

# MÁTYÁS BÉL, A POLYGRAPH IN HUNGARY IN THE 18th CENTURY

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From the middle of the 16th century, Hungary had to endure very hard times, quite until the early years of the 18th century. The country was torn into three parts: the western and northern regions, ruled by the Hapsburg kings, Transylvania and the north-eastern regions associated with it, and the southern and central regions, occupied by the Turks. Called Hapsburg-Hungary, the first region was more than once driven into uprising by the high-handed rule of the kings residing in another country and heeding the counsel of foreign advisers. Along the border of the territories under Turkish rule, where the newly-built border fortresses stood, fight never ceased between Hungarians and Turks, sapping the nation's blood, ruining much of the countryside and claiming most of the financial resources. Political division was deepened by denominational separation: the majority of the population had joined Protestantism, as a result of which an ever widening gulf arose within the population from the middle of the 17th century onwards, when the Protestants were driven back by the counter-reformation supported by the royal court. In the wake of the great peasant revolt in 1514, there were deep conflicts in feudal society. Most of the landlords developed own estates encroaching on peasant property, forcing their serfs to perform statute duty and imposing payment on them in kind and money alike. This was made possible by the fact that the peasantry had been deprived of their freedom of movement, thus having had been made defenceless dependants under the heel of their masters.

Amidst the ordeals of the country, the Muses were mostly silent. In the second half of the 15th century, during the rule of Mathias Corvin, Hungary was still in the lead of cultural progress in Europe. In the period that had passed since then, however, the image of the Hungarians deteriorated among all kinds of foreigners. That was felt especially keenly by the Hungarians from the end of the 17th century onwards, when rebuilding of the country could at last be started after so many years of destruction. Those of them who went open-eyed about the world, had to experience with bitterness that in the view of several travellers and scientists the Hungarians were somewhat indifferent to the general impression created by the nation in world opinion. In the eyes of some foreigners, the Hungarians sank to barbarism. Nobody was more aware of the

disadvantages arising from misjudgement, and mainly nobody else was more ready to refute them convincingly by offering a correct picture of Hungary and its people to international publicity, than Mátyás Bél. He was born in 1684 at Ocova (Očova), county Zólyom. His father was a Slovakian butcher, and his mother a Hungarian; as proven by his enthusiasm towards the Hungarian language and the research work done later on its past, his mother tongue was Hungarian. The circumstances of his childhood did not promise much of a scientific career. His parents recognized his intelligency early enough, and did as much as they could to make good use of it by enrolling their son at a Lutheran school, as followed from their religion. Having had visited seven schools in succession, the young Mátyás only finished his primary and secondary schools at the age of 20. Not his diligence and persistence were lacking, and even less his abilities. His vicissitudes in schooling reflected the state of Lutheran education of the age. Maintained partly by private people, the Lutheran schools were always on the verge of extinction under the pressure of counter-reformation; the mostly undertrained teachers tried to cane at least a little knowledge into their pupils; Bél remembered with bitterness of his cruel schoolmasters even many years after his school years. It was only in his last year at school that he came into the hands of a good teacher, who then helped him to make up most of the arrears and laid the foundation of his university studies.

Under the conditions created by counter-reformation, the Lutherans could not have any institution of higher education in Hungary. Consequently, the Protestant students went almost in a traditional way to Germany, the Netherlands, England and Switzerland. The needy Bél succeeded in collecting enough donations to go to German territory, to the relatively new but already famous Halle University. The good reputation of the institution was owed first of all to A. H. Francke, since it was mainly his activity that had made Halle the radiating centre of pietism. Bél chose the ministry, but beside theological studies he had ample chance to master languages, become engrossed in history and get acquainted with the political sciences just being developed there. All these studies greatly assisted him in developing his scientific career.

