

CHANGES IN THE LANDSCAPE AND TRADITIONAL PEASANT FARMING IN THE BODROGKÖZ REGION

GYULA VIGA

1. The interpretation of the correlation between the environment and man, and of the role of this special system of relations in creating regional cultural variants is one of the foundations of ethnological and anthropological conceptions.¹ The study of changes and the factors and historical processes evoking them, for example the transformation of the environment and the effect on society and culture of the resulting changed system of conditions, can provide findings that are just as important as the reconstruction of earlier states. If the ethnologist wishes to understand the „whole” and carries out „complex” investigations for this purpose, the result will be a quite precise image of the stages in the history of the economy, society and culture, and the changes made in and to the environment in these stages. It will also throw light on the role played by the changing environment – including also the social and cultural environment – in the cultural behaviour of the members of the community, and on the possibilities available to man, as one of the „dynamic elements” of the environmental factors, in the area of cultural adaptation, assimilation and specialisation.² Different social groups living under the same geographical conditions, in the same area, may follow different modes of subsistence; in other words there exist various *alternative* way of life strategies. It is true that the „choice” is at times a social constraint and in general is influenced by external influences and the cultural heritage, nevertheless ecological factors in themselves only rarely represent a culture-shaping force.³

2. The relationship between the landscape and man living in it is organic; it is only the means and methods of the disciplines dealing with it that differ. In 1947 in his overview of human geography, the outstanding geographer Tibor Mendöl, referring to Ratzel’s milieu theory, wrote: „Today’s representatives of human geography no longer see the main task of their discipline in the same way as Ratzel... According to them, and it can be said according to all anthropogeographers today, the principal subject of human geography is not the influence of the natural environment on man, if for no other reason than that there is no discipline that could in itself deal with such a highly complicated question. It must share in that

¹ Kroeber 1931, 250.

² Frake 1962, 53–55.

³ Anell 1964, 7–9.

with all the disciplines dealing with man, including also human geography. But the main subject of the investigations of human geography is precisely the opposite: man's activity in shaping the environment, or more correctly its result, the man-made environment."⁴ Elsewhere he raises the question in the following terms: „...how did the landscape shape the peasantry, and how did the peasantry shape the landscape? Geography is able to give a picture of the way the peasantry shaped the man-made landscape to the extent that it receives data from ethnology and the social sciences."⁵ Allow me to cite another theoretical opinion, this time from the field of ethnology: three and a half decades ago László Kósa wrote: „What the landscape was like and what it became is a problem for geography, but ethnology and cultural history are also involved in the study of the means and methods used to shape the landscape, the social motivations and conditions of the process."⁶

Thus the emphasis in tracing the historical process of reshaping the landscape is not merely on the state preceding the change and the changed circumstances, but also on the organic relationship of the society and culture of man who shapes the environment, transforms it with his activity and adapts to the changed circumstances. The time frame of the investigations has also widened: the ecological conditions for the neolithization of the Carpathian Basin⁷ can now be seen, as well as the limits of forest clearing in the feudal age and its effects,⁸ or the history of water regulation that is also related to the embourgeoisement of the peasantry and its effect on the economy and culture.⁹

It is not simply due to the influence of the ecological approach that the history of man as shaper of the environment has become a „fashionable” research theme in recent decades.¹⁰ It can also be attributed to the recognition that the historical process of the relationship between man and landscape is also of help in interpreting the periods of production techniques and regional changes in culture. There is a big difference in such study of the different regions: the appearance of the different landscapes could not be changed to the same extent, but important general summaries have been produced on practically all the major landscapes of historical Hungary, and geographers as well as researchers of society and culture have reported on the changing environment in conferences pointing the way

⁴ Mendöl 1947, 5.

⁵ Cited by Kósa 1982, 15–16.

⁶ Kósa 1982, 16.

⁷ Sümegi 1998, 367–395; Sümegi 2000, 9–25; Sümegi – Kertész 1998, 144–157.

