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of

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The Leading Urban Elite in Sixteenth Century Cluj and Sibiu

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This dissertation focuses on the comparative investigation of two early modern urban centers: Cluj (Kolozsvár, Klausenburg) and Sibiu (Nagyszeben, Hermannstadt). My work has followed a scholarly tradition in elite research, yet developed a new perspective on urban history in Transylvania, since not much has been written lately on early modern urban elites, and older scholarly contributions, though important and indispensable, have gradually become outdated. This is an attempt to combine traditional and modern research methods, an approach that was necessary due to the large volume of unpublished data that had to be analyzed in a certain historical context and also the decision to compare two urban centers. The analogies relevant for to the research come mainly from German-speaking areas of Europe.

The aims defined for this dissertation were pursued along three main research paths. First, the historical backgrounds of the town elites in Cluj and Sibiu were analyzed, including the development of town autonomy and governmental systems from the medieval period until the end of the sixteenth century. This allowed me to discuss the legal background of urban leadership, to illustrate its continuity, to present the milieu and the conditions under which the political urban elite acted in each town. Second, the findings of the archontological and prosopographical research, the focus on generations, marriage strategies, and professional competence are meant to explicate the character of the leading elite. Finally, an attempt was made to provide insight into their representation and self-fashioning.

The systems of government in Cluj and Sibiu, although each was based on *hospes* privileges, differed markedly in their later development. Both towns had a two-tier scheme of power-division between a larger representative body, the *centumviri*, and a town council of twelve. However, the influence and power of the two institutions followed different principles and had important dissimilarities. In Cluj, the *centumviri* not only elected the town council, but had real control over it, acting like a superior legislative body. In Sibiu, in contrast, the larger council had rather a supervisory role besides the fact that it legitimized the town magistrate by election. The council minutes of the *centumviri* in Sibiu did not survive, and therefore there was no opportunity for empirical research on the activity of the larger council. Nevertheless, comparing the activity of the *centumviri* in Cluj and the town magistrate in Sibiu, it was revealed that many attributes of the *centumviri* in Cluj were assumed by the town magistrate in Sibiu. Following the path of logic, and the fact that there are hardly any signs of activity by the *centumviri* until the end of the sixteenth century, one may assert that the power of the larger council in Sibiu was significantly restricted. Consequently, the influence of the town magistrate in Sibiu was greater than that of the town council in Cluj. There were also differences as well as similarities in the distribution of power within the town councils.

In Sibiu the leader of the town was the mayor, while Cluj was led by the town judge. In both towns a royal judge was appointed as well; however the status, sphere of actions, and position of this office within the hierarchy of the urban government was different. While in Sibiu this office was very much a political role of state importance and the highest prestige, in Cluj the royal judge ranked below the town judge and had only moderate political power. The number of councilors was the same, twelve, but in Cluj their seats were split equally between the Hungarians and Saxons according to the parity governing system introduced in 1458. This parity not only divided the seats in the council but introduced a yearly rotation of the two main offices between the two nations. This kind of power division, unique in Transylvania, not only defined the political careers within the town, but created an elite that was not only bilingual, but had a double identity and yet was politically united.

The principles of creating elites in Cluj and Sibiu were the same – wealth, personal ambition, and family prestige – only the political power of the local elites inside and outside the town and the influence of individuals differed. The basic principle of eligibility for the council was citizenship and its general requirements – property ownership, legitimate birth, and marriage – were applied similarly in most of the urban settlements in Europe, certainly in German towns, although almost every urban settlement set special conditions. Sibiu, for instance, restricted citizenship to native Germans only, regardless of previous social standing, while Cluj was cautious about nobles. In both cases, the key element that fostered these restrictions was the increasing control the governing elite had over new settlers who might have jeopardized their interests. *En mass* settling of non-Germans, for instance, may have challenged the power of the urban leaders in Sibiu, while nobles in Cluj were always potential generators of conflict through their special privileged status in the society of the country. Multi-ethnicity was no longer a problem in sixteenth-century Cluj.

