

Secrétariat TEMA :

ELTE BTK Atelier

1088 Budapest

Múzeum krt. 6-8.

Tel/fax: + 36 1 485 52 08

<http://www.mastertema.eu>

secretary@mastertema.eu



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Supervisor's report on *Town, canal, and region. The impact of drainage processes on the urban centrality of Sombor in the first half of the Nineteenth century* by Dušan Ljuboja

Dušan Ljuboja has chosen a research subject featuring a set of concepts which make part of the TEMA curriculum: town, region and territorial development. He was shaping his research project through his semesters spent in Budapest and Prague. Its central problem is urbanisation in East Central Europe, more specifically in the Kingdom of Hungary, during the Eighteenth to the Nineteenth centuries; in his introduction, Dušan Ljuboja proves his knowledge of the relevant scholarly literature on this subject. In an early stage of the project, he aimed at focusing on the impact made by the construction of the Emperor Francis Canal on the urbanization processes in Bács-Bodrog County, with special emphasis on the free royal town of Sombor. With a reasonable decision, however, he restricted the topic and the final version of the thesis focuses on the well chosen problem of centrality (as a mark of the urban character of early modern towns) whilst the more general notion of urbanization processes proved to too broad for a master's thesis and they have been assigned to the theoretical background instead of being unfolded.

This modification turned out to be fruitful. Dušan Ljuboja has given a remarkable contribution to the conceptualization of urban centrality, because, going beyond the market centre function, he brought focus to the administrative function of the chosen town. Sombor turned out to be a good choice from this point of view because, besides housing the magistracy of the free royal town, it was also the seat for the county officials and the representatives of the Hungarian Treasury. In this way, local, regional and state-wide interests could intertwine and occasionally conflict with one another. The draining process of the territory in and around Sombor was a case in point. Long-lasting and tortuous debates exemplify very well the contrary positions of the sometimes cooperating, sometimes rivalling institutions. The county, backed by the Treasury, makes its best to ameliorate the territory with setting up a drainage system linking the territory around Sombor to the Emperor Francis Canal, but the town tends to resist to these claims as the project, penetrating into its territory, seems to endanger its agricultural production and infringe upon its legal status. Hence, these plans and debates are rightly placed into the centre of the thesis. Dušan Ljuboja reconstructs them using manuscript sources he found in the Historical Archive of Sombor, in Serbia, and in the Maps Collection of the Hungarian National Archives, Budapest.

The careful reconstruction of intentions and events (supported with an account of the territory and the population, an overview of the main actors) may seem, at some points, somewhat copious, but it has a purpose. It is the empirical material underlying the conclusion that Sombor as a free royal town made only a limited impact on the prosperity of the region around it in this case, therefore, its regional centrality, unquestionable as far as its market centre function is concerned, appears to be contested when it comes to its role in regional development. Moreover, the case of Sombor, being the seat of three administrative institutions, reminds scholars that, in their discourses on the administrative centrality of a given place, they should be aware of the juxtaposition and/or conflict of the institutions embedded into it. In the case at hand, it was the county seated in Sombor rather

than Sombor as a free royal town to have a principal role in the amelioration of the regional drainage infrastructure. The free royal town lagged behind the more progressive county.

This outcome is not altogether surprising for Hungarian historiography: it is far from unknown that, in the first part of the Nineteenth century, political and economic reform was mainly promoted by the liberal Hungarian nobility representing the counties whilst free royal towns were busy safeguarding their prerogatives. This historiographical context should be given more attention in a revised version if Dušan Ljuboja planned to publish his thesis. In that case, the continuation of the archival research is advisable because the fonds of the Hungarian Regency Council and the Hungarian Treasury, as well as the National Hydrological Archive of Budapest may contain material relevant to the topic. It is possible that new material may enable him to revisit some elements (such as the question of urban image, roads etc.) that were not tackled in the absence of proper sources now. The English text should be checked once again because, while being well written in general, it contains some minor linguistic flaws such as the uncertain use of *the* and *a*.

All in all, Dušan Ljuboja's thesis is not only an interesting addition to the urban/regional history of Sombor and Bács-Bodrog County, but also a significant contribution to the conceptualisation of space and centrality in the given area and time period. I evaluate it with 5, the best grade in the Hungarian academic system.



Péter Erdősi, PhD
ELTE, Atelier Department of European
Social Sciences and Historiography
Budapest