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Town and Countryside in early modern Hungary

The Case of Sopron, c. 1500-1800

The town of Sopron (Ödenburg) is situated near the western border of Hungary at the junction of major routes of commerce, no further than 70 km from Vienna. As early as in 1291 the town had become a chartered town or **free royal town**, which meant the most fully-fledged municipal autonomy in this period. The town was subordinated only to the king and could represent itself in parliament from 1445. The surrounding seigniorial towns and villages often lodged an appeal with the Town Court due to its wide legal autonomy. The inhabitants of seigniorial towns and the villagers could have been under the necessity of going to the town, and the legal proceedings they experienced in Sopron may have meant a model pattern for them. The **seigniorial town** (oppidum) is a settlement under the landlord's authority, with limited legal privileges, concentrated mostly on agricultural production and on the exchange of products of its immediate hinterland. Sopron as a county town was gradually becoming significant during the early modern period. The county (megye) was not only the unit of administration in Hungary, but that of the autonomy of nobility, too. The importance of Sopron as a county town attracted many noblemen dwelling in Sopron county to the town. The county was one of the most densely populated in the 15-18th c., at the beginning of the 18th c., for example, the density was 32 person/km² and it rose more than 40 p/km² by the end of the century. The population of Sopron was approximately 3500-3700 in the middle of the 15th c., and due to the decline during the later decades some 3000 persons lived in the town in the early 16th c. According to the first national census the population of Sopron was 12600 in 1784-87. These data place Sopron at the high level of Hungarian urban hierarchy in this period.

This paper will explore two significant aspects of the relation between the town and its countryside: the problems of mutual economic dependence and the role of Sopron as a centre of culture.

We have used the Town Accounts, the Town Council Rolls and the parish records of the Lutheran church beyond secondary sources in our study. The Town Accounts contain all kinds of incomes and expenses of the town year by year from the early 14th c. They are written in German, and register the eight villages owned by Sopron as a landlord in a separate item. Sopron had bought these villages in its immediate hinterland by the mid-16th c. due to its ardent demand for land-owning. Everyday

affairs, the proceedings of governing, the problems of "running the town" and decisions concerning **the eight villages** were recorded in the Town Council Rolls. Using the abundant amount of parish records we have put emphasis on the sources revealing how the schools were run, how religious life was organized and financially supported. Perhaps it is worth starting with a list of measures made by the Town Council in order to control the immediate hinterland, since the Town Council Rolls offer plenty of these measures. Among the permanent incomes the seigniorial tax paid by the villages under the authority of the town can be found, and it could have been even 20% of the totals in particular periods, as in 1527 and in 1528, but it usually amounted only 2-5% of that. Each unit of land held in villeinage in the village of Ágfalva, for example, had to pay two "dénár"-s (a Hungarian coin of the period) a year and to give presents (agricultural products) to the town similarly to other villages. Raw materials produced in these villages were forced to the market of the town in order to supply the local guilds and craftsmen. Villains living in these villages were not allowed to sell their products to any merchant or craftsmen not dwelling in Sopron. According to the measures in 1455 only local burghers were allowed to buy any products in the market of Sopron while the town-flag was on the pole. When special demand for corn occurred in case of archducal visitation or when parliament had sessions here in the 17th c., and especially from the 1720s, when Sopron got involved in selling corn in the Hereditary Provinces, the magistracy purchased corn mostly in the surrounding villages. The council protecting the interest of local craftsmen aimed at keeping the price of agricultural products low and that of manufactured goods high. This effort led to a gap between relative prices of agricultural and manufactured products in the 15th c. The interest of the town was asserted at a higher level by two charters providing special privileges for the burghers of Sopron. They did not have to pay customs outward (usually one thirtieth of the value of products) on wine and corn produced on land owned by the town from 1383. The measures have been listed show clearly how, Sopron managed to tie the villages in its immediate hinterland through economic means and privileges. **The eight villages** was the core of the "pure market region" of Sopron. The **pure market region** is meant to be a territory with a market centre, which is the only place of exchange for the surrounding settlements according to the accessible sources. Now we would like to explore the pure market region belonging to Sopron.

Sopron was the only commercial centre of the area bordered by Répce Stream, the Irott-kő Hill, the Lanzasér, Rozália and Lajta Mountains and Lake Fertő.

The town owned its role as centre of exchange because its location, and it did not have to express this position by special privileges. Though four major roads (Gemachte Strassen, viae stratae) went through the town heading for Austria, the market region of Sopron did not involve settlements in Lower Austria, since these roads mainly led towards larger towns such as Vienna or Bruck. Commercial relations must have developed with Lower Austrian towns and villages through roads

with less importance (*Ordinare Wegen, viae ordinariae*), but this link was far less dynamic than that of between the town and its pure market region.

