

GENIUS LOCI

LASZLOVSZKY 60

edited by
Dóra Mérai
and

Ágnes Drosztmér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



ARCHAEOLINGUA

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Table of contents

Tabula gratulatoria	v
Kiadói előszó	vi
Publisher's Preface	viii
Köszöntő	x
Salutation	xi

Boundaries, Frontier Zones / Határvonalak, határvidékek

ALEKS PLUSKOWSKI – ALEX BROWN – SEWERYN SZCZEPANSKI – ROWENA BANERJEA – DANIEL MAKOWIECKI What Does a Frontier Look Like? The Biocultural Dynamics of the Lower Vistula Borderland in the Middle Ages	2
STEPHEN POW The Mongol Empire's Northern Border: Re-evaluating the Surface Area of the Mongol Empire	8
IAN WOOD Two Roman Frontiers and Their Sub-Roman Afterlife	14

Crossing Borders / Határokon át

SZAKÁCS BÉLA ZSOLT Gyulafirátót, avagy a rendi építészeti hagyományok átjárhatósága	19
CRISTOPHER MIELKE A Queen's Crusading Connections: Yolanda of Courtenay, the Fifth Crusade, and the Military Orders	25
BÁRÁNY ATTILA Angol keresztes a magyar végeken: Robert de Champlayn	28
CRISTIAN GAȘPAR Trespassing Pigs, Sons of Whores, and Randy Dogs: Marginalia on a Medieval Document from Caransebeș/Karánsebes	32
VADAS ANDRÁS A kecskeméti marhahajtók megpróbáltatásai és egy végvár jóllakott őrsége	38
LÁSZLÓ KONTLER Borders and Crossings: A Jesuit Scientist in the Whirlwind of Enlightened Reform	41
PAUKOVICS GERGŐ Hajszá az örök fiatalságért. Dr. Voronoff és a dübörgő 20-as évek	45
PINKE ZSOLT – STEPHEN POW A Gangesz-deltából a globális porondra: történeti ökológiai szempontok a kolera kórokozó (<i>Vibrio cholerae</i>) elterjedési területének átalakulásához	50
MARCELL SEBŐK Tangible Cultural Heritage: The Early History of Blue Jeans	55

Inhabiting the Landscape / Élet a tájban

SÓFALVI ANDRÁS	
A Barcaság határai és 13. század eleji településképe a Német Lovagrend adományleveleiben	60
NIKOLINA ANTONIĆ	
The Hospitallers' Estate of Čičan and its Neighbors: Spatial Analysis Yields New Information	64
ÜNIGE BENCZE	
The Abbey of Meszes: New Insights on the Site Location	68
MÓGÁNÉ ARADI CSILLA – MOLNÁR ISTVÁN	
Kísérlet a bárdudvarnok-szentbenedeki premontrei prépostság környezeti rekonstrukciójára	72
BEATRIX ROMHÁNYI	
Monasteries along the Danube	77
PUSZTAI TAMÁS – P. FISCHL KLÁRA	
A dél-borsodi síkság bronzkori és középkori településstruktúrájának összehasonlítása	82
VIZI MÁRTA	
Komplex régészeti kutatás egy egykori dél-dunántúli mezőváros területén	89
BATIZI ZOLTÁN	
Fagyosasszony és Kammerhof	95
PÁLÓCZI HORVÁTH ANDRÁS	
A középkori Kenderes településszerkezete	99
SZŐCS PÉTER LEVENTE	
Adatok Nagybánya és vidéke középkori egyházi topográfiájához	103
ZATYKÓ CSILLA	
Eltűnt berzencei malmok	108
SZABÓ PÉTER	
Középkori cseh erdőgazdálkodás a choustníki uradalom erdőszámadásainak tükrében	113
ANDREA KISS	
Before and After the Great Heat and Drought of 1540: Multiannual Trends of Grape and Grain Harvest Dates in the Vienna Hospital Accounts	117
LÁSZLÓ BARTOSIEWICZ	
“Kleine Fische, gute Fische” – But Sturgeon is Great	121
LYUBLYANOVICS KYRA	
Vad háziállat, házi vadállat: Számi rénszarvastartás a középkori és kora újkori Norvégiában	126
JUDITH RASSON	
Mountains in the Lifeways and History of Northern Macedonia	138
JEREMY MIKECZ	
Crossing the Abyss: The Apurímac Canyon at the Time of the Spanish Invasion of Peru (1533)	142