The talent of Mátyás Bél was quickly spotted by his professors in the course of his studies at Halle (1704—1707), and he was asked to stay in Germany, where he had good prospects. However, he listened to the call of his fatherland, although Rákóczi's war of independence had created fairly uncertain conditions there. Besztercebánya, where Bél was given the job of deputy schoolmaster in 1708, belonged to Rákóczi's land, but a little while later the town had to open its gates to the imperial army, and the change of rule almost cost Bél his life. The fame of Bél's successful pedagogical activity made the Lutheran community of Pozsony in 1714 to invite him to head their badly deteriorated school. And the elders of the Pozsony community have not had to feel disappointed in their expectations, because the Lutheran secondary school soon began its brightest period in the town which had been Hungary's capital since the Turkish invaders had

captured Buda. The Lutheran aristocracy, and even some Calvinists, were anxious to send their sons there, and BéL was soon given the name “rector ac instaurator scholae”. He followed the progress of the school with attention even after his election to the pulpit of the Lutheran congregation at Pozsony in 1719. He remained at the post until his death in 1749.

Pietism left a deep mark on both the religious and human behaviour of BéL the pastor and teacher. This is readily apparent from his religious books that have appeared in print: translation of the Bible, prayer-books, a summary of Lutheran doctrines, translation of various works encouraging to do Christian good deeds, and several forewords to the religious books of other authors. Moreover, he published “Imitation of Christ” by Thomas Kempis, with his introduction. What strikes the reader in his works is the spirit of tolerance—something quite unique in the age. His deeply religious feelings and true devotion stood out against the forbidding and outwardly dogmatism of Lutheran orthodoxy, which always led to religious polemics. BéL’s whole life was imbued with living and active faith. And instead of engaging in external controversies, BéL was striving after internal renewal of the church, simultaneously being highly sensitive to the material and spiritual backwardness of people, especially of the poor. And he did not content himself with disclosing the misery, because his active faith, combined with some rationalism, induced him to lessen the squalor around him.

The spirit of pietism so apparent in BéL’s life was also felt in his pedagogical activity, which yielded plenty of fruits in reviving the schools at Besztercebánya and later on at Pozsony. He had succeeded in opening a wide horizon to the receptive minds of his pupils, furnishing them with factual knowledge instead of pressing on with the usual formal tuition that consisted mainly of memorization of words. It was not enough for him to include the traditional subjects into the curriculum, but he also gave the pupils some realistic knowledge. Beside history, some geography and natural history were taught as well, all in the spirit of patriotic education. In order to provide a firm basis for tuition, BéL had written textbooks in rhetorics, as well as grammar books in Latin, Hungarian and German; of the latter, several ones were reprinted many times even after the author’s death. He specified plans of tuition for his fellow teachers, issued written instructions, introduced meetings for the teaching staff and insisted on keeping education journals. Promotion of the mother languages was not neglected either. The methods of teaching were always adjusted to suit the comprehensive faculty of the children, whose interest was kept alive by captivating and illustrative methods, and even by experiments. In fact, even more than these, was achieved by BéL: to assist education, he established the first regularly appearing daily paper in Hungary, widening his pupils’ horizons by directing their attention to world events.

The spiritual energies of Mátyás BéL had, however, been not exhausted by the very intensive and novelty-oriented activities on the pulpit and at the teacher’s desk. He

strove after the sciences from the very beginning, and not only for changing his country's image to the better in the foreigners' mind. The principal driving force behind his scientific endeavours was his patriotism, the service to be done to his fatherland, so that also Hungary could come up with modern achievements in the realm of science. Moreover, he was also inspired by scientific ambition based on his endowments and erudition. As Bél was making headway into the realm of science, his aims became more and more profane. This is apparent from the dates of publication of his books, considering the years of first appearances in print: religious works were published from 1707 to 1729, pedagogical ones from 1717 to 1729 and scientific ones from 1713 to 1748. The mottos standing on the front pages of scientific works indicate the author's final aims very characteristically. In 1713, the pastor still wanted to serve God's glory through his work. In 1718 God was mentioned in the same breath with the world. At last, the motto chosen by the author in 1736 was "Veritate duce, comite labore", focussing the attention to search by earthly labour after truth. With laicized science prevailing over religion, also rational elements turned up in the books, pointing the way towards enlightenment.