The borders of the market region seems to be set in the 15th c. and shows no major change until the early 19th c., as the census returns analyzed by Prof. V. Bácskai in 1828. Some significant changes, however, took place inside the market region during the 15-17th centuries. The town had been the association of landowning burghers engaged in agricultural production in the 13th and early 14th c., before the guilds with more and more power reshaped the life of the town by the end of the 14th c., though agricultural production still remained an important source of livelihood. The prosperity of trade leads to a division of labour between the town and its countryside, Sopron was providing its hinterland with more manufactured products and gradually built up the system of distribution there. The villains of the surrounding villages and seigniorial towns, especially that of the domains of Fraknó and Kanizsa, however, regularly went to the town in order to sell their corn surplus there. The trades of Sopron could have fulfilled the demand of the countryside, since the closed a village or a seigniorial town were situated to the town, the more severe decline this domestic industry experienced within the market region of the town.

This network of exchange of production seems to have undergone major transformation from the late 15th c. Owing to their local trade and role played as lower centres of exchange approximately a dozen of seigniorial towns began to flourish at the edge of the market region of Sopron, and the town had to face these new rivals and the more limited possibilities of commerce in this period.

The manorial production of manufactured goods seems to have improved again in the 16th c. challenging the crafts of Sopron, since the villagers boycotted the products of the town because of the very high price, though the quality was much higher, as well. The commodity production in villages experienced a serious decline, because the villains were forced to work on allodium owned by landlords and had fewer opportunity to sell their products and had less surplus to merchandise. These tendencies made the situation of Sopron extremely difficult, since the purchasing power of the countryside was descending and the town could have no longer controlled the ratio between prices of agricultural and manufactured products. The prices of agricultural products and raw materials inevitable for crafts dramatically increased in 17th century Hungary.

How could Sopron handle the problems occurred?

1. The town had to arrive at an agreement with the county of nobility in order to supply the guilds with raw materials and to assert consumption in the hinterland. The county gained a better position, so the town had to admit the right of the county the regulate the prices. The county obviously favoured

the interest of the countryside opposed to the town. Sopron was bound to give up some of its privileges and noblemen started flooding into the town. Yet the increasing number of noblemen approved economic activity, since they were affluent consumers and represented new patterns of life to the burghers.

2. The town tried to take part in the agricultural commodity production and commerce of corn. As our sources reveal traders purchased corn in front of the gates of the town and sold it on the territory occupied by the Turkish Empire, because there were better possibilities for marketing there from the late 16th c. The tax they paid made up a significant part of the incomes of Sopron.

3. Since the surplus of **the eight villages** had become more valuable, Sopron, like other landlords, imposed extra tax and other burden on the villagers in harder times. The magistrate rose the amount of tax and the "presents" in the case of the village of Medgyes in 1598: this decision and the Town Accounts reveal how the town made use of the reserve of these villages.

Vine-growing always had an important role in Sopron and it achieved an even greater significance from the 17th c., and because of the lack of sufficient purchasing power in the market region, a great amount of wine was exported to Silesia and Moravia.

Sopron proved to have been able to come off successfully from the pressure of nobility and the increasing significance of agricultural production, and to find appropriate techniques how to preserve basic privileges. Despite the decreasing craft activity the town remained a substantial centre of commerce with international importance due to the corn marketing in Austria in the 18th c. Demographical changes seem to confirm the significance of Sopron, since the increase of population is much higher in the town than in the seigniorial towns in Sopron County, where the key craft activities had gone downhill in the 16-17th c. Sopron was still among the ten most important market centres of Hungary in 1828, when the town was the only market place for 123,257 persons and another 35,370 went occasionally there to sell and purchase.

The impact as a cultural centre, however, was much more widespread in these centuries. The great amount of the documents of the Lutheran church reveal the characteristics of religious life, education and culture from the 16th c. The town have had a school since 1354, and Sopron students were educated at universities abroad, though their place of birth cannot be identified. (Figure 5) Six churches were built inside the town-walls during the 13th c. presumably not just for the inhabitants of the town - about 2000 persons in this period -, but for villagers, as well.

The Lutheran church reorganized the Latin Grammar School in 1557, and invited "rectors" from German-speaking provinces of the Holy Roman Empire, who could be identified in the parish accounts. Two teachers had come from Vienna, two from Wiener Neustadt, four from Regensburg and one from Strassburg in the 16th and early 17th centuries, and one came from Westphalia, one from Hamburg and Coburg during the age of recatholization. None of the teachers stayed longer probably because of the insecurity prevailed by the constant Turkish threat, but the continuity of teachers from abroad guaranteed the higher level of education, the prestige of the institution and the inter-ethnic relations of the church. The town enlarged the school in 1557 spending 650 "font"-s (a large amount of money) for a new boarding school for the great number of students coming from countryside. A public elementary school was opened in 1569, in which the language of teaching was German, the native tongue of the burghers. First the Bavarian Orbán Reuter had been appointed to be the teacher at this school, then M. Klein from Leipzig was asked for to organize and teach a second class.

During the last decades of the 16th c. the freedom of religion had experienced before was threatened, and the schools were forced to move to two small seigniorial towns near Sopron (Nyék and Németeresztúr). After the Peace of Vienna (1606), however, Sopron could reorganize its cultural institutions, and a German and a Hungarian elementary school were founded, moreover, the town opened a school for basic training beside the renewed Latin Grammar Schools. Though a plenty of wealthy noblemen from Transdanubia sent their sons to the schools of Sopron in the 1620s, most of the students came from the Lutheran German towns and villages from Upper Hungary.