Busy Places / Nyüzsgő terek

PETROVICS ISTVÁN	
Újabb adatok Pécs késő középkori történetéhez	147
URBÁN MÁTÉ	
Lokális búcsújáró helyek a késő középkori Nyugat-Dunántúlon	151
BALÁZS NAGY	
The Marketplace of Csütörtök – A Local Market in Fourteenth-Century Hungary	156
KATALIN SZENDE	
The Sopron Fish Market	159
GERHARD JARITZ	
The Craftsman's Voice and Words in Late Medieval Austrian Urban Space	165

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ANA MARIA GRUIA Healthcare in Cluj in the Sixteenth Century: Overlapping Professions	168
ANA MARINKOVIĆ John Capistran's Mantle and the Early Propaganda of Franciscan Observant Cults in Dubrovnik	171
SABINA MADGEARU Ceremonial Space in Front of Medieval Buda: An Illuminated Fifteenth-Century French Vision	175
VÉGH ANDRÁS Óbuda látképeken	177

Layers of the Past / A múlt rétegei

KODOLÁNYI JUDIT Templomok és temetők a visegrádi Sibrik-dombon	181
ROSTA SZABOLCS Egy új lehetőség kapujában – tatárjáráskori védművek a Kiskunságban	186
BOTÁR ISTVÁN Árpád-kori edényégető kemence Csíksomlyón	193
PETAR PARVANOV Fire and Stone: Placing Flints in Graves in Late Medieval Kaliakra	197
GYARMATI JÁNOS Kumpi Wasi. Textilműhely egy inka tartományi központban	201
ZSUZSANNA PAPP REED Post It: Notes from Thirteenth-Century St Albans	207
VALERY REES The Salt of Genius: Marsilio Ficino on Food, Spices, and Nutrition	213
ROSSINA KOSTOVA The Mother of God Monastery near Varna, Bulgaria: More about Missionary Monasteries in Bulgaria in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries	217
DANIEL ZIEMANN The Imperial Abbey of Corvey in the Ninth and Tenth Century: At the Crossroads of Power	221
VIRÁGOS GÁBOR Kartal vagy Cyko? Kísérlet egy középkori nemesi család történetének rekonstruálására	226
TÓTH BOGLÁRKA – BOTÁR ISTVÁN A sepsikilyéni unitárius templom tetőszerkezeteinek kormeghatározása	244
RÁCZ MIKLÓS Egy tiszazugi újkori négyosztatú ház – Dokumentálás és építéstörténet	248

Objects beneath Our Feet / Tárgyak a föld alól

LANGÓ PÉTER A Tiszakeszi-Szódadombon talált kora Árpád-kori kereszt	254
RÁCZ TIBOR – NAGY BALÁZS Tatárjárás kori kincslelet Jászkarajenőről	258
SZENDE LÁSZLÓ Lehetett-e hadijelvény a csajági kereszt?	267
NÓRA UJHELYI Thoughts about Medieval Book Fittings from the Castle of Visegrád	270
MÁRIA VARGHA – THOMAS KÜHTREIBER Treasures of the “Lower Ten Thousand”? Hoards of Iron Objects	273

TABLE OF CONTENTS

K. NÉMETH ANDRÁS „Sarlóját ez okért bőszen fegyverré köszörülte” Késő középkori kiegyenesített sarló Kospa falu helyéről	280
MAXIM MORDOVIN A Collection of Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Cloth Seals from Szolnok	285
TÜNDE KOMORI Ottomans in Pest in the Light of “Luxury” Ceramics: Four Cups from Kígyó Street	289
WICKER ERIKA A 17. századi rácszentpéteri kincslelet	294

Marking the Place / Helyek és jelek

CSERNUS SÁNDOR Keresztes családtörténet és kőbe vésett emlékezet	300
LŐVEI PÁL A pilisszántói keresztes kő legendája	305
MÉRAI DÓRA Sügérek a Nyárádmentén: Sigér Mátyás síremléke leporolva	311
VESZPRÉMY LÁSZLÓ A bambergi lovas szobra és Szent István	316
TAKÁCS MIKLÓS A pétervárad-tekiai reneszánsz kőfaragvány	321
ANNELI RANDLA What and Whom Should We Remember? The Case of the Teutonic Order’s Church and Castle in Pöide, Livonia	325

