



Visitors in the Baradla Cave at the "Oblique tower of Pisa". Woodcut c. 1850's

published his experiences and observations in a book consisting of two volumes " *Travels in Hungary with a short account of Vienna in the year 1793. Illustrated with Map and sixteen other Copper-Plates.* " London, 1797, printed for GG. and J.Robinson. XVIII, 506 p. His work was re-published in three French editions / *Paris, 1799 and 1803, Leipzig, 1800* /and in two Dutch editions / *Den Haag, 1800 and 1801* /and by these the work became well-known and popular throughout Europe and for a long time was the most important source of all information about Hungary.

During his travels, Townson visited several caves and later he described his observations. Out of his accounts, the most valuable is his description of the Baradla Cave of Aggtelek, not only because it was the first printed detailed document but also because the fame of the greatest natural treasure of Hungary

had become widespread.

Townson's attention was drawn to the famous cave whilst at Kassa (now Kosice in Czechoslovakia) some 70 km away. At that time only about 2200 m of passage had been discovered. Townson set out to visit Baradla on July 12th. He arrived late in the evening at Nádaska (now Tornanádaska, a village border crossing between Hungary and Czechoslovakia) where he was received by the local landlord. Townson writes (pp311-312), " The hills here, which are very high, are of unstratified compact limestone, without any petrifications, but it is full of holes; some of these are so deep, and at the same time so round, that they look as if they had been formed by art. " This is the first authoritative information of the potholes of Alsóhegy, which rise above the Bódva valley, out of which the greatest, with a depth of 245 metres, is



"The Great Curtain". Woodcut c. 1850's

the Vecsembükki pothole.

On Sunday July 13th he arrived in Aggtelek. That very evening he climbed down cautiously into the cave in order to find out only the temperature. The next day however, he was strolling along in the Baradla Cave for several hours. We can read about it in his book on pages 312-316 and is as follows :-

In the morning I returned to the cavern, to see how far I could penetrate into it, and to repeat my experiment with the thermometer, but by accident this was left behind. The report here is, that this cavern extends several miles under the hills, and that it would require several days to see the whole of it. The mouth of it is at the bottom of a precipice about 150 feet high, at the west end of a compact unstratified limestone hill, which runs east and west. This entrance is about two yards broad, but so low that I was obliged to bend considerably to get in. I descended rapidly for a short distance, and then I found myself in an immense cave, with a very lofty vault; this has in different parts communication with other caves and passages, and these again with others. Some of these caverns are over one another; in some places I came to considerable streams of water; in one great cave my guide conducted me over a hill formed of great blocks of stone, which most probably had fallen down from the roof: in one place I had to get down a hole like the funnel of a chimney; then I was led into a cave where large stalactites, as thick as my body, hung pendent from the roof, and I was shown others where the sides were ornamented in the

manner of the most curious Gothic workmanship. In some the stalactites were so thick and close together, that we were in danger of losing one another if we separated but a few yards. Here aged stalactites, overloaded with their own weight, had fallen down, and lay prostrate; and there an embryo stalactite was just shooting into existence. The most curious was one apparently of modern date; the sides, and particularly the roof, seemed as if recently separated: and it was probably so, for I think most of these caverns have been formed by the falling in of the rock: very white and slender stalactites were only found here.

After I had wandered about for three or four hours in this awful gloom, and had reached the end of the caverns in one direction, I thought it time to come out, and I desired my guide to return. After we had returned, as we thought, some way, we found passage further; yet the guide was sure he was right. I thought I recognised the same rocks we had just left, and which had prevented our proceeding further, but the guide was positive he was in a right direction. Luckily for us I had written my name on the soft clay of the bottom of the cave, which had been the extent of our journey; on seeing this the guide was as thunderstruck, and ran this way and that way, and knew not where he was, nor what to do. I desired him not to be frightened, but to go calmly to work and extricate us from this labyrinth. As the wood which we burnt instead of lamps was nearly exhausted, and as I never adverted either to one of the guides whom we had left above, who by being charged with wood could not get down the funnel-like hole, being so near; nor to the people of the village being acquainted with our being in the cavern, who no doubt would have taken every possible means of coming to our assistance had we stayed much longer than usual. I was a good deal alarmed for our safety, and there was good reason: had our torches gone out, we should never have been able to find our way out; nor, had any accident have happened to our guide, could we by ourselves, though we had lights, have had any hopes of extricating ourselves. After wandering about till all our wood was nearly exhausted, we found a great stalactite from which, on account of its remarkable whiteness, I had been induced to knock off a specimen as I came by: I recollected how I stood when I struck it: this at once set us right; and after walking a little further we made ourselves heard to the other guide, from whom we got fresh torches, and we then continued our route homewards without further difficulty.

So complete a labyrinth as these caverns are in some places, is not I am sure to be found but in similar caverns: large open passages proved cul de sacs, whilst our road was over and under, through and amongst grotto-work of the most intricate nature. I firmly believe, that though a

man should have lights and food enough to last him a month, he would not be able to find his way out.

