The Hungarian Historical Review 6/1 2017 Medieval Economic History

The Hungarian Historical Review

New Series of Acta Historica Academiæ Scientiarum Hungaricæ

Medieval Economic History

VOLUME 6 NUMBER 1

2017

Institute of History, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences

Versailles: Une histoire naturelle. By Grégory Quenet. Paris: Editions La Découverte, 2015. 225 pp.

Everyone knows Versailles—the palace and its gardens—and yet Versailles is not well known. Built by the French kings during the 17th and 18th century over an area previously owned by aristocratic families and religious communities, seat of the Court and the government from the middle of the 18th century until the French Revolution, it has played since then a secondary yet strongly symbolical role. A museum since 1837, it was the symbolic backdrop for many nineteenth- and twentieth-century political events. Rediscovered as one of the highlights of European art and culture in the early twentieth century with its gardens epitomizing the baroque style in European garden history, it has become one of the most visited monuments, with more than seven million visitors a year. The extensive restoration campaign, launched after the 1999 storm that devastated much of the park, foregrounds the figure of an all-powerful Louis XIV, who, by building the palace and its gardens, achieved his will to absolute dominion over men, territory, and nature.

Such an ideological reading of Versailles is still common, even in much academic writing. Yet art historical and historical research has long since demonstrated that the making of Versailles was a complex process, filled with trials and errors, with projects never completed or replaced by other projects. Recently, other areas of research have looked at this complex history: the piecemeal land acquisition policy to the workings of the complex administrative machinery that organized the building and the daily workings of the domain, the description of the scientific and technological prowess, the activities of humble actors such as gardeners and fountaineers. This recent and growing literature acknowledges Versailles not only as a site and symbol of power, but as a full-fledged human endeavour with its loads of wilfulness and incoherencies, and gives it a much welcomed historical depth.

Grégory Quenet's book, *Versailles: A natural history*, follows this recent historiographical trend. Quenet is a specialist of the history of environmental risks and a promoter of environmental history in France. His choice of Versailles as a case study was a double challenge, both of the traditional historical wisdom about Versailles, and of the realm of environmental history. What he proposes is "another history" (see the title of his introduction) of a Versailles that encompasses the whole entity, not only the palace and the gardens, but the much

larger hunting park and the streams of incoming and outgoing resources that were needed for the domain to function. Taking a typically environmental history stance, he shows how the persistence and resistance of the natural conditions of the site played an essential role in the shaping of the historical Versailles; and how the co-evolution of the (natural) site and the (human) developments involved many actors beyond the well-known decision makers, both humans and non-humans.

The demonstration is organized in four parts. The first part, entitled the "birth of Versailles", describes the site before the large scale transformations brought by Louis XIV from 1660 onward: a swampy valley, good for game, but with little running water merely catering to the needs of a few scattered villages. The last part deals with the "death of Versailles", the period following the French Revolution when most of the grounds were abandoned and sold. (What today is called Grand Parc is a mere 10% of the 8000 hectares owned by the king at the eve of the Revolution).

The second and third parts describe in detail what Quenet believes are the two of the most important factors of the development of Versailles: water and game management. The constant lack of sufficient flowing water was considered one of the main challenges of the site, and many projects were proposed to bring more flowing water to the fountains and the city (though only a few were realized). While historians have already studied these projects as feats of science and technology, Quenet chooses to look at the way the projects were implemented on the ground, and presents them as an ongoing negotiation process between the local social fabric, the environmental characteristics of the land and the administration in charge of the infrastructure—an approach simultaneously reflecting the local and the global power balance. He follows a similar approach in his treatment of hunting. In looking at the areas subjected to constant hunting pressure throughout the year, and subjected to many and often conflicting imperatives (forest management to encourage large game and fowl, wood production, agriculture and animal husbandry in the villages enclosed within the domain), he analyzes the evolution of hunting practices and grounds management as a play in which humans and animals are given equally important roles.

In his conclusion entitled "For an environmental history of France", Quenet reframes the dual aim of his book: while it is a book on the history of Versailles—and as such, a book that cannot be ignored by any future study on Versailles—it is also a manifesto for environmental history. By choosing to study Versailles,

a most unlikely object from the point of view of his discipline, Quenet claims that all human endeavours are within the purview of environmental history and, more generally, that general history cannot dispense with the latter.

His conceptual framework is inspired by the work of the French anthropologist Philippe Descola and philosopher Bruno Latour. He proposes to leap over the "great divide" between humans and animals and write a "symmetrical history" where humans and non-humans are considered equal actors. In such an approach, the role of the "designers" recedes behind that played by what Latour calls a "collective", acting on hybrid (natural and cultural) entities. For a reader coming to the book from the perspective of garden history, the narrative appears at times somewhat contrived. However, it brings to the fore the importance of looking at the material conditions in which gardens are created and continue to exist. Garden history is indeed making that turn: Quenet's approach can be compared to that proposed by two historians and a landscape architect in their book on the gardens of Chantilly (Briffaud, Damée, and Heaulmé, *Chantilly au temps de Le Nôtre: Un paysage en projet* [2013]). Without using the conceptual framework of Quenet, they look at the process of the making of the gardens. Their book could also be considered as an exercise in environmental history, without the name; their stated affiliation, however, is garden history. The combined reading of the two books opens up a wealth of new questions enriching the dialogue between the two fields.

Catherine Szanto
École Normale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris-La Villette