Heritage Sites, Sacred Places / Örökségi helyszínek, szent helyek

ALEKSANDAR PANTIĆ The Ambiguity of Heritage Interpretation: A Late Roman Tomb in Brestovik, Serbia	330
GYÖRGY ENDRE SZÖNYI Rocamadour: Monastic Center, Pilgrimage Place, Art Historical Interest, World Heritage Site	335
KATEŘINA HORNÍČKOVÁ A Penitent Judas Iscariot: An Exemplum of Christian Morals on the Eve of Hussitism?	339
JAMES PLUMTREE Buddha, Lenin, and the Prophet Muhammad Approaching the Landscape and Cultural Heritage of Issyk-Ata	343
ROBERT SHARP The Thames Estuary: The Cultural Heritage and Memory of the Thames Estuary at Southend-on-Sea	349
ESZTER SPÄT Constructing Religio-Ritual Heritage: The New Shrine of Shekhsê Batê in Khetar, Northern Iraq	353
ZSUZSANNA RENNER Delhi, Old and New: Changing Cityscapes and the Cultural Heritage of India’s Capital City	357
FELD ISTVÁN Pseudovár vagy történeti rekonstrukció?	364
ILON GÁBOR A velemi régészeti témaparkról	371
WOLLÁK KATALIN Örökség alapú fejlesztés Kölkeden	374

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Places of Memory / Az emlékezet helyei

JÁNOS BAK	
Nádor 20 Capriccio	380
SZENTPÉTERI JÓZSEF	
Pilistől Tételig. Elektronikus levélféle a 60 esztendő's Laszlovszky Józsefnek	382
RICHARD HODGES	
Scarlino in the 1980s, Forty Years On	386
KLANICZAY GÁBOR	
Egy hozzászólás Kremsben	390

The Sopron Fish Market

KATALIN SZENDE*

One of the first courses that József Laszlovszky, freshly appointed assistant professor, taught in 1984/85 at the Department of Medieval and Early Modern Archaeology at ELTE was “Medieval Primary Occupations” (*Középkori ősfoglalkozások*).¹ I was curious enough to enrol, even if my interest leant towards urban issues, not hunting and gathering. The course was indeed an instructive and enjoyable experience, an eye-opener to many aspects of medieval life that an urbanite student would not have understood otherwise. Now, when we celebrate Jóska’s work and achievements, I am revisiting one of the primary occupations, fishing, and looking at the urban side of it, when the fish – involuntarily – “came to town.”

Fish were available in Hungary in excess. As the anonymous author of *Descriptio Europae Orientalis* notes, “concerning the abundance of fish it excels almost every country apart from Norway where fish is eaten like bread or rather instead of bread.”² The amount was further increased by the purposeful cultivation of fishponds and river inlets where fish were bred and raised in rural areas, on monastic premises, and on the outskirts of cities and towns.³ Its consumption, however, promoted by liturgical prescriptions beyond economic necessity, was compulsory for the entire Christian population, not only those who were in the position of fishing or raising fish for themselves. This necessity gave rise to the fish trade and its spaces, the fish markets.

This essay examines whether there was something specifically urban about the fish trade or, in other words, how far urbanity may be defined through the ways fish was handled and particularly where fish were sold. The main example comes from the centre of my academic comfort zone, Sopron, complemented for the sake of con-

textualization with the cases of Pozsony (Pressburg, Bratislava) and Buda. The relative wealth of sources and several decades of intensive topographical research on all three towns offer solid ground for addressing these questions.⁴ Before examining the fish markets themselves, it is worth considering the ways and places where fish were bred, raised, and caught as well as clarifying the rules and regulations of the fish trade.

Fishing and fisheries

Sopron was home to fishermen throughout the Middle Ages, including the period between the eleventh and the mid-thirteenth century, when it served as the fortified centre of a royal county. The name Halász utca (*vischergasse* [Fishermen’s Street]) has been explained as the remnant of an earlier settlement of fishermen in the service of this fort.⁵ Since the town was not built on a major river, only two small brooks, the main source of fish supply was Lake Fertő (Neusiedler See), where burghers of Sopron were granted fishing rights, although often challenged by the landowners by the lake like the Kanizsai family.⁶ The best fishing grounds of Sopron lie in the lakeside village of Mörbisch (Meggyes), which became Sopron’s dependency through the donation of Queen Mary in 1385, and where several burghers owned fishing sites (*fischwasser*).⁷ These resources were complemented by the secondary use of the moat and the adjoining reservoirs at Széchenyi tér and Ógabona tér for breeding and keeping fish⁸ and by setting up artificial pools or fish farms (*einsecz*) for fish breeding in the suburbs, particularly on the western side, on Újtekei utca (*Neustiftgasse*).⁹ Fish were also raised in two ponds north of the town, the so-called Tómalom (*Teichmühle*). These sites were expanded and controlled in the late fifteenth century by some of the major merchant families of Sopron, the Hengst, Herb, and Sieghart,

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and run with the help of professional fishermen such as György Csitai.¹⁰ Besides these sources the town accepted the import of fish from Fertő Lake and the Rába (Raab) River.

