

District Wardens in the Cities of Northern Hungary in the 18th to 21st Centuries

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ABSTRACT

In Hungarian settlements, *tizedek* (tenths), streets, divisions, and *fertályok* (*viertels*, quarters, or districts) were areas that enjoyed a certain autonomy. They were led by elected “decurions,” “street captains,” or “captains” in Hungarian-populated settlements, and by *viertelmeisters*, or district wardens, in German-speaking settlements. These officials liaised between the municipal authorities and the local community. From the 16th century until the mid-19th century, the decurions and district wardens had official powers, kept the population informed about national and local regulations, helped carry out local censuses, collected taxes, and organized public works. They played a key role in maintaining law and order in their neighborhoods, and in ensuring protection from fire. In the northeastern region of present-day Hungary, we have information concerning the history of the district wardens in the cities of Eger, Gyöngyös, and Miskolc, while in the case of Eger the tradition is still in existence today. There were decurions in Eger as early as the end of the 17th century, who were replaced by district wardens from the 1710s. The position existed in Gyöngyös from the middle of the 18th century until 1874. In Miskolc, there were district wardens from 1794 to 1800. After a hiatus of half a century, the position was then restored, while in 1884 the parallel position of “section warden” was abolished. In Eger, district wardens were active until 1949, then, after a forced interruption in the Socialist era, the institution was revived in 1996, becoming an important element in local identity through its heritage preservation activities. The present study introduces the different eras in the institution of the district warden, its changing functions, its organizational structure, its symbols, and its various forms of social interaction. Eger is the only city in Hungary in which this centuries-old office is still preserved today, justifying the inclusion of this living custom in the UNESCO National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2014.

KEYWORDS

tizedes (“tenth”), *fertálymester* / *viertelmeister*, district warden, election, tax gathering, law and order, heritage preservation

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On February 5, 2022, a ceremony took place in Eger at which 16 newly elected officers, one for each area of the city, took an oath in the presence of the city's mayor, continuing a tradition that goes back many centuries. Wearing black "hundred-pleated" broadcloth cloaks and carrying a ribboned staff, the district wardens have once again been representing individual areas of the city, attending public events and Church services, preserving local values, and helping those in need for quarter of a century. As director of the István Dobó Castle Museum in Eger, I came across objects and documents related to the history of the office, which prompted me to undertake research on the subject. I myself was elected as a district warden in my area of the city in 2012, allowing me an "insider's view" of the present-day heritage-preservation activities.

In Hungarian settlements, *tizedek* ("tenths"), streets, divisions, and *fertályok* (*viertels*, quarters, or districts) were areas that enjoyed a certain autonomy. They were led by elected decurions, "street captains," and "captains" in Hungarian-populated settlements, and by *viertelmeisters* (district wardens) in German-speaking settlements. These officials liaised between the municipal authorities and the local community. From the 16th century until the mid-19th century, the decurions and district wardens had official powers, kept the population informed about national and local regulations, helped carry out local censuses, collected taxes, and organized public works. They played a key role in maintaining law and order in their neighborhoods and in providing protection from fire. In some places, they were also responsible for the management, preservation, and use of communal property (PETERCSÁK 2014a:14; BÁRTH 2015:9–42).

In the 20th century, research carried out by Rezső Milleker, Andor Csizmadia, and János Bárh shed light on the activities of office holders in town districts in Transdanubia, Upper Hungary, the Great Plains, and Transylvania (MILLEKER 1939; CSIZMADIA 1983; BARTH 1997, 2015). Imre Breznay wrote about the history of Eger's district wardens in various publications (BREZNAY 1907, 1926, 1939), while Jolán Szabó and Krisztián Kapusi discussed the history of the district and section wardens of Gyöngyös (SZABÓ 1989–1990, 2015) and Miskolc (KAPUSI 2015) respectively. Thus, together with my own research, it is possible to present the different types of district wardens in Northern Hungary.