Within the considerable linguistic abilities of Bél, who had mastered Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Slovakian and German, his attention was focussed to the characteristics of the Hungarian language. His scientific approach began by searching for the historical roots of the language, examining the available finds of runic writing and reading the ancient literary works. It is of little surprise that in his early works ("*Historiae linguae hungaricae libros duos, genesim et exodum edere parat*", 1713; "*De vetere litteratura hunno-scythica exercitatio*", 1718) Bél had adopted the contemporary idea of tracing the Hungarians from the Huns, and the latter from the Scythians. As regards his first linguistical attempts, he wanted to derive the Hungarian language from the Hebrew. Later on, he expounded the connections of the Hungarian with the Latin, German, French and Slavic languages. At last, he had to see that the Hungarian language differed from all other European languages ("*De peregrinitate linguae hungaricae meletema*", 1734), and he even noticed the relationship to the Finns.

However, the investigation on the origin of the Hungarian language had opened an even wider horizon to Bél. He indicated his intention to treat the distant past and the present state of the country as early as in the Preface of his work on linguistic history in 1718. And in that year he published in the Leipzig periodical "*Wöchentliche Postzeitung von gelehrten Neuigkeiten*" his plans to complete a great work he was already working on: "*Notitia Hungariae*". It is sufficient to cast a brief glance on the plan to see the enormity of the task he had set to himself. The treatment of Hungary's past and present was divided into three main sections: "*Hungaria antiqua*" was devoted to the period ranging from the earliest days to Árpád's conquest of Hungary, "*Hungaria media*" treated the forthcoming centuries, up to the age of the Hapsburg

kings, whereas "Hungaria nova" was intended to portray the country's condition around 1730.

"Hungaria antiqua" was still bearing the mark of the then traditional idea of national genesis, according to which the lineage had begun with the Scythians, followed by the Huns, the Avars and at last the Hungarians. It should, however, be pointed out that Bél's treatment of history included not only the successive waves of great migrations, but also the territories where the events of politics and wars had occurred. Actually, even the historical and geographical description of the countries surrounding Pannonia was included in his plan. The chapter devoted to political history was to be amplified by describing the origins, languages, customs and religions of the four main nationalities of the region. "Hungaria media" was to describe the Hungarians of the pagan aera in a similar manner, then to deal with christianization and the age of the Árpáds and further on with the epoch under Hapsburg rule. In the general section of "Hungaria nova" the chapter devoted to geography was to include the following topics: name, location, size and borders of Hungary; climate and terrain; rivers, along with their conditions of shipping and fishing; beneficial springs; spas; mineral waters; lakes; hills, forests and stock of game; mining for metal ores; salt mines; vineyards and wines; agriculture. Also the political chapter of the general section promised many interesting subjects: Hungary's privileges; coronation and honour of kings; the national arms of the country; dignitaries of the church and the state; estates of the feudal society: the higher clergy, the aristocracy, the nobility, the lower nobility, the royal free boroughs and mining towns, the six towns of the heyducks; constitutional law and form of governments; Hungary's requirements; incomes of the state; mintage; customs; nationalities and languages; serfs. At last, the author intended to take a look at the counties of Hungary in a special section of the book, first the ones situated between the rivers Danube and Tisza, then east of the river Tisza and west of the river Danube, paying special attention to the following characteristics: situation, size, borders, population, fertility; the individual districts with their towns, market-towns, castles, major villages, rivers, spas, mineral waters, lakes and roads; the origin, privileges, coats-of-arms, history, advantages and disadvantages, climate, food supply and customs of the individual towns; magistrates of counties and the leading families, possibly with their genealogies and coats-of-arms; big estates.

Five years later, Bél published the final plan of his work in a decorative volume ("Hungariae antiquae et novae prodromus", Nürnberg 1723), so as to make it known in wider circles. The plan contained no major changes but, as it was apparent from the title, the author had regarded it as proper to drop "Hungaria media", and to insert "Hungaria nova" right after "Hungaria antiqua". The latter's chapters had been modified and extended: geographical information on the Scythes and the Huns was transferred into a separate geographical section, and a number of studies of linguistic

history were listed in the Appendix. In accordance with the modified plan, "Notitia Hungariae novae" was to be divided into a historical section and a geographical one, instead of the original general and special sections. The former was to treat the historical events by the rule of the kings starting with Saint Stephen, omitting the political information originally planned. And as regards the geographical section, it was to describe the name, situation, size, borders and internal division of the country, and to continue with the physical properties (situation, natural endowments) and political characteristics (population, magistrate) of the individual counties, along with the necessary information on towns, castles, villages, estates and main roads. Thereafter, the physical characteristics of the entire country were to be described, in accordance with the geographical chapter of the general section, but extended to caves, natural medicines etc. Also the modified plan of "Hungaria nova" was to include an appendix: the costumes and customs of the Hungarians.