In Pozsony as well as Buda, both situated on the Danube, the main source of fish was the river. In Pozsony many river side-channels and islands offered safe fishing waters; in fact, the later suburb of the *Piscatores*, in front of the main gate of the inner town towards the Danube (Halászkapu, *Fischertor* [Fishermen's Gate]), consisted partly of islands as late as 1379.¹¹ The royal castle of Pozsony employed its own fishermen much earlier than the town and, on behalf of the king, the castellan in charge of the castle (also the *ispán* of Pozsony County) kept one-third of the fishing revenues even after the chartering of the town in 1291. Besides the Danube, fish was also raised in the moat outside the town walls, as is attested, for instance, by the 1454 account book listing an expense for breaking up the ice on the moat to ensure that the fish survived the winter.¹²

In Buda, the fishery right was divided among several institutions, the earliest of them being the chapter of Buda in the northern part of the town (called Óbuda after the foundation of Buda on the Castle Hill), going back to a donation by King Ladislas I (1077–1095). The special group of royal fishermen from the Buda suburbs, who were not subject to civic jurisdiction, was a remnant of their status as royal service people. The fishmongers, however, were regular burghers of Buda. The fishermen lived side by side with the representatives of other crafts such as the tanners and butchers in the suburb between the Castle Hill and the Danube, the so-called *Víziváros* (Watertown), in and around their eponymous Halásztutca (*Halazwcza / platea Piscatorum*). The great advantage of the Buda stretch of the Danube was that the hot springs that come to the surface here allowed watermills and fishermen to operate even in the coldest winters, which made it less urgent to secure supplementary resources.¹³

Regulations of the fish trade and its spatial aspects

In Hungary as elsewhere in medieval Europe, fishing was one of the earliest-regulated occupations due to the necessity of securing fish sup-

plies for Lent and other fast days. As noted above, fishermen of special standing were directly subordinate to the royal castles in Pozsony and Buda and to the *ispán* of Sopron. The charter of privilege issued by Andrew III to Pozsony in 1291 promises in particular to maintain the collective privileges of the fishermen that they already held earlier: *Item piscatores eandem habeant libertatem, qua primitus sunt gavisi*.¹⁴ These early regulations, however, based on oral customs or set in writing, only secured the status of the fishermen and not the conditions or location of trade because they were supposed to provision their landlord in particular.

Data on the regulation of trade, particularly covering the spatial aspects, are available from these three towns from the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. In Buda the regulations had to be put in writing repeatedly (royal charters in 1405, 1424, 1474, 1509) because of the conflicting interests of three main groups, the fishermen (*piscatores*), the fishmongers (*piscium venditores*), and the butchers (*carnifices*), all of whom managed to acquire the right of trading in medium-sized and large fish, while small fish were a subject of discussion.¹⁵ Other debated issues were the acquisition and sale of fish caught by externals and any possible alliance with external providers of fish. The municipality of Buda codified its statutes (known to modern research as the *Ofner Stadtrecht*) for the butchers, fishermen, and fishmongers through royal charters. The charter issued in 1405 (and perhaps also that of 1424) definitely predates the compilation of the *Stadtrecht*.¹⁶

From these documents it transpires that spatial differentiation was necessary both to comply with the various needs of the market and to avoid conflict among competing groups by keeping their activities apart. Therefore, butchers chopped up and sold large fish in their shambles, while fishermen and fishmongers were allowed to sell live fish on benches or tables or from tanks (*in scamptis et mensis ac capisteriis*) in a different location in the fish market. "Dead fish" were only sold by the scales for weighing fish.¹⁷ Purchasing fish for resale, which was the privilege of the fishmongers but not the fishermen, also took place elsewhere, "wherever such fish for sale is to be found" – probably by the riverbank on a first

come, first served basis.¹⁸ Yet another disputed location were the tanks in the Danube (*reservacula, fixoria*) for keeping live fish. It was important to keep the fish alive as long as possible to avoid high prices and shortages (*caristia et penuria*), therefore the king ruled in favour of the butchers.¹⁹

In Pozsony, the (fish)bone of contention lay elsewhere, in satisfying the claims of the castellan of Pozsony castle for his share of the fishing revenues. The agreement concluded in 1506 between Ambrus Sárkány and the local fishermen after bitter strife reveals some details concerning the sale of fresh fish. The fish were transported to the fish market on carts (*ad civitatem in curribus adducent*); the unsold wares could be kept live in boats or other repositories (*in barcam aut in aliud conservatorium*) in the Danube, for which half of the original payment was again due to the castellan, but then it could be offered for sale again.²⁰ It was expressly forbidden to sell live fish from boats; this was only allowed for small “dead” fish and crayfish.