In all three cities, there is evidence of the position from the 18th century, although in the case of Eger, several researchers have dated the appearance of the office to the end of the 17th century, at around the end of the Ottoman occupation, as the successor to the position of decurion. Andor Csizmadia suggested that since Eger was a predominantly Hungarian city before the Ottoman invasion, it had probably been divided into tenths, which explains why the structure of tenths survived after the expulsion of the Ottomans. Lajos Nemes, on the other hand, links the system of tenths to the settling of the Heyducks at the end of the 17th century, as their military organization was situated in Eger. At the end of the 18th century, local tradition also traced the original function of the decurions to the military protection of the city (BREZNAY 1939:3; CSIZMADIA 1983:63; NEMES 2001:68). According to current research, we can be certain that at the end of the 17th century there were already decurions in the city (46 of them were listed in 1695). In 1712, the German burghers who settled in this area following the expulsion of the Ottomans referred to their areas of the city as *viertels* ("quarters"). The elected aldermen were initially known as *tizedes* (decurions), while the name of the district wardens became *viertelmeister* in German (*fertálymester* in Hungarian) from the 1730s. In the 18th and 19th centuries, district warden was the most common name, while in the 20th century the names *fertálymester* and *negyedmester* (both literally meaning "quarter master") were both used.



Initially, Eger was divided into four quarters, although the number of districts was increased to six in 1716, and subsequently to 12 with the proliferation of the city's suburbs between 1716 and 1823 (PETERCSÁK 2015:81–82).

In the 18th century, the district wardens of Eger carried out their work together with, but subordinate to, other city officials: they informed the inhabitants of the district about the decrees of the landowners and authorities. Their original function always remained important — that is, their participation in the registration and collection of taxes. In their own area of the city, they were responsible for fire protection and for the cleanliness of chimneys, courtyards, and streets. They ensured that everyone paid the day wage set by the magistrate, that accommodation was not provided to strangers, and that the inhabitants of the district lived morally upright lives. They were responsible for peace and quiet at night and were able to take troublemakers to court. By the end of the 18th century, the duties of the district warden were beginning to become onerous for citizens, and especially for those involved in trade, who tried to avoid their responsibilities by offering various excuses and who typically hired a deputy to act on their behalf (PETERCSÁK 2015:82–86).

This explains why the city experimented with using paid district wardens between 1805 and 1808, who were referred to locally as “employed” or “hired” district wardens. They can be regarded as the second generation of Eger's district wardens. Rather than the 11 annually elected officers, six permanent district wardens were employed, who “held office for several years” and received 40 forints in cash and 25 bushels of wheat per person. However, these paid district wardens proved unreliable: they neglected their duties and, as a result, there was an increase in disorder. They considered their wages to be meagre compared to the amount of effort involved, and, like the merchants before them, they complained that they were unable to pursue their own trades because of their duties as wardens, and that collecting taxes was onerous for them, so they asked to be released from their obligations. The three-year period thus proved that the hiring of permanent district wardens was untenable and that it made more sense to restore the old position of honorary warden, according to which annually elected citizens were honor bound to fulfill their duties (PETERCSÁK 2014a:53–58).

The years 1808–1858 represent a third period, during which earlier duties continued to be important, including announcing the collection of taxes, explaining the decrees of the city council to the district's citizens, and undertaking night-time patrols to maintain order. One innovation was that warden no longer carried out the night patrol alone but was accompanied by another resident from the district. However, the biggest change compared to the previous century's practice was that the district wardens were obliged to be on duty at the house of the chief justice according to a schedule, which meant that they could be sent out to deal with any incidents that arose. This duty even had to be fulfilled on Sundays. In the meantime, the number of city districts increased by one, and from then on Eger had 12 district wardens for more than a hundred years. Even in the 1840s, for their varied and onerous work the honorary district wardens were paid the same 40 forints that the hired district wardens had been given in 1805, as well as 14 bushels of wheat each year from the customs quota payable by the city mill (PETERCSÁK 2015:91–93).

