

Bálint, Petra: A mindennapi élet alakzatai: Büntetőperek történeti néprajzi vizsgálata (1750–1850) [Patterns of Everyday Life: A Historical Ethnographic Study of Criminal Trials (1750–1850)].

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BOOK REVIEW

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Published by the Hungarian Ethnographic Society as the twelfth volume in the *Néprajzi Értekezések* [Ethnographic Papers] series, this publication is a revised version of Petra Bálint's doctoral dissertation, which she successfully defended in 2019. In the space of almost 300 pages, the book presents the results of a historical ethnographic examination of topics referred to as “patterns of everyday life,” covering a period spanning an entire century.

This is not the first dissertation and book on a historical topic to have been published in the last six to eight years in the context of the Hungarian and Comparative Folklore Studies Doctoral Program run by the Doctoral School of Literary Studies at the Faculty of Humanities of Eötvös Loránd University. János Bednárík's dissertation focusing on the Buda region in the nineteenth century, and his book on village priests in the bourgeois era (*Falusi plébános a polgári korban. Egyház és helyi társadalom a 19. század második felében a Buda környéki falvakban* [Village Pastors in the Bourgeois Age. Church and Local Community around Buda in the Second Half of the 19th Century in Villages], 2020) — also published in the *Ethnographical Papers* series — were written within this same doctoral school, which, under the direction of

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Dániel Bárh since the beginning of the 2010s, has a strong orientation towards historical ethnography and historical folkloristics. Bence Ament-Kovács's dissertation, which he defended in 2023 and which is currently being prepared for publication in book form (*Uradalom, plébánia, faluközösség. Történeti néprajzi dimenziók a 18. századi Dél-Dunántúlon* – [Demesne, Parish, Village Community. Historical Ethnographic Dimensions in Eighteenth-Century Southern Transdanubia] 2023), likewise deals with the eighteenth century and partly overlaps with the subject of Petra Bárh's dissertation. Several of the doctoral students supervised by the head of the doctoral school, including myself, are working on historical ethnographic topics, albeit at different stages in their doctorate courses.

Conducted over an extensive period of more than ten years, Petra Bárh's research is framed by and structured around a clearly delineated group of sources, comprising criminal trials held at manorial and county courts. While the author takes into account both its advantages and disadvantages, this fact permeates the entire volume. The majority of the sources comprise manorial court trials, although the civil litigation cases among them were not included in the research. Over the years, the author reviewed almost a thousand trials, five hundred of which were used for her dissertation. In several places she describes the handling, organization, and choice of sources, her selection criteria, and the compilation of the database used for the research. Petra Bárh also talks about the difficulties related to systematization that arose in the course of the work, which, on the one hand, offer an insight into the characteristics of a long-term historical ethnographic study, while on the other hand giving a clear idea of the many possible ways in which the material might be arranged.

The timeframe referred to in the title of the book covers a period of one hundred years, from 1750 to 1850. The choice of this period was likewise motivated by the nature of the source material. In the main text, however, the timeframe is interpreted more loosely, thus examples and data from the first decades of the eighteenth century up to the emancipation of the serfs in 1848 are included. However, such a broad approach to the timeframe requires greater justification, without which one might well query the comparability of data that are presented side by side despite a gap of eighty, or in some cases hundred years.

The spatial framework of the volume is provided by the boundaries of Heves and Külső-Szolnok counties (in middle area of Hungary) as they existed in the feudal age. The choice of this area — a sizable public administrative unit — was undoubtedly prompted by the nature of the archival source material and the principles of systematization, although it would be extremely helpful to have a detailed description of the circumstances behind it. As it is, the juxtaposition of data from geographically distant, and therefore socially very different settlements may raise questions in the reader's mind.

The first introductory chapter, provides a thorough and detailed overview of the history of research, focusing on the concept of everyday life and possible approaches to it. In the course of a comprehensive review of the Hungarian and international literature, the author seeks to answer both theoretical and methodological questions. At the end of the presentation, it becomes clear that she has adopted a comprehensive interpretation, focusing on "all lived experiences of the social strata." (p. 27.) The precise content of this definition becomes clear as we proceed through the volume.

Petra Bárh's goal was to obtain information about everyday life from the studied source type, and to outline its frameworks and characteristic features. Although she purposely avoids basing her work on types of crimes and offences, the second introductory chapter nevertheless



contains a detailed description of contemporary criminal justice practice. She was able to use witness statements from the records of hearings that took place largely as a result of this practice, from which she obtained the thematically arranged data that form the three major thematic units of the book (material culture and lifestyle; the relationship and functioning of the individual and the community; and verbal and non-verbal forms of communication).

Following the introduction, Petra Bálint presents her material in three main chapters. The thematic groups reflect careful consideration on the part of the author. The first, and the shortest, of the three is the chapter “The material culture of everyday life.” Data on alimentation, followed by the house and life around it, then clothing, and finally the use of weapons (knives, pocket-knives, rifles), are presented side by side. Since, by her own admission, the author was unable to find the same quantity and depth of information on all these topics, this chapter for the most part presents the available data, which she ably integrates into the lifestyle history processes identified by ethnography. Notably, topics such as hygiene and defecation, which are absent from other works on lifestyle, are also covered in this presentation. In the summary of the chapter, the author observes that what emerges from the data is a picture of an eventful and mobile lifestyle that was largely lacking a private sphere.