The local statutes of 1511 sheds light on the relationship between the fishermen and fishmongers; the local butchers do not seem to have acquired the same rights as their counterparts in Buda. Fishermen and fishmongers could conclude alliances and each group delegated one controller to oversee quality issues; the fishermen were better positioned than the fishmongers, however, and had the first right to purchase unsold fish from external fishermen, who were first allowed to offer it for sale three times. Fish had to be sold at the regular fish market; it was forbidden under penalty of confiscation to smuggle it out of town or to hide it by the water to cause a shortage.²¹

In Sopron the sale of fish generated less conflict – and thus less regulation. Butchers did not encroach on the fishermen’s rights here, and professional fishmongers are not mentioned either. The latter were perhaps concealed by the fact that everyone operating an *einsecz* (pool/fish farm) was obliged to join the guild. The first detailed description of the fishers’ guild, aka St. Catherine’s guild, dates to 1514.²² Remarkably, it frequently refers to female members (*schwester*), not only concerning religious duties, but also when describing the sale of fish. In fact, when it comes to fighting at the market (*welche schwestern auff*

dem marckt kriegen), male members are not mentioned at all. It transpires from other points of the statutes as well that the sale of fish was considered the fishwives’ job. A number of professional functions were connected to fishing: the *einseczmaister*, the *zechmaister* and the *fischmaister*. The latter two had to oversee fair pricing at the market. The external fishermen were given, similarly to Pozsony, three chances to sell their wares before offering it for sale to the local fishermen, which apparently referred to live fish. The regulation of export was more lenient here; one only had to leave behind one third of the fish to avoid a shortage.