During the fourth period (1859–1860), appointed district commissioners took the place of the district wardens and were active primarily in the collection of taxes. We have no trace of the order or city council decision that — according to an entry in the journal of the Cifrasánc district warden — terminated the position of elected warden at the end of 1858, although besides



this journal entry, the word “None” appears against the years 1859 and 1860 in the list of names engraved on the warden’s staff in the Felnémet district. Their activities may have become limited to the collection of taxes but failed to generate the expected results, which explains why the traditional position of district warden was restored. This is confirmed by the fact that, after the elections on February 9, 1861, “based on a practice going back over a century” the new wardens were presented in person at a local council meeting chaired by the mayor, where the “newly electees” also swore an oath (PETERCSÁK 2015:93–95).

At this point, it is worth examining how the district wardens operated in Gyöngyös and Miskolc in the 18th and 19th centuries. The position was established in the administrative structure of Gyöngyös in 1761 and abolished in 1874. During this time, the role and nature of the position changed, in keeping with changes in the local government. In 1761, the town was divided into four quarters, which, in the town’s administrative system, functioned as tax districts and local government electoral districts, while they also played a role in the enforcement of council decrees. In 1766, the term “district warden” appeared in the town’s records, and this subsequently became the generally accepted name rather than the former *exactor* (or tax collector). The *perceptors* of the town’s districts were also given the new title *fertálygazdas* (“district heads”) (SZABÓ 2015:43–52). Up until 1781, the members of the council elected a district head and two district wardens in each district. The district head stood higher in the hierarchy, while the district wardens were subordinate to them. In 1781, the position of district head was abolished due to abuses, and in the 19th century the number of district wardens was increased, first to nine and then, in 1825, to 10, and this number remained unchanged until 1850. In 1854, there were only four wardens, and in 1867 the council decided to appoint only one.

It was a written requirement that office holders had to have their own assets, since in this way they could be held accountable for the money they collected. They had to be able to read, write, and count in order to be able to perform the administrative tasks. Their activities were connected to the district, and initially they were involved exclusively in the collection of taxes and the related administration. Their tasks were later expanded to encompass the common cultivation of the town’s land, ensuring supplies for the military, providing fire and flood protection, supervising public sanitation, establishing public safety, and keeping an eye on strangers. The official instructions were recorded in writing in 1825–1826 and 1830. One of the 10 district wardens was assigned to remain in the town hall each week, day and night, allowing him to act on immediate issues. Initially, the district wardens were not paid for their work, although they were exempted from paying tax. A regular salary was introduced from 1783, and for a while they also received money to purchase boots. After 1850, it became increasingly difficult to integrate the position of district warden within the bureaucratic system of officials and within the public administration, thus they performed only ancillary activities, subordinate to a specialist official (collector of war taxes, quartermaster). After 1854, wardens were no longer assigned to every district, and after 1867 the one warden that remained was not connected to any of the city’s districts. Having lost its association with the districts, its specific function, and any independent duties, the abolition of the post thus became inevitable in Gyöngyös (SZABÓ 2015:53–64).

The position of district warden appeared as late as the 1790s in the public administration of Miskolc, a market town that was part of the royal demesne. This can be explained by the fact that, with the help of the Royal Hungarian Treasury that exercised the rights of landowner, Miskolc began to reform its administration according to the pattern typical of royal free cities.



According to Krisztián Kapusi, who has carried out research on this topic, the office of district warden would have been a status symbol for the officials of a market town that was aspiring to the status of royal free town, demonstrating the settlement's developmental demands and its aspirations to self-determination (KAPUSI 2015:67–68). The *protocollum* for the year 1794 recorded the names of those elected as district wardens in the town's four quarters, whose job descriptions were read aloud. In 1800, the range of responsibilities in Miskolc primarily included fire protection duties, with five of the eight points connected with averting the risk of fire. Besides participating in actual firefighting, the duties included checking the condition of fire extinguishing devices, water-filled vessels, and chimneys, and supervising the night guards. They were also expected to have troublemakers arrested. The *városkapitány* ("town captain") was the immediate superior of the wardens, who, in turn, were each able to rely on two *fertálykapitány* ("district captains") and four *fertálytizedes* ("district decurions") in the performance of their official duties.