⁸ Müller 2000, 27–44.

⁹ Frisnyák 1990; Kósa 1990; Szabó 1996, On the mythological relationship between landscape and man: Keszeg 2003.

¹⁰ Andrásfalvy 1973; Andrásfalvy 1975; Andrásfalvy 2004, 40–57; Borsos 1994, 95–105; Borsos 2004; Gunda 1986, 3–13.

ahead.¹¹

3. The most striking landscape-shaping activity – forest clearing and water regulation – were carried out in different social and production systems in the Carpathian Basin. The expansion of agricultural areas at the expense of forests was characteristic mainly of the feudal age,¹² while state intervention was manifested in regulation of the process and in measures to ease the serious resulting harm.¹³ In contrast, early local attempts notwithstanding, the regulation of rivers was carried out when embourgeoisement was under way in Hungary. Together with the liberation of the serfs, it caused big social changes and it could only be carried out through national measures, with the help of the state.

A few figures will give an idea of the impact and consequences of the regulation of rivers in Hungary and also of the qualitative changes it caused. Between 1879 and 1918, 2.5 million hectares were gained by draining marshes; up to 1900 the Danube valley companies made 2 million hectares of land flood-free and others in the Tisza valley recovered 4 million hectares. In addition, close to a hundred drainage companies made nearly half a million hectares flood-free. Altogether this means that around 9 million hectares of new agricultural land became available in the course of the work directed by Jenő Kvassay and described as a *Second Magyar Conquest*.¹⁴ The flood control works alone resulted in 6.5 million hectares of land, which meant that around 2.5 million hectares out of the 3.5 million hectares in the Carpathian Basin were gained through flood control. (This is more than the combined total of the land gained in the valleys of the Po and the Loire and the Dutch polders¹⁵.) In 1895 the total length of the levees exceeded 4,000 kilometres, and there were more than 3,000 kilometres of inland water drainage channels. Between 1846 and 1920 the length of the Tisza channel network on the Great Plain grew from 24 to 12,000 kilometres. 240 million cubic metres of earth were moved to build the levees and channels and more than 100 million cubic metres to cut off meanders in the rivers.¹⁶ As a consequence of the river regulation, the landscape became more uniform, the age-old difference between the levels of the Great Plain that were periodically inundated and those that were flood-free, a difference that had determined the nature of human settlement and farming, practically disappeared. The wetland flora and fauna disappeared together with the water from the former floodplains and with them the

¹¹ Andrásfalvy 1973; Andrásfalvy 1975; Réfi Oszkó 1997; Borsos 2000; Bellon 2003, 19; Hoffmann 1994, 73-99.

¹² Hoffmann 1994, 73-99.

¹³ For an overview: Takács 1980; cf. R. Várkonyi 1992.

¹⁴ Szuhay 1998, 146.

¹⁵ Ikvai 1991, 335-336.

¹⁶ Frisnyák 1990, 98.

ancient way of life of hunting and fishing in the marshes and grazing cattle outdoors all year round. Grazing land and the pastoral way of life were restricted to the alkali flats of the former floodplains; elsewhere wheat, maize and fodder crops occupied practically all the available space.¹⁷

The clearing of forests and reed beds, the ploughing of meadows and grazing lands was also a way in which peasant landowners increased their holdings: between 1895 and 1913 the area of plough land increased by 1.4 million *hold* (around 800,000 hectares) which affected small holdings because during this period the total area of holdings larger than 100 *hold* (57 hectares) declined by 340,000 *hold* (around 194,000 hectares). Parallel with this, the area of fallow land diminished by half and that of grazing lands by 1.4 million *hold*.¹⁸

The great work of shaping the landscape was done by the rural population in Hungary. By the stratum which had not acquired a viable holding when the serfs were liberated and by the time of the regulation of the rivers had irrevocably become the agrarian proletariat. They found work as navvies or in the emerging industrial sector, some went to work in the transport services that arose in the wake of the big changes in the landscape, while others sought a solution through emigration. However the majority, together with their descendants increased the internal contradictions of agrarian Hungary.