The decision to drop the drafting of the chapters on constitutional law, internal politics and social strata, leaving it to a later date, was made in the course of writing the books. As indicated in "Prodromus", the documents relating to the diplomatic and genealogical sections had to be set aside because the material at hand was too much already even without them. Moreover, it was obvious that still more material was to come in, and the author had to make up his mind as how to economize on time and mental power. He then decided to concentrate on "Hungaria nova", trying to fuse the historical section already completed as much as possible with the description of the individual counties and towns, thus actually creating historical geography. That intention was only strengthened by the relative scarcity of essential historical sources on Hungarian history—a kind of hitch that had occurred every then and now. There were no national archives at that time, and—protecting their possessory rights—private persons kept their documents locked up, refusing even researchers to take a look at them. Some of the narrative sources, and right the ones of fundamental importance, were had only from hearsay at the time. A number of them were listed too in the Preface to "Prodromus", with an appeal to anybody safeguarding them to publish or put those valuable documents to Bél's disposal. For it was a strong conviction of Bél that no authentic picture could be drawn on Hungary's past until important archives were closed to researchers and manuscripts of great promise were hidden. "Give me two hundred documents dated from two centuries of our past", Bél was saying, "and I shall produce unparalleled results on the essence of the nation's history. Documents are to historians the same as the Bible is to theologians, law codes are to jurists and common sense is to philosophers". Bél not only gave detailed indication on which groups of sources should be saved from oblivion or final disappearance, inducing everybody to let their historical sources become public property, but he also deserves credit for having had organized regular collecting of Hungary's historical sources. His

efforts in that field showed the following essential characteristics, as opposed to the ecclesiastical data collection that had been the only such action previously: saving secular relics from annihilation, absence of any religious bias, objectivity, comprehensiveness, absence of prejudice, a clear-headed critical attitude towards documents of doubtful origin or validity, and publication of all documents that had proven to be authentic. As regards the narrative sources, Bél's work "*Adparatus ad historiam Hungariae*" (1735–1746) was the first major study of historical sources in Hungary. Beside that excellent primer, he had a major share in a huge source edition published under the name of J. G. Schwandtner and entitled "*Scriptores rerum hungaricarum veteres ac genuini*" (Viennae 1746–1748 and further editions); also that work is still in use. He intended to incorporate the most important local documents into the topographical descriptions in "*Notitia*" either by full text or in an adapted form.

And that intention was continuously realized, because the extensively ramified and gigantical plan of "*Notitia*" had sound foundations. "*Prodromus*" had become such a thick volume because, by a completely new method, Bél had inserted several complete chapters with plenty of notes into the text of the plan. Moreover, he referred to other sections that had been ready for publication, and indicated that there was not a single part without at least a sound basis to set out from. However, having had nearly come to nought once, his work met with difficulties owing to various external hindrances. The observers of later ages could not understand this phenomenon without knowing more about the age, with its political, religious and social contrasts.

Published in a German periodical, the first plan did not went down unnoticed in Hungary either. Some ill-wishers of Bél then took that opportunity to accuse him of preparing foreign invasion as a mercenary of some enemy country by collecting data on borderlands and fortifications. Those people went so far as spreading news about Bél's imprisonment on account of spying. But that charge was soon refuted in consequence of two original methods adopted by Bél for data collecting about historical geography of the country, a topic of new type totally unknown to wide circles. Partly, Bél issued the best pupils of the Pozsony secondary school with questionnaires, asking them to collect answers from their parents, ministers, one-time teachers during their summer holidays. Partly travelled all over the country himself, and also sent his co-workers, to gather data and impressions on the spot. In order to ensure safe working conditions. Bél asked for permission for data collection first from County Pozsony, in 1720. The condition of issuing a permit was that Bél and his co-workers were to carry the town's passports, and regularly report at the district administrators and the bailiffs of the big estates; moreover, they were not to meddle in religious or other affairs. The Esztergom archiepiscopal office, however, was totally unconvinced of the harmless character of the undertaking, and demanded that the entire action be nipped off in the bud so that the Lutheran priest and his envoy could not stupefy the ignorant people and strengthen the heretics in their deviations, thus

