
The organization and execution of administration are cornerstones to an understanding of the history of any town or city within any historical period. In European urban history, analysis of different forms of municipal governance is a popular topic which has great potential for comparative research. These two reasons in themselves are sufficient explanation for why the publication of the book by Drahoslav Magdoško devoted to the self-governance of the city of Košice in the Middle Ages is to be welcomed. Chronologically, the book covers the period from the mid-thirteenth century to the end of the first third of the sixteenth century. In fact, there are more reasons to appreciate this book. Its findings are based on long-term and careful archival research, which has yielded several new insights and revisions of our previous knowledge on this subject. Primarily, Magdoško has focused on the mechanisms of operation related to the performance of municipal self-governance in Košice, such as the agenda of the local town judge (villicus, iudex, ger. Richter) and of the city council, the role of the Community of Burghers (later replaced by the Council of Elders), the functioning of the municipal offices, management of the urban economy, administration of the local suburbs, etc. To frame this issue in context, Magdoško dedicated the introductory passages of his book to an outline of the history of Košice in the Middle Ages and also to an assessment of the position and role of this city in the urban network of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary.

The tendency to compare the situation in Košice to other contemporary Hungarian towns is generally strong in the text, making Magdoško’s book very relevant for urban historiography on this area. One might regret that the same comparative point of view was not always consistently applied to compare his findings for Košice to the history of cities in the neighboring countries, in particular Lesser Poland, Silesia, Moravia, and Bohemia. Certain issues, such as the election and competencies of the town judge, are viewed from a wider, Central European perspective. In other cases, however, Magdoško offers not a systematic comparison, but rather an indication of wider contexts. For the periods of time in question, when the events in Hungary were closely linked to the situation in the surrounding kingdoms under the rule of one sovereign (Sigismund of Luxembourg, Matthias Corvinus), the comparative approach
would be particularly desirable. Moreover, to assess the situation in the neighboring countries, it is possible to rely on various secondary literature titles.

Despite the fact that Košice’s urban sources are preserved in greater integrity only from the second half of the fifteenth century, Magdoško has succeeded in compensating for the lack of direct evidence by considering analogies with the situation in other Upper Hungarian towns. In this respect, it is possible to quote, for instance, his convincing reasoning that although a specific document attesting to this is missing, one can nonetheless assume, on the basis of other sources, that Košice had complete judicial autonomy even before 1342.

The most interesting parts of the book include a description of the processes the common denominator of which was the effort of the Košice urban elites to ensure their share of power in the city. Their endeavors had a significant result. In the mid-fifteenth century, for the election of town judge and councilors, the Community of Burghers (a group of full-fledged citizens owning property within the city walls) was replaced by the more exclusive Council of Elders, which included several dozen men who were appointed by the outgoing members of the council and by the town judge. We can hope that by providing a description and analysis of these events, Magdoško has paved the way for more detailed (and potentially very interesting) prosopographical studies devoted to the particular families belonging to the circle of Košice power elites, which consisted mostly of wholesalers. Magdoško’s observations concerning the analysis of incomes and expenses of the city, which are neatly presented in the appendix of the book, are also valuable, as is his detailed survey of the competencies of individual urban officials and city employees, who were determined by the town judge and councilors. In the city’s leadership there were visible efforts by a limited group of burghers to restrict the government in the city to themselves as much as possible. It would be very interesting to see whether and to what extent these tendencies of the Košice power elites were manifested, for example, in the socio-topography of the city (as suggested in tables in the appendix), marriage strategies, the existence of the exclusive urban societies, etc.

It is also necessary to acknowledge with gratitude the carefully crafted appendices, including lists of notaries, town judges, and members of municipal councils until 1534, which clearly show continuity in the individual personalities/families who occupied these offices. The book also includes a detailed summary in English of the main findings and conclusions.

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