The case study on the 176 new citizens between 1587 and 1599 in Cluj revealed a relatively steady proportion of ethnic groups; the number of Hungarian new citizens did not go much beyond the number of Saxons, although the immigration of Hungarians shows more consistency in every year. The professions of the newly settled also reflect the realities of the occupational market in the town: goldsmiths and tailors were overrepresented. Goldsmiths were mainly Hungarians, while the new Saxons were involved in the textile industry. Thus, one may assert that the demographic supply of the town populace in Cluj was in accordance with the existing ethnic and professional realities in the sixteenth century and thus preserved the status quo and maintained continuity for the elites. Therefore, the control of immigration was not only a topical measure of the incumbent elite, but also a strategy of power control.

Entering the community of citizens was the first step towards public office, the rest depended on the personal ambition, abilities, family connections/networks, and

auspicious circumstances. The archontological comparative analysis of the town leadership in Cluj and Sibiu displays 108 and 134 officeholders. In the period between 1550 and 1600, i.e., when data series are available for both towns, the number of persons registered as councilors in Cluj shows a slightly higher number than in Sibiu. Although fewer in number, the town councilors in Sibiu spent more time in office (8.96 years) than their counterparts in Cluj (4.64 years). The longest period of office holding in Cluj was 11 or 12 years, while some councilors in Sibiu served the town for no less than 35 to 38 years. Yet, these lengthy periods were not a sign of hereditary office-holding. There was no straight line of succession in office holding in one family. That leads to two important assumptions. The position of a councilor in Sibiu was stronger than that of a councilor in Cluj, and individuals had more power in Sibiu than in Cluj. That might have been a consequence of the town council in Sibiu being the administrative body of the whole Saxon community in Transylvania and thus playing an augmented political role. Secondly, the rotation of persons was more frequent in Cluj than in Sibiu. The main competition-generating fact would be the number of citizens: a larger populace meant greater rivalry for offices. The demographic indicators of Cluj and Sibiu, however, did not differ substantially, thus here other reasons must have been acting. The parity system in Cluj might have created competition for public office more than the non-parity system in Sibiu. The power of individuals and the regional and state importance of Sibiu created longer incumbencies.

Long periods spent in town council usually meant high offices as well; there are some exceptions that prove the rule, when a person did not access high position within the council even though he spent 30 or even 36 years in the governing body. There were probably particular reasons that kept someone away from top roles that are impossible to comprehend through the obscurity of time. Long careers were conditioned by objective and subjective circumstances. Longevity was irrespective of someone's political abilities, yet it was one significant condition for a long-lasting career. At the same time, the quality of a career depended on the political and social capital of each office holder, as well as his advance through the ranks of the council. The *cursus honorum* of the councilors was reflected by the order in which they sat in the council room. Usually it took around seven or eight years for someone to reach the top seats, and almost without exception each man started his progressive advance in hierarchy from the very back of the table. In Cluj the starting position within the council was the seat of the steward, while in Sibiu new councilors were never entrusted with this office at the beginning of their career. Great differences occurred on the top levels of urban government as well. While in Sibiu mayors were in position even for ten years, the town judges in Cluj rarely exceeded five years. There were also differences in the afterlife of the mayors and town judges. There was a tradition in

Sibiu that the resigning top leader stepped back to the first position in the council, i.e., to the deputy mayor's position – a kind of reintegration of power. In Cluj, the substitute position depended greatly on the acting town judge, and in spite of the fact that there were cases when indeed a former town judge was nominated to the deputy position, one finds less consistency in this respect in Cluj.

Yet the most striking contrast has been revealed in the comparison of the royal judge positions. Here the influence of state policy is strikingly stronger in Sibiu than in Cluj. Besides the fact that the kings of Hungary and later the princes of Transylvania often nominated the royal judge of Sibiu, breaking the privilege of the community in this sense, the career of the royal judges also underlines the differences. The average number of years spent in this office in Sibiu was 12 years while in Cluj it was only 1.8. Moreover, almost every second royal judge in Sibiu was appointed to this office without holding any other offices before, while in Cluj there are hardly any such occurrences. That makes even clearer the strong political character of this position in Sibiu. It is not surprising, therefore, that many judges played important roles in state policy as well.

State offices were among the targets in the vertical mobility of townspeople, either on a political or on professional path. Professional state functions were linked to the mining and minting businesses, where mainly goldsmiths and literates were active. The goldsmiths of Cluj were strongly involved in minting, while the councilors in Sibiu were closely interested in mining concessions.