stirring trouble in the country and causing damage to the Roman Catholic church. The counter-action was effective: County Pozsony was soon ordered by the Royal Chancery not to issue a passport to the Lutheran priest without a royal consent, because his intention to roam the country as a historian had only been a fake. It was ordered that Bél be questioned at once about his nationality, the duration of his presence in the country and the person or authority who had ordered him to describe the conditions prevailing in Hungary. "That priest" was to stay at home until answers could be obtained on these questions. On receiving the summons, Bél had to understand with a painful surprise that not only his well-intentioned endeavour had been completely misunderstood, but even he himself had fell under suspicion. At first, he answered the questions with the peaceful dignity of an independent scientist standing above narrow interests, saying that scholars had the right by natural law and common law to choose such a topic for research. As a result, Bél was summoned before the Palatine, vice-regent of Hungary. However, Palatine Pálffy was sympathetic to his case on seeing the finished chapters of Bél's work, and approved the plan. That decision then opened the way to Bél up to the royal court, and after several audiences before the king he was even awarded, and given permission to commend the renewed plan of "Notitia" to him. Under such favourable conditions was "Prodromus" published in 1723, so as to prove to all the world the large-scale and well-founded major scientific character of the undertaking being superior to all kinds of petty and false reprehension.

Thus the author could carry on with his work with the highest backing-up, although it did not mean that all hindrances had been put out of the way. In the feudal world, where the fate of the individual was determined by his social standing, and in an age when the gravest sins against humanity were committed on religious accounts, there were many people who remained suspicious of, or even hostile towards, the Protestant pastor of peasant origin and his work risen from private initiative to the rank of national undertaking. The Jesuits who had already compiled a collection of documents by denominational evaluation for religious purposes, were downright hostile to the outstanding results achieved by Bél in disclosing and publishing secular documents and sources. Their efforts resulted in removing Bél from the head of the first Hungarian regular newspaper "Nova Posoniensia", thus putting an end to it. The entire Roman Catholic church, as well as the big estate owners, could not accustom themselves to Bél's intention to collect data also from the territories belonging to them.

Even if in the beginning Bél had failed to recognize the highly sensitive character of his undertaking, and the many interests it was to cross, he had no doubt about the magnitude of the work and the difficulties involved in it. It was clear to him right away that he could not succeed without co-workers. His firm conviction that it was absolutely necessary to base every plan on the sound foundation of sources compelled him from the beginning to turn to other scientists, well versed in the subject, because at



first: very few original sources were available for him. This applied especially to "Notitia", which had a really extensive and colourful plan. A number of co-workers had already been listed in "Prodromus", some of them having had contributed to the convincing character of the plan through fully completed sections, and Bél expected to win new aspirants for his case right by publishing an even better plan. Thus he not only asked all scientists to publish their valuable sources or place them at his disposal, but expected them to contribute to his work. The rather faint echo received to the appeal to assist him regarding the history of the Hungarian language was not very encouraging in that respect, in spite of Bél's promise to give everybody his due, and share scientific recognition with all co-workers. It must be admitted, however, that his own high ambitions strongly reduced the value of that pledge later on. Some of the manuscripts sent to him were either locked up in his cabinet for good, or published in a re-phrased form, in Bél's excellent Latin style, and under his name too. Nobody spoke about plagiarism then, of course, since the question of authorship was seen in that age in a different light. In any case, Bél's attitude to heighten his own international fame by all means made others refrain from co-operation, and contributed to the failure of his efforts to establish a Hungarian academy of sciences.

