



BOOKREVIEWS

Markets and Staples in the Medieval Hungarian Kingdom. By Boglárka Weisz. Budapest: Research Centre for the Humanities, 2020. 258 pp.

Economic history is blooming again in Hungarian scholarship, and members of a new generation of historians are revisiting and reconsidering the fundamental principles and institutions of the medieval Hungarian kingdom. A research project coordinated by Boglárka Weisz under the “Lendület” (Momentum) program of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences has produced impressive scholarship in recent years. The monograph reviewed here is a revised version (published now in a beautifully typeset edition) of the Hungarian edition, which was published in 2012.

The book has three main chapters and a large appendix with a “data inventory,” meaning an exhaustive alphabetical and chronological listing with the market days in the medieval kingdom of Hungary. The first chapter examines markets, including the histories of their emergence, the terminology used in connection with them in medieval charters, and details of their financial and social aspects. Weisz takes the most immediate meaning of the word “market” as regular (daily, weekly, and annually) gatherings of people for the exchange of goods and services. The right to hold a market had to be sanctioned by a royal grant, even when natural factors, as Weisz explains, created those markets, owing to a given site’s favorable political or geographic location. The terminology for markets was as complex as the network of daily or weekly markets and the fairs held on saints’ feast days. Weisz expertly guides her reader through the terminology, which changed over the course of the centuries. The term “forum liberum,” for instance, lost its original meaning of providing free passage to merchants coming to the fair and in the fourteenth century became a generic term for “market” (p.20). As becomes evident from the first subchapters the overview and scope of the book are impressive. Weisz has compiled and analyzed a large amount of data which is nevertheless navigated with ease. In addition to the better-known concepts, she presents ancillary rights to market privileges, which are less familiar to most readerships, i.e. the ban-mile right, which from the examples presented was mostly granted to towns in the northwestern counties of the kingdom (pp.38–39). The social function of markets as sites for the dissemination of information, the discussion of official or private matters,

of the negotiation of new regulations, routes, tolls, or changes in the official insignia (seals) is presented in subchapter seven, which is dedicated to market proclamations. This crucial role of enabling public communication eventually made the markets central places in towns, where the town halls began to be built starting in the late fourteenth century (p.49).

Chapters two and three investigate the historical evolution of the staple right as a complex of trading privileges in the medieval Hungarian kingdom. Weisz challenges the older views in Hungarian secondary literature and highlights the intricacies of the staple rights in medieval towns of the realm, which were diverse and shifted over time. Weisz further corrects the secondary literature and notes that the first staple right charter was granted by King Béla IV to Buda in 1244 for trade on the Danube. There are indications in royal charters that before the Mongol invasion the town of Esztergom benefitted from a privileged position in relation to the foreign merchants entering the kingdom, though the city never received a formal grant in this respect and eventually lost its position to the emerging town of Buda. Based on a meticulous examination of royal charters granting or withdrawing the staple right and of locally issued town regulations, Weisz discerns several categories of staple right covering a variety of obligations that foreign merchants had to meet. Each town sought to carve out certain rules that best served the interest of the local merchants. Weisz shows that only Buda and Kassa (today Košice, Slovakia) succeeded in acquiring the full staple right, though this was met with opposition from merchants, both Hungarian and foreign, who resorted to solutions to circumvent the towns with the staple right, such as using alternate roads or trying to obtain individual exemptions. In fact, as Weisz explains, the use of mandatory roads was connected to the staple right but not constitutive of it. This was true of other commercial privileges that put limits on foreign traders, such as prohibitions on retail sale, bans on transshipment, the obligation to use the local weights, and the ban on setting up merchant companies. Weisz does not dwell on these details, but we see that the bestowal of the staple right was not solely the result of royal urban policy (a concept which the author does not use). Rather, the towns themselves were actively interested in obtaining this right, and at least in the case of the Transylvanian towns, they had agents lobbying at the court who also made payments on their behalf.

The data inventory is a useful tool for historians interested in the medieval Hungarian kingdom, as it provides exhaustive data on all known market days of market. The information is organized alphabetically according to the names of the counties, and it includes the day of given market, whether weekly or annual,

the year when the franchise was granted, and the bibliographical reference. The bibliography is also impressive. Weisz has pursued research in an array of archives, unearthing new data, and she has combed through a large list of published source editions.

Boglárka Weisz's book sets the history of a crucial institution of medieval economies, the staple right, on a new path. Furthermore, her thorough examination of the chronological evolution of markets underscores how the Hungarian kingdom gradually grew into an economy based on trade and exchange, with markets also acquiring a social role over time.

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