The reshaping of the landscape also gave a decisive push to transformation of the traditional society and culture. This process as a whole is generally called embourgeoisement of the peasantry or, in another respect the period of modernisation.¹⁹ The concept is open to debate, although the transformation took place with regional variants and considerable differences in time, and it is certain that there are regions where the embourgeoisement was achieved in all respects. It is also certain that rural society shifted compared to its earlier state and changed.

4. Just as the European peasantry everywhere was able to expand the frames of its production activity at the expense of forests and water, in the Bodrogek region too these provided the possibilities for the extensive expansion of farming.²⁰

Forest clearing occurred continuously from the 13th century in the Bodrogek region, as in other parts of the Carpathian Basin which had a single vast expanse of forest at the time of the Magyar Conquest. The process of settlement and the expansion of farming continued for centuries while at the same time the extent of the forests and waters was gradually reduced. The forests, watercourses

¹⁷ Bulla-Mendöl 1999, 71.

¹⁸ Orosz 1965, II. 112–113.

¹⁹ For an overview: Kósa 1990. On the change in capitalizing agrarian society: Gunst 1998.

²⁰ I have published more detailed studies on the subject: cf. Viga 1996, 8-64; Viga 2001, 75-87.

and periodically inundated areas were closely connected, and in many respects the historical stages of regulation of the rivers and forest clearing were also connected. The oaks on higher land in the vicinity of settlements were the first to fall to the axe although the extensive oak forests at higher elevations, mainly in the interior of the Zemplén Mountains, continued to be of importance in feeding herds of swine right until the mid-19th century. Up to the early 19th century the flood-plain forests and plains forests had suffered the least harm as they could not be cleared until the rivers had been regulated. The last big stage in the clearing of the forests coincided with the regulation of the rivers in the Bodrogek region.²¹

It was the forests and the flood-plain forests, and the hay produced on the water meadows that provided the fodder for the flocks and herds kept in the Bodrogek region up to the mid-19th century. The clearing of the forests caused a setback in this branch of farming, then when the entire structure of land utilisation was transformed by the 1880s the practice of wintering cattle in barns increasingly became the norm, while extensive grazing and common village grazing land still survived in places as relics from the past.

The proportion of plough lands increased in the wake of the reshaping of the landscape, but this was not distributed evenly between the upper and lower areas of the Bodrogek because of the topographical factors. (The terms *Lower* and *Upper Bodrogek* are used in the literature to distinguish the territories belonging to Hungary and to Czecho-Slovakia after 1920.) While – according to calculations by Sándor Frisnyák – in 1865 plough land represented 37.4% of the total land area in the Upper Bodrogek region, and only 19.6% in Lower Bodrogek, as a result of the river regulation, flood control and drainage works by 1897 these proportions were 57.1% and 49.2%. The area of grassland fell from 31.0% to 21.6% in the Upper Bodrogek region, but in the Lower Bodrogek – where the marshes were drained – it increased from 24.7% to 34.7%. However the most eloquent figures are those on the areas unsuitable for agricultural use: these shrank from 17.2%, and 42.9% to 7.5% and 9.9% respectively. The countryside's ability to sustain population increased and elements of flood plain farming increasingly became marginal relics beside farming for the market.²²

However, it is important to note that behind these overall figures there were widely differing changes in individual settlements. Topography was a decisive factor: elevations of 95-100 metres above sea level made possible entirely different human activities. If we look more closely at changes in land utilisation in the individual settlements we obtain a more nuanced picture and also answers to the questions of how the landscape influenced the shaping of settlement groups and the emergence of regional variants in production techniques and way of life. In the

²¹ Bogoly 1992, 20; Frisnyák 1996, 27-30.