Bél must have had precious little hope to gain co-operation from foreign scientists in writing historical geography of Hungary, and more or less the same applied to Hungarian Catholics. The co-operation of Hungarian Calvinists could be hoped for with more reason. Since 1724, a major state office entitled *Consilium Regium Locumtenentiale* had been functioning in Pozsony under the heading of Palatine Pálffy, and later on of Prince Francis of Lothringia, the husband of Maria Theresia, and Bél had succeeded in establishing some form of relation with it. Owing to those connections, Bél was visited not only by Lutheran aristocrats, but also Calvinist ones, asking for his advice on how to protect the rights of their churches against despotic measures. Thus Bél could base on the help of protestants in general, some of whom had been able to undertake relatively high governmental functions in the years of religious tolerance during Rákóczi's war of independence. Most of the co-workers had come from the ranks of the Lutheran surgeons and teachers of the towns in Northern Hungary, and some of them contributed to "Prodromus" by supplying complete sections.

Beside the intellectuals living far away from Pozsony and occasionally contributing to Bél's work mainly in natural history, he had to have a team of close co-workers to cope with the considerable amount of far-reaching work, and it must be stressed that Bél deserves credit for having had established such a highly capable scientific team of researchers. And he had succeeded in that in spite of the fact that even the Lutherans were divided to orthodox believers and pietist ones. The former had gained the upper hand in 1707, and from then on they dealt severely with the latter. In order to be able to carry on with his work, Bél did not take a stand for pietism, but that attitude left

its mark on his entire activity and behaviour so deeply that he could not entirely escape from the attacks of the dogmatists, and had simultaneously lost the support of the adherents of orthodoxy, and even of the young theologians coming home from Wittenberg University, the second most popular German university after Halle. On the other hand, he received much more support from the best of his own disciples. In the field of history, his best supporters were his son, Károly András Bél, professor at Leipzig University in later times, and J. Tomka-Szászky; on the site examinations to collect and treat national customs and methods of peasant husbandry all over the country was mainly the task of J. Matolai, whereas valuable documents were sent for him from private archives by S. Dobai Székely. It deserves special mentioning how clever he was in guiding his co-workers towards the fields best suiting their abilities, teaching them how to search for reliable sources, assess them critically and make the best use of them. It is still surprising to see that all of his disciples based their work on original sources, and yet they were so much at home in classical literature, including poetry, and how accurately they quoted authors, ancient and contemporary alike. It is so much the more striking because they had no central library, and beside the set of books collected by Bél, they had access to only two libraries. In the field of natural history, the books of a famous surgeon in Pozsony, K. Rayger, offered them much information, whereas historical works were available from a legal scientist, I. P. Munkátsy, who had a good private library with many classics at Nagyszombat, in the vicinity of Pozsony. Although being a nobleman and belonging to another denomination, Munkátsy did not spare his books, but sent his well-guarded treasures to Pozsony by the cartful. He was, however, an exception, and most of the noblemen and the Catholics disliked the idea that "Notitia" be completed, whereas the circle of possible co-workers was drawn tight by the disaccord within the ranks of Lutherans. All these problems not only made Bél cautious in his dealings, but also demanded adaptation to the conditions in order to be able to attain his major scientific objective: the completion of "Notitia".

The fact that in order to escape from his enemies trying to wreck his scientific plans and even destroy his existence Bél had to appeal to the king's power only required a certain degree of accommodation, whatever difficulties it had created for him. The order issued to the counties to supply him with data and furnish the information required for his historical-geographical work would had been a good new in itself, but it had yielded hardly any results, and for even that meagre outcome Bél had to pay a heavy price: he was obliged to present his manuscript to the very county head whose county it was dealing with. In the course of the procedure of giving opinion of the manuscripts did it became obvious that most of the counties regarded Bél's activity with incomprehension mixed with distrust. In some counties, the nobility was afraid of having to pay more tax and raise more soldiers if realistic data would be published on their communities. In other places, the entire undertaking was regarded