The Jesuits had the opportunity to open a school with three classes and thirty-two students in 1632, which enjoyed popularity among the catholic noblemen in the country, because there was no charge for education and the classes were held in Latin, which was the official language of Hungary in these centuries. The student plays at the end of the academic sessions (examen) attracted the noble parents to Sopron, and the town was becoming more open for them. The financial support of the palatine and the Court had a significant impact on the Hungarian nobility as well as the presence of young aristocrats (Batthyányi, Zrinyi) at the school. A new boarding-house was built for the "poor Roman Catholic pupils" in 1654, and it was continuously enlarged from the 1660s on, because of the increasing number of catholics in the town. The financial support given by the town played an important role in maintaining this school, too.

The town of Sopron had bought a house in 1658 in order to place there the new Hungarian Grammar School in 1658, and to give shelter for the Hungarian pupils coming from Sopron, Austria, Transdanubia, Upper Hungary and Transylvania, as K. Seelman's *Hodoeporica exeunti urbe...* (1661) revealed. The first headmaster (P. Kövesdy) originated from Eperjes (Pressau).

Sopron supported the schools, whatever religion they represented, buying building sites and houses, paying the teacher's income, giving donation and scholarships to less affluent students. The town made a tremendous effort to protect Lutheran schools, but gave place for the Jesuit institutions, as well. The situation of the schools was a central topic at the sessions of the Town Council, to which inspectors reported regularly. The town had done all in its power to be admitted as a cultural centre, even the burghers were ready to shoulder the expenses of the schools. A mayor offered his garden to the school, others had given shelter for students from the countryside, and they were not forced to pay rent, if they were not able to. Grants and foundation-money given by burghers rounded off teachers' and students' income. K. Lackner, for example, had left one third of his wealth for the students, who had the intention to continue their studies abroad. We have documents on similar donations from the 1640s. M. Lövey and G. Grad, for example, had given "bread and breakfast" without any charge for six students from the occupied territories, because - as they put down- "the lookout of culture is dim there because of the Turkish occupation". Students from the occupied territories and from the eastern parts of the country shared households with the burghers of Sopron, and experienced everyday activities of one of the westernmost town of Hungary and may have been taken over its patterns. The examples above, though they show only the top of the iceberg, reveal the consciousness of the burghers and their role played in life of a cultural centre, Sopron invited eminent teachers from abroad and let worthy and poor, Lutheran and Catholic students be their pupils, and they could even continue their studies abroad financed by the town. The town had become a substantial cultural link between Western Europe and Hungary.

Sopron owned jurisdiction over the religious life of **the eight villages**. The Town Accounts and the Town Council Rolls offered numerous examples of financial support in order to maintain the churches there. A certain amount of lime was given, for example, to the villages of Harka in 1609 and to Ágfalva in 1610 for the purpose of rebuilding the churches there. Financial aid, however, was not the only way of supporting these villages, as Senator J. Preining's activity revealed: he bestowed an Agenda upon the congregation of Bánfalva with his own introduction in 1571.

The town appointed, supervised and discharged the priests of the villages. The orphaned M. Pieth, for example, was designated to be the priest at Balf in 1521, because he intended to graduate in theology. T. Oemnicus was removed from his position as the priest of Medgyes by the town in 1621. The priests appointed by the town could have been obliged to Sopron and served its interest; K. Baumgartner, for example, had been a family tutor in the mayor's household before he was nominated to be the priest of Ágfalva. Since they lived near the town, they might have managed to keep up their connections and return to the town as priests or teachers. This was the case with A. Sallinger, who asked for a position inside the walls having been served as a priest for thirty-five years in the village of Harka. Owing to

the cultural significance Sopron was able to overshadow the importance of the diocese and to deny the bishop's authority over the surrounding villages, and the representatives of the town were always present in the convocations of the diocese and could influence the decisions. Priests from **the eight villages** had often left for seigniorial towns (Locsmánd, Csáva, Németeresztúr) and even for important free royal towns such as Pozsony, Besztercebánya or Kőszeg (Pressburg, Neusoll, Güns), and the town acquired a very good reputation as the haven of the Lutheran religion and culture in the sea of recatholization and resort of Lutheran priests. J. Fuchs, for example, from Igló (Iglau), I. Alter from Lőcse (Leucha) were nominated to be the priests of Balf in 1627 and in 1639.

Sopron proved to be a significant centre of commerce and culture with an extended hinterland due to traditions, privileges, conscious burghers dwelling there and advantageous location. The efforts of the town gain special merit bearing upon the political events of Hungary in the 16-18th c., when Turkish and Habsburg occupation, religious intolerance, riots and general insecurity threatened the population.

Further research concerning other aspects of Sopron as a centre has to be done based on the great amount of accessible sources.

Further basic sources:

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