²² Calculations made by Sándor Frisnyák, cited in: Boros 1997, 224-232.

villages of the Bodroghöz region in the mid-19th century the share of plough land in the village lands ranged from 6% to 62.5%. Naturally, the smallest plough lands went together with the largest areas unsuitable for agricultural use: for example 6% of the land around Tiszakarád was plough land and 76% was uncultivated, these proportions for Luka (Bodroghalom) were 8.2%, and 50.40%, in contrast with Bacska (Bačka) where 62.5% of the land was plough land and only 14.5% was unsuitable for agriculture. After the regulation of the rivers, in 1897 the above proportions changed to 40.7% and 6.1% in Tiszakarád, to 61.6 and 8.3% in Bodroghalom, and in Bacska to 79.5% and 5.4%.²³ Without automatically interpreting the figures, anyone familiar with the ethnology of these villages is well aware of the difference in their way of life and production traditions.²⁴

The process of acquiring possession of the reclaimed land in the Bodroghöz region was accompanied by much tension and social contradiction: on the whole the new land did very little to improve the structure of land ownership, especially among the poorest peasants, but instead strengthened the large estates which were only slowly becoming capitalised.²⁵

Together all this indicates the structural change in farming, but it was a contradictory process – mainly because of characteristics of the structure of local society, demographic history and the history of land ownership – despite the fact that the parallel progress of reshaping the landscape and the slow embourgeoisement of the peasantry can be observed in the changing culture of the Bodroghöz region. In its details the flood control and regulation of the rivers reshaped the settlements' subsistence system and with it transformed the earlier settlement hierarchy. All this primarily involved an extensive increase in agriculture and did not bring a major change in the production structure of peasant farms. The predominance of grazing (fattened) beef cattle for sale remained, together with the priority of grain production. However, as differences between the utilisation of flood-free areas and the flood plains became only of secondary importance, the latter meant an increase in wheat production over the traditional rye crops grown on the sandy areas. With the gradual disappearance of fallow land, the cultivation of forage root crops and field forage crops also spread from the turn of the 19th to 20th century, but within the frame of the two-course rotation of crops these were grown in many places alternating with rye on the sandy areas. On the whole there was an increase in the importance of wintering in stables, but animal husbandry was carried out in many different organisational forms and villages with large grazing lands mainly beside water found themselves at a greater economic

²³ Boros 1997, 227 ff.

²⁴ Viga, 1999; Viga, 2002, 281-289; Viga – Viszóczy 2000, 167-208; Viga – Viszóczy 2006, 291-344.

²⁵ On the problem of land distribution in the Bodroghöz: Balassa 1956.

advantage over those with limited grazing areas. The settlements that were linked to the circulation of the market as a result of construction of the railways were placed in an especially favourable situation.

In our region the reshaping of the geographical environment is closely linked also to the major periods in peasant culture: the regulation of the rivers in the Bodrogek region was the condition for the embourgeoisement – albeit slow and contradictory – of peasant society. The process brought the differing structures of farming in the villages of the region closer to each other, but traces of the earlier traditions can generally be recognised in the changed structure.

Literature

Andrásfalvy, Bertalan

1973: „A Sárköz ősi ártéri gazdálkodása”, *Vizügyi Történeti Füzetek* 6, Budapest

1975: „Duna mente népének ártéri gazdálkodása Tolna és Baranya megyében az ármentesítés befejezéséig”, in *Tanulmányok Tolna megye történetéből*, VII., Szekszárd: Tolna Megyei Levéltár

2004: „A vízhaszonvétel és árvízvédelem hagyománya Magyarországon”, in *Hagyomány és jövő*, 40-57, Lakitelek: Antológia

Anell, Bengt

1964: „The ecological factor”, *Folk* VI, 7-14.