as the registration of noblemen's estates, but it was stressed under a single breath that noblemen could not be obliged to prove their right to their possessions. In yet other places, the additional work involved in Bél's undertaking was found too burdensome, and often it became clear that in many counties there were no appropriately informed officials who could give the right answers. As a consequence, the answers came in very slowly from the counties, delaying the completion and publication of "Notitia". And even the answers sent back to Bél were mostly of not much use. Instead of answering in merit, several counties objected to the large number of errors and omissions found in the manuscript, saying that it were cheaper to draft a new text. And even if a county had made concrete remarks on Bél's manuscript, the useful ones were quite insignificant beside the objections and the points requesting omissions, especially in matters of religion. Bél was downright reprimanded for having had set the peaceful co-existence of three denominations in a village belonging to the Catholic bishop of Veszprém as an example to be followed. In that village, he stated, having only the Lutherans public worship, the Catholics and the Calvinists did not separate from them, but had common prayer with the Lutherans every day. That practice was found scandalous both by the county authorities and the national ones, especially because of the solely existing Lutheran worship congregation. According to the answer, such statements were derogatory to true Catholic faith, which was "the only legally recognized religion from the very beginning, and the only one permitted for public worship, whereas all other denominations were merely sects that had crept into the country clandestinely, having been tolerated merely because of an unmerited and vicissitudinous period; thus in order to save the only true and solely redeeming faith from any unlawfulness, the author shall be strictly ordered to omit all terms relating to the religion, and dare not even mention the subject of religion in the future". In other counties, Bél's intense interest taken in peasant customs was found suspicious, since in their view such a topic was unworthy of a historical work. The royal chancery, entrusted with the supervision of the affair, mostly approved the objections, forbidding Bél not only to mention religious subjects in his work, but also instructing him to keep clear of the possessory right of the noblemen's estates and to omit the description of meaningless and ridiculous peasant customs. And, representing the interests of the Emperor's court, in Vienna, it was added that the author dare not term insurrections against the Emperor as wars, Rákóczi's insurrection among them, since "wars are only possible between equal belligerent parties. The term rebellion shall be used instead".

The bureaucratic fussing and contrary opinions threw light on the unprepared state of feudal Hungary under Hapsburg rule to support such wide-ranging and far-sighted scientific structure as "Notitia" was. Mátyás Bél was ahead of his age, and had to make huge efforts to preserve the forward pointing central message of his work for posterity. His exceptional working capacity, patience and persistence were not sufficient to publish the four magnificent and bulky folio volumes of "Notitia

*Hungariae novae historico geographica*” (Viennae 1735–1742) with the excellent maps of S. Mikoviny and the description of nine counties, in addition also some concessions had to be given. Containing only the description of a single county, the fifth volume was only published incomplete after the author’s death. Since the description of County Szepes had already been published as an example in “*Prodromus*”, the descriptions of eleven counties of the total of 48 originally planned were available in publication. The drafts of the others were also ready to some extent, but their publication was prevented first by the death of Charles the 3rd [6th], then by the war conducted by Queen Maria Theresia, and at last by the sickness and death of Mátyás Bél. The manuscripts left behind by the author amounted to 82 big folio volumes, and several attempts were made in the following decades to publish them, but all in vain. Among others, texts remained in manuscript form which—e.g. ones dealing with Hungary’s agriculture, economy, national costumes and peasant customs—represented special value because no higher authority had seen and censored them, consequently they still contain Bél’s original conception without the slightest curtailment.

Mátyás Bél, who was justly named “polyhistor consummatissimus et celeberrimus” for his huge, multifarious and forward-looking scientific activity even abroad, could not live to see finished his greatest work, “*Notitia*”, the extensive, elaborate and far unprecedented historical and geographical description of Hungary and her people, becoming public property of the scientific communities both at home and abroad. But even the volumes published in his life show him one of the leading scientists of one-time Central-Europe.

In the early years of his career, Bél no doubt had received much useful initiative from his professors at Halle (Ludwig, Francke, Cellarius, Gundling etc.), and in general from the representatives of political sciences. His unique ability was reflected by the fact that in his concept he went far beyond the sphere of political science of his age. On the one hand, he established political geography on a firm historical basis. And that was made so profoundly that “*Notitia*” has become a rich source-book as well, along with Bél’s two other collections of sources, serving as an example of how to do away with the former limitations of objective source criticism, how to break away from historization limited to the events of the recent past and used as a weapon in religious polemics, and how to write secularized history of Hungary. On the other hand, historical geography was coupled with natural geography under the effect of the great experience of visiting the regions reconquered from the Turks and exploring integrate Hungary’s natural resources. But Mátyás Bél had achieved more than that. He had succeeded in not only extending the concept of describing his country in an original way, but by fitting components of natural history, economy, knowledge of society, ethnography and medicine into the description, he had practically enlivened the genre, thus flinging open the door to a historical and geographical survey of the country