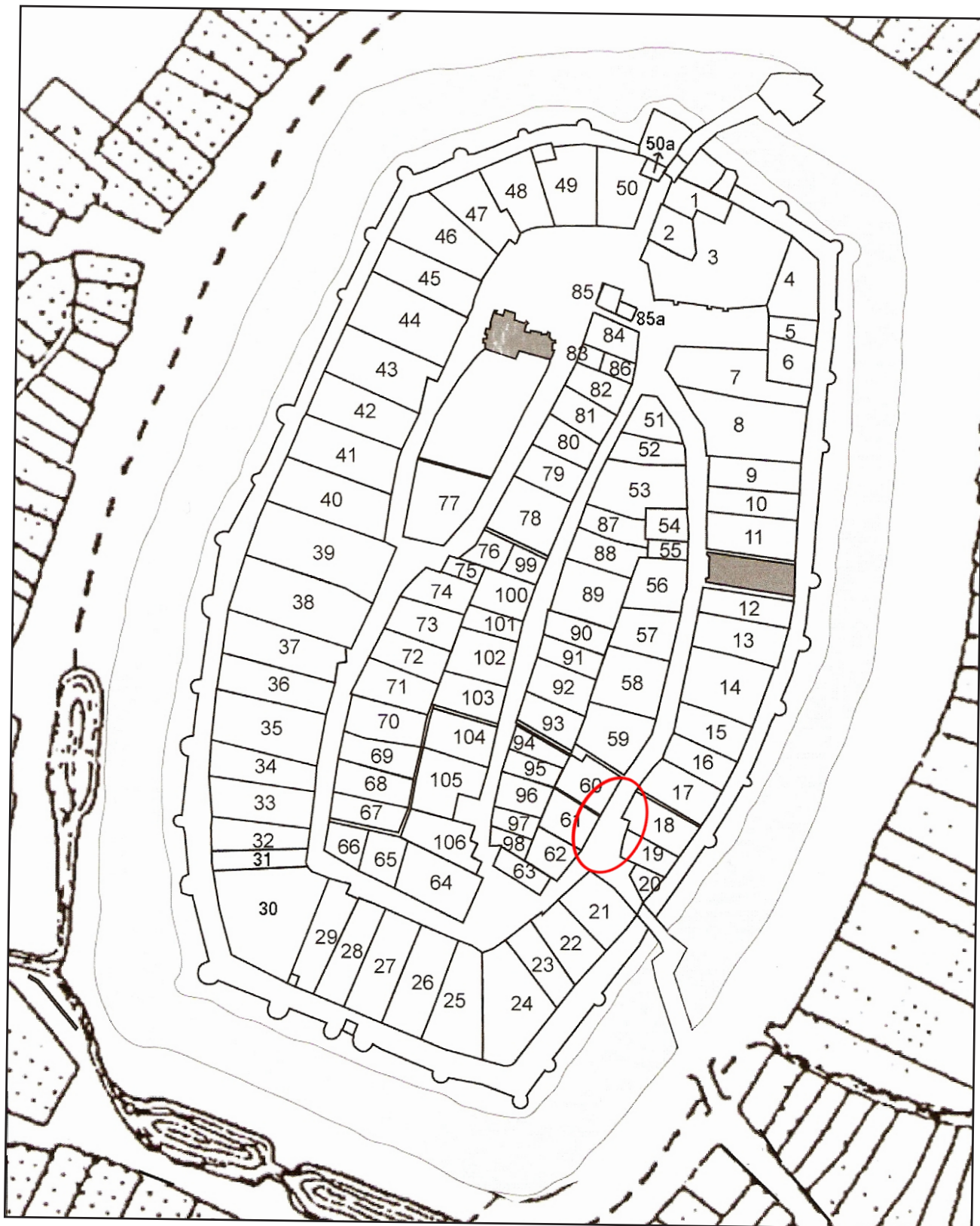
The topography of fish markets

The regulations discussed here refer to the fish markets from time to time, but usually only in general terms, taking the knowledge of their locations for granted. One needs to use further evidence, mostly sales contracts of neighbouring properties, to pinpoint their places in the urban fabric.

For Buda, András Végh has completed this task and identified *Elevenhalszer*, or *Eleven hal utcája* (place/street for live fish) with “the slightly broadened stretch of Úri uca before it reaches Szentháromság utca.”²³ This place was a stretch of medieval Mindszent utca, in the central area of the Castle Hill near the town hall. Other specialized marketplaces and retail facilities were nearby, such as the shambles and shops of the cloth cutters. The inhabitants of this part of Buda, such as the Juncker and Rozgonyi families, were leading businessmen involved in both long-distance trade and the financial administration of the realm.²⁴ The fish market was in daily use due to the continuous need and the quality requirements concerning the freshness of the fish.

In Pozsony, the fish market was likewise in the walled central part of the town, in the vicinity of the main square, in front of the Franciscan friary. Many other markets and trade facilities adjoined this area, including the shambles.²⁵

These two examples are helpful in understanding the location of the Sopron fish market, the place that stands in the title of this paper. Like in Buda and Pozsony, it was also in the fortified town centre, in the southern part, adjoining the



► **Fig. 1.** The central part of Sopron with house numbers, with the place of the fish market marked. Map taken from Ferenc Dávid, Károly Goda, and Gusztáv Thirring, *Sopron belvárosának háza és háztulajdonosai 1488–1939* (Sopron: Soproni Levéltár, 2008), inside front cover.

Salzmarkt (modern Orsolya tér), again in the vicinity of the shambles. Imre Holl has already given a good approximation of its place in a follow-up study to his classic topographic analysis.²⁶ Four sales contracts from the *Erstes Grundbuch* combined with the list of house-owners compiled by Ferenc Dávid enable a more precise location. The four houses denoted as “*am Vischmargkh*” can be identified with Szent György utca 18 and 20 on one side (60 and 61 in Dávid’s list), and Szent György utca 19 and 21 on the other (19 and 20 in Dávid’s list, see Fig. 1).²⁷ One of the contracts (572) also names the *mörin*, the ditch channelling waste water from the walled town to the moat—a feature that may have come in useful for the fishwives at the end of the day, too.

The sources also provide information about the social standing of the inhabitants of these houses—the second tier of burghers. Most of them were well-established craftsmen: three shoemakers, two furriers, a butcher, a baker, a tanner’s daughter, and a few retailers; once a prebendary priest also appears as the brother-in-law of one of the sellers.