The Miskolc district wardens performed their duties from 1794 to 1800, then, after a hiatus of half a century, the position was reinstated with a change of name. In 1850, the city was divided into eight sections, while in 1855 it was reorganized into four districts that were likewise referred to as "sections." In December 1855, the county authorized the employment of eight district wardens in the four sections, with a salary of 36 forints. The district wardens were also allowed to choose 16 "assistant decurions." In 1859, the obligations of the city personnel who were officially known as *szakaszmester* ("section master") and commonly referred to as *fertálymester* or *negyedmester* (district warden, or "quarter master") were summarized in writing. They included compiling reports of tax payments, assigning members of the population to undertake communal work, supervising the night watchmen, monitoring strangers and suspicious elements, and overseeing the citizens' fire extinguishing equipment. "Literacy and accounting skills" were important criteria for their appointment (KAPUSI 2015:69–72). From the mid-1860s, the number of district wardens was sometimes lowered and sometimes raised. By the 1870s, the function had been reduced to delivery, announcements, and collection, and in 1884 the town's assembly finally decided to abolish the position of section master (KAPUSI 2015:74–75).

In Eger, the fate of the position of district warden followed a somewhat different course. From 1861, district wardens were once again elected in each district, and this period, which lasted until 1931, can be regarded as the fifth period in the position of warden in Eger. In 1883, the legal department of the town's body of representatives recommended that the office be abolished here too, in line with national law. The representatives, however, decided that the institution should be preserved. Their decision was doubtless motivated by a desire to preserve tradition, and although, up until the beginning of the 20th century, the specific tasks of the wardens were laid down in the regulations, they were mainly engaged in delivery work. The town's more affluent citizens and farmers recognized that the institution could be a forum for socializing and networking. The inaugural feasts and banquets given by the new wardens for those retiring from office provided ideal opportunities. Informal gatherings were important opportunities for wardens from different professions and walks of life and helped strengthen the identity of each district, which explains the insistence on hospitality despite the often significant expenses this entailed. The prestige of the office reached its peak in the first half of the 20th century. By this time, even Church dignitaries, county and city officials, and intellectuals considered it a great honor to be elected as a district warden (PETERCSÁK 2016:316).



Until the beginning of the 20th century, the wardens were not part of a unified body but were organized into 12 distinct groups, according to district, to which all living district wardens belonged. It was within this framework that the annual election of the new wardens took place “based on the old customs,” banquets were held, and the district wardens’ journals were kept. In the 18th and 19th centuries, all the district wardens gathered once a year, on the day of St. Apollonia (February 9), whom they regarded as their patron saint, to celebrate mass in the basilica and swear the oath of office in the city hall. Here the townspeople were able to observe the wardens and their attendants marching in their silver-buckled, hundred-pleated black broadcloth cloaks, holding their ribboned staffs in their hands. The first seeds of a unified body emerged in the early 20th century. One particularly striking joint incentive occurred in 1907, on the occasion of the unveiling of the statue of István Dobó and the national song contest, when a silver statue of a district warden, dressed in a cloak and holding a ribboned staff in his hand, was awarded as prize (PETERCSÁK 2016:317–318).