Balassa, Iván

1956: *Földosztó mozgalmak a Bodrogekben 1898-ban*, Sárospatak: Rákóczi Múzeum

Bellon, Tibor

2003: *A Tisza néprajza. Ártéri gazdálkodás a tiszai Alföldön*, Budapest: Timp

Bogoly, János

1992: *Királyhelme. Királyhelme és a Felső-Bodrogek természetrajza és történelme*, Bratislava: Madách

Boros, László

1997: „A folyószabályozások hatása a Bodrogekben a társadalmi és gazdasági folyamatokra. Tokaj és környéke”, *Földrajzi tanulmányok*, 223-233, Tokaj Nyíregyháza: Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg Megyei Önkormányzat Pedagógiai Intézete

Borsos Balázs

1994: „Táj ember kultúra. Az ökológiai megközelítés társadalomtudományi alkalmazásához: Dimenziók”, *Felső-Magyarországi Szemle*, 3, 95-105.

- 2000: *Három folyó között. A bodrogi közti gazdálkodás alkalmazkodása a természeti viszonyokhoz a folyószabályozási munkák előtt és után (1840–1910)*, Budapest: Akadémiai
- 2004: *Elefánt a hídon. Gondolatok az ökológiai antropológiáról*, Borsos Béla – Kiss Lajos András – Lányi András, Budapest: L'Harmattan
- Bulla, Béla – Mendöl, Tibor
1999: *A Kárpát-medence földrajza*, Budapest: Lucidus
- Frake, O. Charles
1962: „Cultural ecology and ethnography”, *American Anthropologist* 64, 53–59.
- Frisnyák, Sándor
1990: *Magyarország történeti földrajza*, Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó
1996: „Az Alsó-Bodrogi köz helye és szerepe a Kárpát-medence földrajzi munkamegosztásában (18-19. század)”, in *Seminar k 150. výročí zalozenia Zdrúzenia pre reguláciu Tisy v Medzibodroží*, 22-55, Kráľovský Chlmec: Bodrog és Hernád Vízyűjtő Vállalat
- Gunda, Béla
1986: „Megjegyzések a kulturális ökológiához”, *Új Forrás*, Október, 3–13, Tatabánya
- Gunst, Péter
1998: „A magyar agrártársadalom 1850-1914 között”, in Gunst, Péter (ed.): *A magyar agrártársadalom a jobbágyság felszabadításától napjainkig*, Budapest: Napvilág
- Hoffmann, Tamás
1994: „Erdő és kultúrtáj – európai vázlat”, in Novák, László (ed.): *Néprajzi tanulmányok Ikvai Nándor emlékére* (Studia Comitatus 23), 73-99, Szentendre: Pest Megyei Múzeumi Igazgatóság
- Ikvai, Nándor
1991: „Ökológia és agrokultúra (A hagyományos gazdálkodás és a környezet összefüggései a Kárpát-medencében)”, in *A Herman Ottó Múzeum Évkönyve XXVIII–XXIX*, 329–337, Miskolc: Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén Megyei Múzeumi Igazgatóság
- Keszeg, Vilmos
2003: „Tájban élő ember: hiedelem és biográfia”, in Viga, Gyula – Holló, Szilvia Andrea Cs. Schwalm, Edit (eds.): *Vándorutak Múzeumi örökség. Tanulmányok Bodó Sándor tiszteletére, 60. születésnapja alkalmából*, 133–150, Budapest: Archaeolingua
- Kósa, László
1982: „Ember és táj. Jegyzetek a magyar nép környezetalakító munkájáról”, in Balassa, Iván Ujváry, Zoltán (eds.): *Néprajzi tanulmányok Dankó Imre tiszteletére*, 15–20, Debrecen: Déri Múzeum