The town councilors in Sibiu managed to reconcile state and urban functions, while in Cluj persons who received high offices in the state administration suspended or abandoned their urban political ambitions either because they fostered vertical mobility through state functions or because the leading elite in Cluj tried to separate town affairs from state affairs as much as they could. However, state officials of local origin had great lobbying potential for the urban governments, as the cases presented in this dissertation also show.

Besides the most important offices, notaries were also presented at length in this dissertation for two reasons; first, because they were part of urban administration and second because they had special roles in urban leadership, so different and yet in accordance with the general features of town elite. Running an urban chancery or carrying out special work was basically wage labor, but the skills this labor required raised the notary among the most respected town servants. Nothing shows the importance of town clerks in town administration more clearly than their high mobility and the endeavors of town leaders to lure the most skillful clerks to their town. Their absence must have created hitches in the town administration, since notaries were not just simple scribes, but literates who could interpret the laws, watch the legality of administrative or legal procedures, and guarantee the authenticity of documents.

Moreover, they were propulsive actors of urban political self-fashioning and representation, the producers of canons of local identity. They established links between East and West, and brought new ideas and implemented them in the local context. Peregrinations to Western universities, principally to Wittenberg, were essential in spreading Reformation thought and humanist ideas.

The office of the notary was an excellent position for an ambitious man to enter the circle of the urban elite through education. One rarely finds, however, (exclusively in Sibiu) notaries who entered town council after their appointment to the town chancery had expired. Notaries apparently fostered other types of career, very differently in Cluj and Sibiu. While the clerks of Sibiu opted for clerical positions after their term expired, in Cluj most of them were to be found in county, state or ecclesiastical functions. Whether they have belonged to the political or intellectual elite of the towns remains a subject to debate.

In spite of the many differences in the career-building patterns in Cluj and Sibiu, one important similarity was often present; the councilors often strengthened their position by advantageous marriages. The marriage strategies of the elite were of great importance in every urban center since matrimonial alliance was the main instrument for perpetuating power or gaining prestige in a family. The simultaneous presence of persons with direct kin relations was prohibited in the councils of Cluj and Sibiu alike. In Sibiu even brother-in-law ties were excluded. In Cluj, where such relations were permitted, the “son-in-law principle” was applied in inheriting and preserving political and economic power within influential families. Of the twelve burghers who held the position of town judge in Cluj between 1580 and 1600, seven were in some family relation to each other. In 1580 two brother-in-laws controlled the whole political life of the town by filling the two most influential positions: the offices of town judge and royal judge.

Widows had an important role in perpetuating political and social power. The case study on Sibiu connected to the history of the Altenberger house, later the town hall, revealed how the distinction of owning prestigious real estate was transferred among important political actors by marrying widows. Passing on political capital was fundamental in such cases. Marriages outside the town followed yet different strategies and economic considerations played a stronger role than political interests. Important merchant families increased their businesses by capital fusion through marriage.

Besides marriage strategies, the relations between generations were likewise key issues in the political life of Cluj and Sibiu. One should not look for features of hereditary positions bequeathed from father to son, but rather for parental/family support for their offspring’s career. There are hardly any cases in either town of the same family being in leading positions for more than two generations because the

mobility of the Transylvanian urban societies was pronounced. Important families fostered vertical mobility towards ennoblement.

The frequency distribution of professions among the councilors presents two slightly different patterns in Cluj and Sibiu. While in Cluj goldsmiths were the most influential, in Sibiu tailors were among the most powerful craftsmen after the wealthy but narrow stratum of merchants. This shows again that one cannot make a clear distinction between the economic and political elites.

Concluding these archontological inquiries one may ask whether the political elites of Cluj and Sibiu in the sixteenth century can be labeled as a patriciate. According to the criteria established by patrician research in the 1960s, the political elites in neither of these two towns can be associated with the attributes of a patrician society, although some distinctive patrician features may apply in certain cases. The whole elite was, however, a leading group distinguished more by social and economic power, and consequently political capital, and less by traditional family ties. Moreover, there were no such preset and closed groups of power as in Nürnberg or Wrocław (Breslau), for instance, but rather generations of power with real political vocations. It is an important distinction that these generations did not have full monopoly over the urban government, especially not in Cluj, where they were incumbents for shorter periods. Thus, they had less or no chance at all to create strong power groups. Such power concentrations started to appear only in the seventeenth century. Both in Cluj and in Sibiu individuals played significant roles. This is the main difference between the two urban governments examined here and a patrician system of town administration.

