THE PANNONIAN GREAT PLAIN – A FLOURISHING GARDEN?

WATER AS A KEY TO THE HISTORY AND FUTURE OF THE CENTRAL LOWLANDS IN THE CARPATHIAN BASIN

"Europe's Famous Garden" is the title of a book on the historical ecology of the Carpathian Basin (R. Várkonyi, 1993). This metaphorical title refers to several explicit and hidden senses of a garden. It is humanised Nature coinciding with a series of human needs: shelter, safety, food, beauty and paradise. The symbolism of garden and landscape has common roots: it is the relationship of culture and nature. The “famous garden” concept connects the rich potential and diversity of the landscape with its role in the heart of Europe. Humans have shaped the Carpathian Basin over several thousand years: the remains can be traced back to the Bronze Age. The first settlers used the loess on the flood-safe plateaus, where permanent changes resulted from the felling of deciduous forests, pasturage and ploughing (Frisnyák, 1990). They formed a cultivated landscape, widely called a cultural landscape: culture and cultivation have overlapping meanings. There are parallels with the terms horticulture, sylviculture and agriculture. The Pannonian Plain is the birthplace of the Hungarian people's European history. A famous writer explained that the resonantly open pronunciation of Hungarian makes it the perfect language to carry over the sweeping plains. Travellers and geographers sometimes described it as a world of a great diversity, and also of ambiguity and extremes. Why is it important in the European context? It is a distinctive region of the continent both culturally and ecologically. It conserves characteristics similar to the Eastern Eurasian Steppe; it is the most western region, where originally the forest steppe occurred, and it is a melting pot of the eastern and western cultures, and also a threshold for many species coming from neighbouring climatic zones. What does “Europe's Famous Garden” look like today? How have inhabitants of this area managed its potential and does the future hold?