



BOOK REVIEWS

Pécs 1663. Evliya Cselebi és az első részletes városleírás.

(Források Pécs történetéből 4.)

[Evlia Çelebi and the First Detailed Description of the City.

(Pécs Historical Sources 4)]. By Balázs Sudár. Pécs: Pécs Története Alapítvány–Kronosz, 2012. 180 pp.

Recent historical research into everyday life among the three parts of divided Hungary during the early modern period has found that the differences were much less profound than previously thought. Examples are the rates and means of taxation, and relations with authority. Even the religious changes brought by the Reformation, economic trends, and cultural affairs developed in almost exactly the same way in the territory occupied by the Ottomans as in the part of the kingdom retained by the Habsburgs. Where there were considerable divergences, however, was in the history of the towns. When we consider such well-defended Transdanubian towns such as Sopron or Szombathely, or leaf through books on the early modern history of towns in Upper Hungary, the differences from the stories of Szeged, Temesvár (Timișoara, Romania) and Pécs are striking. There is also a palpable difference in Hungarian historiography. András Kubinyi developed a standardized system for researching medieval urban history, but there is neither a standard method nor a consensus view for the early modern period. There are still two “parallel worlds” of historical research into the towns of the period, one dealing with those in Christian-held lands and the other with those under Ottoman control. As things stand, the prospect of a synthesis is remote. The differences in the available sources are of course a contributory factor. Special abilities are needed to treat the distinctive types of sources on the life of towns in the occupied territories, especially those generated by Ottoman administration, and this inevitably requires the involvement of Ottomanists. The number and quality of sources changed, but some of the towns which passed into Ottoman control are in a more fortunate position in one respect: the Turkish traveler Evliya Çelebi described them in his memoirs, thus leaving a special source for posterity. In this book, Balázs Sudár presents to us Evliya’s description of Pécs, which is really a work of literature, and requires very thorough background knowledge to be used as a source on urban history.

The early modern history of Pécs divides into two parts. There is a relative abundance of material on the sixteenth century, permitting a fairly good reconstruction of this period. Surprisingly, the seventeenth century is much more poorly served in this respect. The Ottoman sources have almost completely disappeared, and gleaning nuggets of information from family correspondence is like panning for gold, demanding much patience and luck. One of the few contemporary developments with a positive legacy in terms of sources was the reviving interest of the Catholic Church. It is against this paucity of information that we have to assess Evliya's account of his travels, almost the sole narrative source on most of the towns in the occupied territory. Even though Pécs is uniquely recorded in Pál Esterházy's observations during Miklós Zrínyi's siege of 1664, when Christian soldiers entered the city, the value of Evliya's work is undiminished.

Evliya's writing has been accessible to Hungarian readers since 1904, and his description of Pécs since 1908. Its value has only been recognized very recently, however, because fragmentary translations and the lack of familiarity with Islamic historical literature were insurmountable barriers for local historians. Indeed Sudár has chosen to re-translate the text rather than patch up earlier attempts. The resulting book bears out the wisdom of his decision. The desired effect is largely achieved with explanatory notes, without which even an improved text would have remained "dead." The author himself was surprised to find that "the explanations are seven or eight times the length of Evliya's text. In the process, many new details have come to light, and we find that Evliya was a much better-informed author than previously thought: the superfluous-seeming oriental flourishes often carry factual information." The foundations of this translation are Sudár's linguistic and literary erudition, through which Evliya's chapter on Pécs has become a true description of the city.

The first chapter of the book introduces the author and his work in the light of the latest international literature. Evliya was born in Istanbul in 1611. Although his family held high posts in the empire, he always avoided a political career. He started off as a scholar, and was already a very well-read youth when a dream prompted him to set off on his travels; exploration the Muslim world then became his life's work. His surviving work tells us little about his own life. All that remains are a few inscriptions painted in his own hand in Adana in Anatolia, Kyustendil in Bulgaria and Foča in Bosnia. Most of what we know of him comes from his own writing. For instance, he frequently traveled to Transylvania on diplomatic missions. His uncle, Melek Ahmed, Pasha of Silistria from 1656,

frequently interfered in Hungarian politics, and it was by his side that Evliya came to the Carpathian Basin. His curiosity and thirst for knowledge got him into interesting situations. In 1660, he met Miklós Zrínyi in Csáktornya (Čakovec, Croatia), and in 1665, he was a member of the Ottoman delegation to Vienna to negotiate the Peace of Vasvár. He also visited Kassa (Košice, Slovakia) and Déva (Deva, Romania). One question regarding the author remains unanswered in Sudár's fascinating description: in the Muslim world how much accepted and practiced was the humanist ethos of an educated person renouncing a worldly career for the sake of scholarly enquiry?