The second chapter, “The active individual in the community,” is far longer, the data are presented in greater detail, and more efforts are made to interpret the trial texts. After a lengthy historiographical introduction, the author focuses firstly on men, within the interpretive framework of masculinity and the male environment, which the author describes as the culture of violence. Although one might question why men are here equated with violence, the image of the violent male in the early modern period that is suggested by the sources does make sense if one takes into account the nature of trials (in this case, the fact that they were held in the wake of exceptional, punishable offences). The trial records led Petra Bálint to conclude that honor and morality played a central role in the male world. This finding is later supported by certain sections of the chapter on women.

The second subchapter deals with the place and role of women in local communities, and expectations towards them. Here too, in keeping with the nature of the sources, violence experienced or perpetrated by women becomes a central element. The reader is presented with the early modern idea that there was an acceptable measure for the beatings administered by a husband, and that in many cases it was the women who were to blame for the acts of violence — that is, beatings were considered a legitimate punishment if the wife’s perceived or actual offence was deemed by the participants to have brought shame on her husband and family. Starting from this subchapter, growing emphasis is given to the idea that the trials perhaps serve not so much as a source of data on which to base an analysis or summary (which the author herself explicitly refrains from doing, p. 228.), but rather as a means for understanding certain attitudes. The rape trials are a good example of this, elucidating as they do the respective attitudes of the litigants and the participants. The objective was apparently to safeguard the honor of the men and to preserve the image of uprightness and orderly family life, and not — strange as it may seem from a contemporary perspective — to punish violence.

The third section of this chapter on the active individual within the community explores the themes of love and sexuality. It is rare for ethnographers to discuss this topic in such depth and so extensively, drawing on a historical source corpus, and in this respect the subchapter constitutes a remarkable contribution to the volume. At the same time, it is here that we first come across the concrete statement (p. 118) that all the data originate from a violation of rules or



norms and must be interpreted as such. Despite this, the author is clearly aware of community control over the body in early modern communities, as evident from the detailed witness statements — that is, control over exactly what was seen by whom, and when, in relation to sexuality. We are also given a nuanced picture of those sexual behaviors that were considered deviant in this period, on the basis of which it can generally be stated that all sexual behavior outside marriage and not for the purposes of procreation was to be considered reprehensible.

The fourth subchapter focuses on children and their role within the family and community, although once again mainly in terms of criminal law categories. The major and minor conflicts in relation to abortion, illegitimate children, and orphans reveal the hardships inherent in children's lives. By way of summary, Petra Bálint states that the system of norms governing everyday life became accessible at the point where community norms clash with legal norms. Discussion of some of the less significant topics illustrates the points of intersection between the private and collective spheres. The sources illustrate the mentality and attitudes of the wider community rather than those of the family.

The last chapter of the volume, “Verbal and nonverbal forms of communication”, is the longest section and contains the most data. On the one hand, the author was able to rely in this chapter on more abundant literature than in the earlier chapters, while, on the other hand, she was apparently inspired to a great extent by experiments and problems related to categorization. Ultimately, she decided to present the swearwords that appear in the trials according to their function and place within the situation, thus we are given information about the verbal manifestations accompanying gender, family, social, and ethnic conflicts, and finally religious and denominational conflicts.

This chapter contains an analysis of data related to the perception and expression of time in the trials. The expressions indicating time that are used by the examined witnesses are associated with their customary activities, which the author presents in table form, also providing the year from which the data originate. This is followed by the subchapter “Manifestations and expressions of emotions,” the historical aspects of which have also been little researched in Hungary. In the eighteenth-century trial material examined here, emotions appear indirectly, through linguistic expressions, and their examination thus requires caution. Owing to the specific features of the source types, three of the largely negative emotions that appear in the witness statements — anger/rage, fear, and resentment — are presented in greater detail. Based on these, Petra Bálint raises the idea that the presentation of the data could have pointed to what these emotions meant at the time, although in this chapter she merely presents their verbal manifestations.

The third subchapter focuses on gestures. After an ambitious summary of research history from the Middle Ages, the focus turns to questions related to the grouping of gestures. Following some observations on ethnographic experiments, the author opts for the situational presentation of the gestures, alongside a presentation of their content and function. The goal was to associate the appropriate meaning with the gestures, although the data are, with few exceptions, poorly suited to this. The author then writes at greater length about four of the forms of gesture that appear in the trials: kissing, spitting, hand gestures, and the exposure of genitalia are discussed in detail. Of these, the section on hand gestures is the most extensive. She lists data from the trials relating to the swearing of oaths, shaking hands, the making of the “fig sign,” the sign of the cross, and pointing.

In summarizing her work as a whole, Petra Bálint states that she has managed to gain access to the lifeworld of the common people of the 18th and 19th centuries. Despite the fragmentary



nature of the data, she argues that the quality of the sources has enabled her to bring to light elements of everyday life as they were used. The everyday life illustrated through her data is mobile and open, and although its specific features can essentially be grasped at the collective level, it is occasionally possible to reach the level of individual actors (or, as the author calls them, “historical data providers”). The themes she outlines thus point in the direction of the history of mentality, an area in which the author sees further research opportunities.

The structure of the volume, in which an enormous amount of source material is presented, is transparent and easy to follow, while the visual separation of the many source quotations enhances the readability of the text. At the end of the book, a map, a collection of the idiomatic expressions and phrasemes that occur in the trials, as well as photographs of a few of the trials also provide valuable assistance to the reader.

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