [2]

The first volume described the County of Bratislava. The second started with a description of the County of Bratislava (Pozsony County), continued with the counties of Turiec, Zvolen and Liptov (Turóc County, Zólyom County, Liptó County). The third volume included the counties of Piešťany, Piliš and Šolt (Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun County). The fourth part, which he managed to publish, discussed the counties of Novohrad, Tekov, Nitra, Hont and Small Hont (Nógrád County, Bars County, Nyitra County, Hont County, Moson County). The description of Szepes County was published in Prodromus (the introduction to Bel's Notitia); descriptions of other counties were left in manuscripts.

The structure of the mentioned descriptions is admirably unified.[3] The texts are divided into general and specific parts. The general part covers a geographical description of the counties' borders, natural features, population, offices and important noble family lines. The second part contains the history of royal towns, descriptions of castles and manor houses, small towns and villages. At the end of each county description, there is a table displaying distances to the most important European towns.

The subject of my research is the text which deals with the history of Nitra's castle and the town of Nitra *(Arx et oppidum Nitria)* after the Battle of Mohács.

The eleventh chapter is quite rich in content and is divided into five parts. The first one, called *Recentiores arcis et oppidi conversiones – The updated history of the castle and the town*, deals with the post-Mohács period. The part *sub Botskajo – for Botskay* notes the events related to the castle and the town at the time of Botskay's uprising. The third part, named *sub Bethlenio et Rákoczio – for Betlen and Rákóczi,* maps the events during the rebellions. In

the part *capitur a Turcis – occupied by Turks,* Bel describes the capture of the castle by the Turks. Finally, the general de Souchès *(vindicatur a Sufa – protected by de Souchès)* recaptures the castle from the Turks.

This history is quite distant from our time: with this preface the author opens the eleventh chapter in which he mainly records the events connected with the anti-Habsburg uprisings.

Bel's description starts with a narration of the period after the Battle of Mohács. Bel presumes that *Nitra was occupied by John Zápolya (Johannes Zapolya), because John entrusted the Bishop's residence to Valentin Török (Valentinus Turcus)*[4] *– a man who was secular and experienced in soldiery. Then, after making peace, when Nitra came back to Ferdinand (Ferdinandus), he gave the town and the whole dominion as a present to Alexei Thurzo (Alexius Thurzo).* This happened in 1534. Bel's detailed information about it is provided in the paragraph discussing the bishops of Nitra. Within the description he refers to the work of Miklós Istvánffy, *Historiarum de Rebus Ungaricis Libri XXXIV*.[5]

The eleventh chapter contains an incomplete discussion of part of the history of Nitra, during which *Botskay complicated political relationships in Hungary*. At that time, the bishop was Ferenc Forgách (Franciscus Forgách), *a man of unusual devotion to the emperor*. Bel describes a siege of the town by the forces of Ferenc Rédei (Franciscus Rédej).[6] They were described as *men of robbery, not of weapons or soldiery*. After the rebellions, Nitra experienced disastrous consequences. From May 1605, Turkish forces under Rédei's command besieged Nitra. According to Bel, Forgách asked commander Kolonic (Kollonitsius) for help. The bishop managed to repel the attacks of the rebels, but after some of Forgách's followers switched allegiance to Botskay's followers, the castle and the town were taken by the rebels. Afterwards, the bishop and his cathedral chapter left Nitra. [7]

The castle experienced a similar fate at the time of Betlen's war: with these words Bel introduces the passage on the plundering of Nitra by Betlen's forces, quoting František Kazy (Franciscus Kazy).[8] *John Telegdy (Johannes Telegdius), the town's bishop, with some Hungarians and Germans acting on behalf of the emperor, was defending against and withstanding a continuous siege. Finally, unable to resist the onslaught, he unwillingly gave up, ceded the castle to Betlen and left for Vienna...After Betlen (Bethlenius) plundered the castle and collected the crops, he left for Trnava (Tyrnavia).* Bel dates the taking of the castle by Betlen's followers at 1620. They controlled it until 1622, when, after signing the peace of Mikulov, the castle was given back to the ownership of Bishop Telegdy.[9]

Later on in the text, there is a sizeable time gap. According to Bel, in 1663 when the Turks conquered Nové Zámky (Ujvarinum), Nitra entered a crucial period of its history. Based on references to Wager's work, the events are recorded in quite some detail.

At the very end of the eleventh chapter Bel mentions "a recent rebellion", referring to Ferenc Rákóczi's uprising, more specifically his defeat at the Battle of Trenčín (1708).

During the course of the abovementioned passages, Bel relies on several sources. Quotations from many works as well as quotations from documents represent 30 per cent of the whole text. Such a number of quotations testifies to Bel's effort to provide an objective and comprehensive view of historical events. The quotations help to illustrate Bel's interpretation of a particular historical event, as well as to build the basis of a historical explanation itself. Besides the works of historians, Bel refers to his own work, namely, other parts of the Notitia.

There are some places where Bel implies agreement with the authors quoted by not commenting. Sometimes, he offers an opinion expressing doubts or partial disagreement with their opinion or regret for the incompleteness of the quoted section, and at other times he discusses the quotation and comes to new conclusions or makes his own assumptions. In approaching difficult questions, as a historian he tries to introduce as many opinions as possible and avoid premature, subjective conclusions. He often ends chapters with the words "*the reader can draw their own conclusions.*"

The extensive range of Bel's sources is demonstrated in the *Notes* of Notitia where I came across a great number of works by Czech, Polish, Austrian, German, Croatian and other historians. Regarding local historical works, Bel used almost every work by older and younger historians, mostly his contemporaries.

It is necessary to recognize that Matthias Bel collected and digested much information in the part of Notitia which I have studied and discussed. His description is engaging, but even though there are some gaps, his work may be considered an important starting point.

Notes:

1. See: TIBENSKÝ, Ján. *Veľká ozdoba Uhorska. Dielo, život a doba Mateja Bela.* Bratislava: Tatran, 1984, p 149.
2. See: TIBENSKÝ, ref. 1, pp 168 – 169.
3. To the structure of the Notitia see RÁCOVÁ, Katarína. *Trenčín pohľadom Mateja Bela.* Nitra: FF UKF, 2012, s. 16-22. ISBN 978-80-558-0053-0.
4. Valentin Török (1504?-1550), follower of *John Zápolya*, later of Ferdinand Habsburg
5. Miklós Istvánffy (1538 – 1615), Hungarian historian, author of *Historiarum de Rebus Ungaricis Libri XXXIV.*
6. Valentin Török (1504?-1550), follower of *John Zápolya*, later of Ferdinand Habsburg
7. Miklós Istvánffy (1538 – 1615), Hungarian historian, author of *Historiarum de Rebus Ungaricis Libri XXXIV.*
8. Ferenc Rédei (died in 1621), military and imperial high official.
9. See.: MRVA, Ivan. *Nitra v tieni polmesiaca.* In MARSINA, Richard (ed.). *Nitra v slovenských dejinách.* Martin: Publishing house MS, 2002, s. 256 - 266. ISBN 80-7090-625-1.