Sudár gives a thorough overview of Evliya's work on pages 24–30, from which the need for the translation becomes unmistakably apparent. A quarter of the text relating to Pécs had never previously been published, and the rest was peppered with mistranslations. This prevented the texts which were available in Hungarian from being properly interpreted, resulting in distrust of Evliya's work. His description of Pécs is in fact highly detailed and almost certainly authentic, recording his own experiences there in 1663. Taking up seven pages in the modern edition, the text is hardly less than what Evliya devoted to Sarajevo, for example, so that the description is not a negligible part of his work.

The account follows Evliya's usual scheme. First he describes the foundation and conquest of the city. After that comes the architectural description, accompanied by the author's conclusions. The latter show Evliya to be a sophisticated observer. Sudár well elucidates the context, and displays impressive background knowledge. For example, in connection with the mosque of Kasim Pasha, Evliya mentions Sultan Selim's mosque in Istanbul. Indeed, the buildings are very similar, differing only in dimensions. In an important subchapter, Sudár explains the background to Evliya's numerical data, the area of the Turkish traveler's work which usually attracts the harshest criticism. Sudár has himself calculated all of the figures for Pécs, and settles the matter satisfactorily. Evliya gave an accurate figure for the number of mosques, but in general the figures should not be taken too seriously, as they were only intended to convey orders of magnitude.

The central chapter of the book is the source itself, occupying pages 49–88. The translation flows well, but most important is the critical apparatus. There are nearly 170 explanatory notes, and it is these that really bring seventeenth-century Pécs to life. I will highlight only one or two from the wealth of new details. Evliya laid great stress on the Greek tradition as regards Pécs. He considered that it had been built in the time of King Alexander the Great, to plans by Plato.

He also mentions the grave of the latter as being there, which of course is not true, but offers a glimpse into the worldview of the local Turks. They saw the Ottoman Empire as the inheritor of Alexander the Great's lands, and the Sultan as his direct descendant. The conquest of Hungary and their presence in Pécs was therefore a justified recapture. Recognition of this, for which Sudár takes the credit, allows us to understand the mention of Plato and Alexander in Pécs. He also itemizes all of the places in Evliya's travelogue which the author calls the "Garden of Irem." In the few passages where he mentions the earthly paradise of Muslim mythology, he includes Pécs, because he had a high estimation of the Tettye Hill above the city.

The second half of the book is an appendix, in fact an expansion of twenty of the footnotes. First he discusses the circumstances of the fall of the city and settles the contradictory statements found in the historical literature. The information he draws on is not new, but his review is very worthwhile. The same is true for the biographies of the major Ottoman dignitaries in the history of Pécs, because until now we have only known about Kasim, and almost nothing about Memi Pasha or Jakovali Hassan. The latter was the subject of a study by the author a few years ago. In the absence of a modern Ottoman cultural history, we know very little about early modern Muslim culture. This underlines the importance of Sudár's account of the various orders of monks and his substantial contribution to the question of the relations between the medieval university and the Muslim colleges. School students and general readers may also be interested in the chapter on Muslim mythology and legends, with sections on the Garden of Irem, and the history-of-ideas aspects of Plato's alleged presence in Pécs. At the end of the book is a glossary, a bibliography and an index to help researchers navigate through the text.

Sudár's book is not an urban history in the strict sense, and does not set out to be. *Pécs 1663-ban* is a scholarly source publication with critical apparatus that helps the reader understand Evliya's text. The presence in the title of the year is misleading, because the author touches on nearly every part of Pécs's early modern history. It may thus be seen as preparatory work for a major monograph, and also a very useful source for anybody interested in the history of the city.

Translated by Alan Campbell.

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