- 1990: „Paraszti polgárosulás és a népi kultúra táji megoszlása Magyarországon (1880–1920)”, in *Studia Folkloristica et Ethnographica* 27, Debrecen: KLTE Néprajzi Tanszék
- Kroeber, A. L.
1931: „The culture-area and age-area concepts of Clark Wissler”, in Rice, S. A. (ed.): *Methods in Social Science*, 248–265, Chicago
- Mendöl, Tibor
1947: *A magyar emberföldrajz múltja, jelen állása és feladatai*, Budapest: Néptudományi Intézet
- Müller, Róbert
2000: „A középkor agrotechnikája”, Bende, Livia – Lőrinczy, Gábor (eds.): *A középkori magyar agrárium*, 27–44, Ópusztaszer
- Nádasi, Éva
1985: „A gazdálkodás és az etnikum viszonya”, in Szabadfalvi, József – Viga, Gyula (eds.): *Interetnikus kapcsolatok Északkelet-Magyarországon*, II. kiegészítő kötet, 23–26, Miskolc: Herman Ottó Múzeum
- Orosz, István
1965: „A differenciálódás és kisajátítás”, in Szabó, István (ed.): *A parasztság Magyarországon a kapitalizmus korában (1848–1914)*, II, 9–145, Budapest: Akadémiai
- Réfi Oszkó, Magdolna
1997: *Gazdálkodás a Rétközben a XVIII–XIX. században*, Nyíregyháza: Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg Megyei Levéltár
- Sümegei, Pál
1996: „Ember és környezet kapcsolata a Kárpát-medencében az elmúlt 150 000 év során”, *Panniculus* 3, 367–395.
2000: „A középkori Kárpát-medence éghajlati és környezeti viszonyai”, Bende, Livia – Lőrinczy, Gábor (eds.): *A középkori magyar agrárium*, 9–25. Ópusztaszer
- Sümegei, Pál–Kertész, Róbert
1998: „A Kárpát-medence öskörnyezeti sajátosságai egy ökológiai csapda az újkőkorban?”, *Jászkunság* 44, 144–157.
- Szabó, László
1996: „Tájátalakítás és a kultúra egységesülése”, in *Társadalom, etnikum, identitás*, 152–158, Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetem Néprajzi Tanszéke
- Szuhay, Miklós
1998: „A mezőgazdaság kapitalizálódása – 1848–1918”, in Gunst, Péter (ed.): *A magyar agrártársadalom a jobbágyság felszabadításától napjainkig*, 137–161, Budapest: Napvilág
- Takács, Lajos
- 1980: *Irtásgazdálkodásunk emlékei*, Budapest: Akadémiai

Várkonyi, Ágnes, R.

1992: *Pelikán a fiaival*, Budapest: Liget

Viga Gyula

1996: *Hármas határon. Tanulmányok a Bodroghköz változó népi kultúrájáról*, Miskolc: Herman Ottó Múzeum

1999: „A tradíció és a változás néhány jellemzője a Bodroghköz népi műveltségében (Karcsa és Pácin példája)”, in *A Herman Ottó Múzeum Évkönyve XXXVIII*, 1127-1155, Miskolc

2001: „Megjegyzések a paraszti kultúra változásának kérdéséhez. Bodroghközi példák”, in Bali, János – Jávor, Kata (eds.): *Merítés. Néprajzi tanulmányok Szilágyi Miklós tiszteletére*, 75–87, Budapest: MTA Néprajzi Kutató Intézet – ELTE BTK Tárgyi Néprajzi Tanszék

2002: „A tájformáló kultúra korszakai és a kultúrtáj változásai a Bodroghközben”, in Keményfi, Róbert (ed.): *A kultúra táji, térbeli változatai. Tanulmányok a 60 éves Kósa László tiszteletére* (Néprajzi Látóhatár XI.), 281-289, Györffy István Néprajzi Egyesület

Viga, Gyula – Viszóczy, Ilona

2000: „A paraszti gazdálkodás változásai”, in Viga, Gyula (ed.): *Kisgéres*, 167-208, Dunaszerdahely – Komárom: Lilium Aurum

2006: „A hagyományos gazdálkodás jellemzői és változásai”, in Viga, Gyula (ed.): *Nagytárkány I. Tanulmányok a község településtörténetéhez és néprajzához*, 291-344, Somorja – Komárom: Fórum Kisebbségkutató Intézet