The more the research on urban leaders in East-Central Europe proceeds, the more the hypothesis of patrician governments in this region falls. The findings on Sopron (Ödenburg), Košice (Kassa, Kaschau) and Banská Bystrica (Besztercebánya, Neusohl) and now on Cluj and Sibiu do not underline any patrician character in these urban centers. Yet, power groups or generations did exist. In Sibiu the influence of individuals and their grip on power in this sense was greater than of the political elite of Cluj. Comparatively, in Sopron, for instance – according to Károly Goda's research – the change of people in the leading positions was more frequent than in Sibiu. The high frequency of office-holders changing in Cluj resembles the example of Buda, another town with a parity system. Whether the competition for urban offices was a simple question of demographic growth or whether political systems influenced the power concentration in a town would be easy to understand through extended comparisons. Studies on the elites of Žilina (Zsolna, Sillein), where a parity system was in use, and Levoča (Lőcse, Leutschau) or Kežmarok (Kécsmárk, Käsmark), the two most important centers in the Spiš region, would be the best case studies to compare with Cluj and Sibiu. Such studies are not available yet.

The third part of this dissertation is dedicated to the self-representation of the governing elite, mainly in Cluj (but with references to Sibiu as far as the sources allow). Two separate instruments of self-fashioning are discussed: ceremonials of council election and their symbolism and the town hall as a monument for the public display of governing principles.

The town statute of Cluj adopted in 1537 brought two important changes in the council election procedure; it changed the date and place of the election. The ceremonial act was transferred into a public sphere, to the cemetery. This raised as many questions as answers during the research. Surely, moving the election process to the open air was a response to a need coming either from the townspeople or the elite to make one of the most important events in town accessible for all. Everything happened in front of the citizens, thus, the council received symbolic investiture from the whole community. Using the cemetery as place for elections was not typical for such purposes, a fact that leaves space for several interpretations. Plausibly the town council turned back to an old medieval tradition, or preferred the graveyard because it was the only fenced central place that afforded protection for the electoral gathering. The symbolic meaning of such a place should not be disregarded either. It could have served as a place of *memento mori*, a site for remembering the forebears or as a space between the church and town hall, between sacred and profane.

The transfer of former church rituals into a secular context was an issue that persisted throughout the whole council election. The procession of the new council through the town was a conversion of religious processions into a secular ceremony, although it might have been a symbolic seizing of the town, a kind of *reambulatio terrae*. Either in terms of religious or legal incentives, the procession of the new council was the first moment of (festive) interaction with the townspeople and thus one of the most important channels for self-representation by the elite.

Even if the source materials are scattered and pieces of information on the council elections appear almost incidentally, one may assert that these events were full of symbols, rituals and signs that were meant to stress the relations between the town and its officials as well as between the officials and God. Although the day of the yearly council elections was the only public secular feast day in town, the sacred and profane spaces of the town also interacted and formed a duality and shift of meanings. What belonged exclusively to the ecclesiastical space (e.g., the procession through the town, the burial place, the songs) became scenes of a secular ritual, while secular realities (e.g., the number of councilors, the oath, tolling the bells) entered the sphere of the sacred.

This kind of shift in the meaning and use of sacred and profane have also been presented by Dietrich Poeck and Antje Diener-Staekling in their studies on urban council representation. The striking similarities among Cluj, Sibiu, German and French

towns create clear evidence that ideas, traditions, and governing principles were transmitted and circulated throughout Europe.

The sparseness of written sources on early modern town halls and even the physical absence of such monuments left little chance for comparative research. Only the rare example of the decorations of the town hall in Cluj could be discussed. The inscriptions on the walls of the early modern town hall of Cluj were both decorations and messages to citizens entering the building, informing them of the high moral standards of their local government. The decorative scheme, with sentences taken from the Bible and works by Classical authors, attests the cultural background of the designer, but also reflects the demands of civic society – as in other European towns – for a building which displayed the virtues of their town in the spirit of contemporary traditions. This kind of civic ostentation may also be ascribed to the emergence and development of early modern civic awareness. This can be a closing sentence of this dissertation and an opening notion for what will come as a continuation to this research: the formation of civic identity and the role of the elite in shaping it. It points forward to new inquiries.