comprising the different aspects of human life. His aim was to leave nothing out of recording in script which would be necessary to acquire a profound knowledge of the physical and social state of the entire country. Thus the overall picture gradually included the depiction of natural endowments and resources, the method of husbandry, the population and their customs, legal conditions, ways of living and the state of civilization and culture, so as to offer a universal picture of the nation's life. Bél's grandiose historical concept was definitely centered on mankind, and examined the country's population by considering the interactions and correlations of the natural and human environment. And what is more, the author's patriotic conception embraced the entire population living within the country's borders, without differentiating by social standing, religion or nationality. He cut himself free from that feudal-type view of society according to which only the members of the ruling class were regarded as inhabitants owing rights ("regnicolae"). Bél would not accept any inappealable authority above him, and demanded a place in society not on the basis of belonging to some social class, but on the strength of his own capacities and achievements. He consciously regarded the entire country as his and the entire people's home. His patriotism embraced the whole Hungary, and while he set out to explore the entire fatherland, not for finding rarities but for discovering the simple folk under the ruling class, he was eager to record their work, feasts and culture. And in doing so, the historian inevitably compared his findings to the "one-time flowering state" of Hungary, and the open-eyed scientist having wide international connections and corresponding with many fellow scholars from Rome to Petrograd, made comparisons to the more developed conditions in other countries. In that manner, Bél's portrayal accomplished a critical attitude, expressing dissatisfaction with the existing situation and the inefficiency in making use of the country's natural resources. He did not hesitate to scourge the noblemen for merely safeguarding memories of their one-time military virtues, and neglecting their duties to practice husbandry and improve their education. And he had the courage to warn the rich on their duties to better public welfare and assist the poor. The portrayal of the past and the present thus pointed towards bourgeois individualism, as well as enlightenment, striving after the removal of preconceptions and inherited superstitions from the path of progress.

It is thus understandable why feudal society failed to appreciate Bél's epoch-marking activity. Much more recognition was awarded to Bél's splendid achievements in the scientific circles abroad. Published in Leipzig, "Acta Eruditorum" sent its best wishes to the originator of the well-written, nicely laid out and to the last detail clearly documented plan soon after the appearance of "Prodromus", and later on paid great tribute to each of the four volumes of "Notitia" which the editors had received from "the scientific centre of Pozsony". Of the first volume of "Notitia", the following was stated: "Although no outstanding work is in need of our recommendation, it has none the less been deemed proper to state that by either considering the abundance, selection

and appropriate lay-out of the subjects included in it, or the provision of literary references and source quotations, or the wit demonstrated in refuting idle talk, or the clever mixing of earnest things with pleasant ones, or the beauty and glossy finish of working, no desideratum whatsoever could be found to the immortality of Bél's name". Having had published two articles on natural history in "Philosophical Transactions" (1743, 1744). Bél became a member of the London "Royal Society". Previous to that, he had gained membership of the Prussian Royal Academy of Berlin, then of the Tzarist Academy of Sciences at Petersburg, the Scientific society at and the Latin Society at Jena. The Pope honoured the Lutheran scientist with golden medals bearing his portrait. And at last, let us quote J. Brucker, who in his work series entitled "Bilder-sal heutiges Tages lebender und durch Gelehrtheit berühmter Schriftsteller" (V. Augsburg 1746) expressed the following opinion in a lengthy appreciation of Bél's work: "His big plan to publish a full collection of works on Hungarian history, the fortunate proofs of the result, the gifts of acumen, wit and scientific erudition necessary for such a great and important undertaking displayed by him, as well as the impetus thus given to his compatriots not to leave all honour of science to other peoples, and his untiring endeavour to abolish the barbarism that has overcome his country, moreover a thousand other merits of Bél, bringing the fame of restoring scientific work in Hungary, have made him so famous that the portrait gallery of renown literators could be justly regarded as deficient without the profile of the excellent scientist of Hungary".