The fish market was close to the back gate (*Hátsókapu*, *Hinderthor*) of the Sopron town wall, although probably not leading directly up to it as Holl indicated. The *Hátsókapu* was the gate that was opened, facing east, in the Middle Ages to replace the former southern gate of Roman origin due to a new orientation of Sopron’s contacts to Hungary. In the 1496, however, the gate was closed—this is the context in which the fish market appears in the council sessions, when the community requested that the gate be opened and the fish market made accessible. Forty-five years later, in 1541, the same request was repeated; this time it was also said explicitly (as suspected based on the analogies) that “dead fish” must not be sold here to avoid infection. The texts do not specify what caused this disturbance and where fish were sold meanwhile.²⁸ In any case, by the nineteenth century the fish market had moved outside the town walls, to the northern end of the grain market (*Ógabona tér*).²⁹

Conclusions

How do these observations position the fish markets in the urban landscape? All three were sited centrally but in restricted, narrow spaces, complementing other retail functions in the commercial and administrative hearts of these towns. Although this limited the output to some extent, it allowed for efficient control. At the same time, there were differences of scale: Buda, the late medieval capital of the kingdom, gave rise to more competition and multiple locations of buying and selling fish; Pozsony allowed for more cooperation between fishermen and fishmongers, while in Sopron, which had the smallest population of the three towns, the members of the fishermen’s guild met the needs, relying on a gendered division of labour instead of the participation of professional fishmongers.

These three markets were distinctly separate from the places of production, the rivers or fishponds where the fish were bred or caught—just as town butchers did not sell meat directly from the slaughter site. Furthermore, as Maryanne Kowaleski has observed, “fish was more commonly sold at markets and not fairs.”³⁰ These features distinguish urban markets of freshwater fish from rural sites and from coastal fisheries of salt-water fish where the market often directly adjoined the fishing sites.³¹

Overall, even if fishing as such cannot be considered an urban occupation, fish markets seem to have been primarily urban phenomena. Here those who had no access to fish in other, more direct, ways could procure this “spiritually strategic” commodity under safe and relatively hygienic circumstances in a central and tightly controlled space. It would be worth extending this investigation to a broader sample; among the indicators of the urbanity of a settlement it seems justified to add the existence, location, and operation of specialized fish markets.