Generally speaking, the main contribution of this dissertation is that it opens the opportunity for larger central European comparisons, and thus might contribute to a shift in the clear-cut historical paradigm of a border between East Central Europe and the West. There are many different topics to compare: political elite creation, career building, governing systems and traditions, institutional developments, election procedures, and self-representation. Later, these topics might develop into self-standing research that can be extended to other urban centers. On the local level, the database of office-holders in the Appendix of the dissertation will become an instrument for historians dealing with the history of Cluj or Sibiu.

Curriculum Vitae
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EDUCATION

2004-2014: PhD in Medieval Studies, Department of Medieval Studies, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

2002-2003: MA in Medieval Studies, Department of Medieval Studies, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

1998-2002: BA in Art History, History and Philosophy Department, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

WORKING EXPERIENCE

2008- : Archivist, Romanian National Archives, Cluj County Department.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

2010-: *Inventoring and studying historical archival sources* course at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca.

RESEARCH PROJECTS

2006–2010 – OTKA research project on *Urban elites in medieval and pre-modern times* (coordinator István H. Németh)

2003–2004 – Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, source edition project on *The historical documents of the hospitals in Cluj in the 17th century* (coordinator Enikő Rűsz-Fogarasi)

SCHOLARSHIPS

2010 – one month *Herder-Stipendium* at the Herder Institut in Marburg.

2010, 2009 – two months *Domus Hungarica* research grant at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute of History, Budapest.

2007 – three months *Doctoral Research Support Grant* at the Institut für vergleichende Städtegeschichte in Münster.

FIELD OF INTERESTS: medieval and early modern urban history, elite research, social topography, urban identity.

CONFERENCE PAPERS AND PRESENTATIONS

2011 – *From Guild House to Town Hall: Social Mobility and the Possibilities of a Public Career* International Medieval Congress Leeds,

Városvezető elit a 16. századi Kolozsváron VII. Nemzetközi Hungarológiai Kongresszus, Cluj-Napoca.

Kolozsvár és fejedelmek viszonya a 16. század második felében III. Magyar Várostartörténeti Konferencia, Archives of Budapest, Budapest.

2010 – *Notarzeichen in Siebenbürgen* at the conference *Zeichen – Symbol – Identität - Notarszeichen auf spätmittelalterlichen Urkunden*, Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen.

Ritual și simbol în viața politică urbană în secolul al 16-lea. at the seminar *Imagine, obiect și ritual în cercetarea contemporană* Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca.

Polgári karrier, nemesi életmód Kolozsváron a Reneszánsz korában. Conference at MTA Institute of History, Budapest.

2009 – *Town notaries in late medieval and early modern Transylvania.* International Medieval Congress in Leeds.

2007 – *Goldsmiths and Other Honorable Craftsmen: Artisans in the Government of Transylvanian Towns* International Medieval Congress in Leeds.

2006 – *Of Decent Stock. Elite generations in Cluj.* Eighth International Conference on Urban History: Urban Europe in Comparative Perspective, Stockholm

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Prestige at Work. Goldsmiths of Cluj/Kolozsvár in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. Saarbrücken: VDM, 2009.

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“ ‘Amely ebet ez előtt mostál, most is azont mosd.’ Egy 16. századi fürdőházi jelenet érdekességei” [‘Wash the dog you have washed before.’ The details of 16th century scandal in the public bath.] *Korunk* (2010/10): 22–27.

“From Decent Stock. Generations in Urban Politics in Sixteenth-century Transylvania.” in *Generations in Towns*, ed. Finn-Einar Eliassen and Katalin Szende. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. 210–231.

“Polgári karrier – polgári lét Kolozsváron a reneszánsz korában” [Burgher career – burgher life in Cluj during the Reformation period]. *Történelmi Szemle* (2009/4): 481–501.

“Nobilis vagy cliens? Mathias Armbruster, egy 16. századi nagyszebeni nemesedő polgármester”. [Noble or client? Mathias Armbruster, a nobilizer mayor from Sibiu] *Korunk* (1/2007): 75–81.