On the soil at the bottom of the cavern, my guides shewed me impressions which, they said, were from the wheels of a carriage. I thought immediately to have detected the error by measuring the distance of the marks of the two wheels at different distances: but I was mistaken; the marks were throughout parallel. Whether these were really the marks of a carriage I cannot say: I only observed them in the first part of the caverns. If the soil at the bottom at the mouth of the cave was taken away, I do not see any impossibility, through the assistance of men, to get such a thing in thus far. It is known to have served as a hiding-place to the weak and unfortunate in time of war, and a better hiding-place there cannot be.

I thought it probable that I was the first English traveller who had examined this immense cavern; but Mr.Korabinsky says *, "that it is of such astonishing dimensions in length, that two members of the Royal Society of London, who were sent some years ago into Hungary by the Society, to examine this and other curiosities, after remaining in it three days, could never get to the end of it, nor find an opening."

* *Lexicon von Ungarn, page 6.*

Since we have no supporting sources about the two English scientists mentioned by Korabinsky, we have to accept with great certainty that Townson seems to have been the first Englishman to visit the Baradla Cave.

At the turn of the 18th - 19th century there had been very few Hungarians who could read English, so Townson's work had become more widely known in Hungary only after its French translation had been published. It was Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, the greatest Hungarian poet of his time, who first mentioned in 1801 Townson's description, and wrote about it in his letter to his mother after he had visited the cave. The complete Hungarian translation of the Baradla description was published by Pál Almási Balogh in the periodical entitled "*Tudományos Gyűjtemény*" / *Scientific Collection* / in 1820. Up to the present, lots of quotations and references have been made in Hungarian speleological literature.

Similarly to John Paget's and other English travellers descriptions of travels in Hungary, it seems to be most desirable that also Townson's

Detail of the cave. Woodcut c. 1850's

valuable work should be translated and published in Hungarian.

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The first detailed description of

BARADLA CAVE

in Robert Townson's book published in 1797

The largest and best-known cave in Hungary is the **Baradla Stalactite Cave** at Aggtelek in the north-eastern border region of the country. The entire length of the cave, together with the 5.2 km long section known as Domica cave lying in Czechoslovak territory, is 24 km. Its historic past, the huge size of its passages, the great variety of its stalactite formations and the crowd of visitors attracted by its beauty, make this cave worthy of mention amongst the most famous caves of the world.

According to the archaeological excavations, Baradla has been known since ancient times. It was first the dwelling place of prehistoric man and later, nearly up to the Second World war, it served as a

refuge for the inhabitants of the surrounding territories. Traces of tourism go back as far as the beginning of the 18th Century. Organised tourism can be dated back to the end of the last century with professional guides. Today, in the Hungarian part of the cave, the most beautiful passages in the so-called short tours attract 200,000 visitors yearly. The number of tourists in the Czechoslovak side can be estimated at about 140,000.

Sándor Hadobás

A Baradla-Barlang Első Részletes Leírása Robert Townson Könyvében /1797/

Magyarország legnagyobb és legismertebb barlangja a 24 km hosszú, méltán világhírű aggteleki Baradla, melynek Domica nevű 7 km-es szakasza átnyúlik Csehszlovákiába. A barlang meglepően későn, csak a 18. század derekán tűnt fel a nyomtatott forrásokban. Kiseb német és magyar nyelvű híradások után 1797-ben jelent meg első részletesebb ismertetése Robert Townson angol természetbúvár 1793. évi magyarországi utazásáról szóló, később franciára és hollandra is lefordított könyvében. Ezáltal külföldön talán hamarabb híre ment a magyar föld legnagyobb természeti kincsének, mint otthon. Írásunkban teljes egészében közreadjuk Townson érdekes Baradla-leírását, melyről Csokonai Vitéz Mihály már 1801-ben említést tett aggteleki barlanglátogatásáról édesanyjának írt levelében, magyar fordítását pedig Almási Balogh Pál közölte a Tudományos Gyűjtemény 1820. évi 1. számában.

The cave was mentioned surprisingly late in printed sources. The first great figure of Hungarian geography, Mátyás Bél (1684-1749), mentioned the cave first in 1742, in his work "*Notitia Hungariae novae historico geographica*" /vol.IV page 17. In the same reference he calls attention to the error made by G.Wernher in his famous book "*De admirandis Hungariae aquis*" /Basel, 1549, when he writes about the cave of Fülek. It is obvious that he wanted to write about the Baradla Cave of Aggtelek.

After shorter reports written in German /*Korabinsky, 1778, 1786; Ungrisches Magazin, 1781* /and in the Hungarian language /*Teleki, 1796; Vályi, 1796* /it was only in 1797 when the first detailed description of Baradla Cave was issued, thanks to an English traveller.

Dr.Robert Townson, a physician, naturalist, and member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, undertook a journey through Hungary during the five months from May to October 1793. He