Notes

- ¹ *Leckekönyv* [Index] in the author's possession, p. 24.
- ² Olgierd Górka, ed., *Anonymi Descriptio Europae orientalis* (Cracow: Academia Litterarum Cracoviensis, 1916), 46. Translation by the author.
- ³ László Bartosiewicz et al., "Animal Exploitation in Medieval Hungary," in *The Economy of Medieval Hungary*, ed. József Laszlovszky, Balázs Nagy, Péter Szabó, and András Vadas (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 138–142.
- ⁴ The first decades of research on Sopron's topography were summarized in Imre Holl, "Sopron (Ödenburg) im Mittelalter," *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 31 (1979), 105–49; recently: Ferenc Jankó, József Kücsán, and Katalin Szende, *Sopron*, Hungarian Atlas of Historic Towns 1 (Sopron: Soproni Levéltár, 2010). On Buda and Pozsony see the references below.
- ⁵ A similar explanation is given for the *Schmiedgasse*, nowadays part of Várkerület, namely, that it refers to a former village of blacksmiths. Károly Mollay, ed., *Erstes Grundbuch – Első telekkönyv, 1480–1553* (Sopron: Soproni Levéltár, 1993), Einleitung XVII. The name Fischergasse was first mentioned in writing in 1421: Jenő Házi, ed., *Sopron szabad királyi város története* [The history of the free royal town of Sopron], part I (7 vols), part II (6 vols) (Sopron: Székely és társa, 1921–1943), part I, vol. 2, 198.
- ⁶ E.g. Házi, ed., *Sopron*, part I, vol. 6, 147–148, 179–181.
- ⁷ The queen's donation: Házi, ed., *Sopron*, part I, vol. 1, 204–209. *Fischwasser* at Mörbisch: Jenő Házi and János Németh, eds., *Gerichtsbuch – Bírósági könyv, 1423–1531* (Sopron: Soproni Levéltár, 2005) 98, No 4; 99, No. 9.
- ⁸ András Vadas, "Városárok és vízgazdálkodás a késő-középkori Közép-Európa városaiiban" [Moats and water management in Central European towns in the late Middle Ages], *Urbs. Magyar Várostartörténeti Évkönyv* 10–11 (2015–2016): 337–338.
- ⁹ E.g. Mollay, ed., *Erstes Grundbuch*, 50, No. 347. The guild statutes of 1514, discussed below, offer much detail on the working of the *einseczen*.
- ¹⁰ Károly Mollay, "A Tómalom középkori előzményei (Fejezet a soproni határ történetéből)" [The medieval forerunners of the Tómalom/Tiechmühle (A chapter from the history of Sopron's boundaries)], *Soproni Szemle* 46. (1992): 150–167.
- ¹¹ Judit Majorossy, "A foglalkozás topográfiája: A társadalmi tér a személyes térig: a társadalmi mobilitás térbeli elemei a 15. századi Pozsonyban" [The topography of profession: From social space to personal space: Spatial elements of social mobility in fifteenth-century Bratislava], *Korall* 45 (2011): 116.
- ¹² János Király, *Pozsony város joga a középkorban* [The law of the town of Bratislava in the Middle Ages] (Budapest: MTA, 1894), 118–119; Vladimír Segeš, *Remeslá a cechy v starom Prešporku* [Crafts and guilds in medieval Bratislava] (Bratislava: Marenčin PT, 2010), 257–259.
- ¹³ András Végh, *Buda város középkori helyrajza* [The topography of medieval Buda], vol. 1 (Budapest: Budapest Történeti Múzeum, 2006), 23, 26, 111–112; András Végh, "Buda and Pest around 1300 and 1400: Two Topographic Snapshots," in: *Medieval Buda in Context*, ed. Balázs Nagy, Martyn Rady, Katalin Szende, and András Vadas (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 191.
- ¹⁴ Lubomír Juck, ed., *Výsady miest a mestieiek na Slovensku (1238–1350)* [Privileges of towns and market towns in Slovakia] (Bratislava: Veda, 1984), 76.
- ¹⁵ István Kenyeres, ed., *Zunftbuch und Privilegien der Fleischer zu Ofen aus dem Mittelalter – A budai német mestárosok középkori céhkönyve és kiváltságlevellei* (Budapest: Budapest Főváros Levéltára, 2008), 334–389.
- ¹⁶ Karl Mollay, ed., *Das Ofner Stadtrecht: Eine deutschsprachige Rechtssammlung des 15. Jahrhunderts aus Ungarn* (Budapest: MTA, 1959), Cap. 107, 110–112.
- ¹⁷ "pey den vishwëgen," c. 110. Other authors interpret the term as "carts of the fishermen" (translation by József Schmidt, *Buda város jogkönyve* [The law-book of Buda] vol. 2 (Szeged: Szegedi Középkorász Műhely, 2001, 373) or as "Fishermen's road" (Végh, *Buda város*, vol. 1, 111).
- ¹⁸ "ubi huiusmodi pisces magnos ad emendum reperierint," Kenyeres, ed., *Zunftbuch und Privilegien*, 344.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 379.
- ²⁰ Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára, Collectio Antemohacsiana (DL) 103074 and Diplomatic Photo Collection (DF) 241001 (1506.01.10).
- ²¹ Király, *Pozsony város*, 197–201, Appendix 443–445.
- ²² Házi, ed., *Sopron*, part I, vol. 6, 305–308.
- ²³ Végh, *Buda város*, vol. 1, 73, 80, 185, 201, 210; András Végh, *Buda, Part 1, up to 1686*, Hungarian Atlas of Historic Towns 4 (Budapest: Budapest History Museum, Pázmány Péter Catholic University Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Archaeology, Archaeolingua Foundation, 2015), Gazetteer "Halárusok," p. 48.
- ²⁴ Végh, *Buda város*, vol. 1, 195–208, *passim*.
- ²⁵ Majorossy, "A foglalkozás topográfiája," 116; Judit Majorossy, "Community and Individuality in Medieval Urban Space. The Social Topography of Butchers Through the Case of Pressburg in Comparison," *Czech and Slovak Journal of Humanities* 2 (2011): 28, Fig. 7.
- ²⁶ Imre Holl, "Marktplätze und Handwerker – Entwicklungstendenzen in Sopron im Mittelalter," *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 123 (1995–96): 7–15.
- ²⁷ Mollay, ed., *Erstes Grundbuch* 418 (1525), 498 (1528), 572 (1533) and 826 (1547); Ferenc Dávid, Károly Goda, and Gusztáv Thirring, *Sopron belvárosának házai és háztulajdonosai 1488–1939* [Houses and house owners in the central part of Sopron, 1488–1939] (Sopron: Soproni Levéltár, 2008), 83–86, 186–190.
- ²⁸ Károly Mollay and Károly Goda, eds., *Gedenkbuch – Feljegyzési könyv, 1492–1543* (Sopron: Soproni Levéltár, 2006), 56. (1496.03.25); Házi, *Sopron*, part II, vol. 2, 183 (1496. 04.25), 278 (1541.04.25).
- ²⁹ Jankó, Kücsán and Szende, *Sopron*, 72, Fig. 37.
- ³⁰ Maryanne Kowaleski, *Local Markets and Regional Trade in Medieval Exeter* (Cambridge: CUP 1995), 48.
- ³¹ Jessica Dijkman, *Shaping Medieval Markets. The Organisation of Commodity Markets in Holland, c. 1200–c. 1450*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 110–31.