



Library

Peter Chrastina
Vyvoj vyuzivania krajiny Trenčianskej kotliny a jej horskej obruby
[The evolution of landscape-use in the Trencin basin and its mountain range]
Constantine the Philosopher University
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This transdisciplinary monograph is the first detailed book ever published on the history of landscape use in a Slovak region. The author, Peter Chrastina, is an expert in both history and geography. In this study he strives to apply the methods of the natural sciences to archaeological, historical and cultural geographical data.

The book starts with a theoretical analysis of expressions such as “cultural landscape”, “land cover”, “transition processes”, “trends in landscape use”, “geo-ecological types”, “landscape subtypes”, and, of course, “human impact on nature”. Unfortunately, these definitions are based almost exclusively on formulations by Slovak authors and are hence do not match the terminology employed in international works.

The geographical object of this work is the Trencin basin in SW Slovakia, in the Vah river valley, also including the surrounding mountain ranges (Povazsky Inovec, Strazovske Mts., White Carpathians). The area under consideration extends over ca. 157.5 km². The study has several objectives. It assesses land use on the basis of both published and unpublished data, monitors temporal changes in categories of landscape

use, identifies the principal causes of differences and changes in landscape use, and points to foreseeable future trends. The author adopts a holistic approach for the whole geographical region, taking in the whole complex of physical-geographical features of the regional landscape (lithological, morphological, climatological, hydrological, pedological and bio-geographical), as well as nature conservation aspects.

Chrastina divides his landscape-use history in two periods: from prehistoric times until 1782/84 and from 1782/84 to 1998. He divides the prehistoric period into four stages. In the first, comprising the Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods (30,000-5300 BC), humans impacted the landscape only slightly (hunter-gatherer communities). In the second stage (Neolithic, Aeneolithic, and early and middle Bronze Ages, 5300-1200 BC), a new shifting and mosaic-like landscape developed as a result of the rise of farming and, consequently, the rotation of settlements, fields, pastures and forests. The late Bronze Age, the Iron Age, the Roman period, the period of the migration of nations, and the early Middle Ages (1200 BC-900 AD) make up the third stage. It was marked by the formation of a semi-natural (mesohemerobic) landscape. The fourth stage includes the rest of the Middle Ages and subsequent history until the land reform introduced by empress Maria Theresa, and was characterized by an intensification of agricultural production.

The second time period (1782/84-1998) includes three stages: The first (1782/84-1865/80?) was the most influenced by the geo-ecological limits of the landscape, due to the lack of innovative exploitation technologies; the second (1955/56) was the time of collectivization and the industrialization of agriculture (collective farms were forcibly established and land use was planned in detail by the leading party); the last (1989/91-1998) featured the changes that followed the so-called Soft (or Velvet) Revolution that did away with the Socialist-Communist order (an analysis of the recent decade (1999-2009) is unfortunately not included). This last period saw an intensification of land use and, conversely, the abandonment of fields and pastures, an evolution influenced by market, trade and business trends in a borderless Europe. Many traditional farming businesses and collective farms folded, and new corporations managed from western Europe (or other foreign countries) were established, influencing land-use patterns through the creation of industrial parks, new communication systems, etc.

The book gives an excellent overview of changes in landscape use in

Slovakia and Central-Eastern Europe. Its interpretation of pre-medieval times is sufficiently well supported by a very good analysis of archeological finds, but the importance of the approximately one thousand years of the Great Moravian, Hungarian and Austro-Hungarian periods appears to be underestimated, since they are discussed in less pages than the pre-medieval period. It is important to emphasize, instead, that it is during this time that the basic matrix and mosaic of recent landscape use was formed (settlement sites, road networks, fields, forest borders, river regulations, etc.).

In Chrastina's analysis of the last millenium, no original archive documents are cited, just second-hand sources, with the exception of several maps, figures and tables. Here sometimes the book reads more as a synthesis than as a study of historical documents, but this approach is ultimately suited to its objectives.

The book makes an exciting read and I definitely recommend it. However, I would caution prospective readers that the author's methodological approach, e.g., the classification of "landscape-use categories" (in Slovak: TVK) and geo-ecological landscape types and subtypes (GT or GsT), is appropriate for the goals of the work, but cannot be easily understood by non-Slovak readers. Slovak landscape ecology is at a quite high level and has its own school(s) (represented by Milan Ruzicka, Laszlo Miklos, Zita Izakovicova, Florin Zigray, etc.), but it is not an easy task to convert its data into a format that is manageable and readily understandable at the international level. The author cites European, American etc. authors only occasionally. The book is a true *Slovakum* (although a very good one). Some of Slovakia's neighboring countries - e.g., the Czech Republic and Hungary - have been very active in research on landscape or vegetation history (forests, grasslands etc.), but Chrastina rarely discusses or even mentions these studies. The reader may also miss a comparison with other parts of Slovakia. The Slovak Republic is rich in different landscape types, including some with similar structures as the Trencin basin. Other authors provide partial results on changes in landscape and vegetation use, including the present writer, who assessed the long-term distribution of non-native plants in the Nitra river basin (*Kanitzia* 15: 47-62) and the history of saline habitats in SW Slovakia (*Flora Pannonica* 5: 67-93).

In the monograph there are more than half a thousand literature references, usually to essays by Slovak authors published in the Slovak

language. It includes 70 black-and-white and color figures, 45 diagrams and 37 tables of varying quality. At the end of the book, foreseeable trends in landscape use and the scientific and practical implications of the results of the investigation are discussed. The conclusions seems to be very general.

In spite of several weak points, this study is fundamental reading for any who wish to gain a better understanding of the history of landscape use in Slovakia. Of course, it will mainly be useful to Slovak readers (the English summary at the end of the book is very compendious), but whoever is interested in the past and present trends of Central or Eastern European landscapes, and understands Slovak or a cognate Slavic language, should also read this unique book.