The sixth and last period in the history of Eger’s district wardens comprises the two decades from 1931 to 1950, which were marked by the operations of the Eger Association of District Wardens (*Egri Negyedmesteri Testület*). This civil society organization was established on May 10, 1931, at a meeting in the city hall, during which it was stated that “Eger’s district wardens preserve something of the honest, good old days of the past...” Their activities were carried out in accordance with the “ten commandments” adopted at that time to preserve and promote local values, to promote moral and religious life, and to alleviate social problems. On September 20, 1931, the leaders of the association were elected. The first chair was Dr. Menyhért Kürti, a Cistercian priest and director general of the royal school district. In the autumn of 1931, the association played an active role in the organization of aid for the poor, and in 1935 it was decided that all wardens would be responsible for monitoring the condition of statues, calvaries, and monuments in their respective districts. During the Second World War, the 14 district wardens, including representatives of two new districts from 1938, distributed social aid to the needy on the basis of issued certificates, while the Women’s Friendly Association was founded in 1941 — within a body that for centuries had been made up of men — to help the poor and the families of those fighting in the war.

In the 1930s and 1940s, active and retired district wardens jointly participated in the Church services and civic events of the city and its individual districts. In 1933, they attended the harvest parade, and it was they who welcomed the visiting prime minister, Miklós Kállay, at the railway station in October 1942. The first appearance of the Eger district wardens in Budapest was in 1916, when Bernát Kocsis and Imre Siller participated in the coronation of King Károly IV. In 1934, Eger’s district wardens represented their city on two occasions — the procession of the Holy Right Hand of King St. Stephen, and the 15th anniversary of the entry of regent Miklós Horthy into Budapest. The Hungarian public were introduced to the district wardens of Eger through a radio lecture delivered by Imre Breznay in 1936 and by the recordings of the Hungarian Film Office.

On these occasions, each incumbent proudly carried the ribboned warden’s staff, the symbol of office, on which the names of all retired wardens were engraved along with the dates of their time in office, and to which was attached a ribbon embroidered with the name of the recently retired official (Fig. 1). This may have been a symbol of power, like the staff of a magistrate, although we have information about its use only from the 1870s, when the tradition-preservation nature of the office was already dominant. From the 1880s, there are descriptions of the





Fig. 1. Béla Brindza, Jr., a district warden from Eger, Hungary, wearing a cloak and holding a ribboned staff, 1938. István Dobó Castle Museum Historical Documentation 81.39.1

red-lined, loose cloak made from black broadcloth, which, as in other occupations, can also be regarded originally as a symbol that lent dignity to the wearer. From the last third of the 19th century, the staff and cloak bestowed a historical perspective and reinforced the centuries-old tradition of the office (BREZNAY 1939:8-9; PETERCSÁK 2014b:366-380). From 1849, a list of elected wardens was compiled annually, accompanied by ornate illustrations, along with an indication of the warden's district, while from 1869, photographs were even taken of the incumbent wardens. The historicizing style of these tableaux, which included details and historical figures related to Eger as well as the Hungarian and municipal coats of arms, reinforced the historical traditions of the office (PETERCSÁK 2010:219-259).

One element that indicates the religious character of the office of Eger district warden is that, from the 1830s, the district associations kept torches and candles that it loaned free of charge for the funerals of deceased district wardens and their wives, and to others for a fee. The wardens' unity was strengthened by the fact that they attended the funerals of deceased district wardens collectively, carrying the mourning flag. At masses and processions held during the important festivals, active district wardens stood with candles and lanterns on either side of



the altar, and at the Corpus Christi procession they accompanied the Holy Sacrament. Respectability and a religious and moral life were the primary considerations when selecting the district wardens. In the interwar decades, the leadership of the city assigned to the wardens the important role of safeguarding the spiritual peace and elevating the religious sentiment and moral standards of the population (PETERCSÁK 2016:320–322).

At the end of the 19th century, the unification of the city-wide institution was symbolized by the introduction of a common district wardens' flag, and from the 1930s, their cohesion was further strengthened by an oval-shaped badge that they wore pinned to their cloaks.

In 1950, the district wardens, who were elected according to tradition by the districts' retired wardens, were no longer permitted to swear their oath at the city hall, although in their letter addressed to the Hungarian Workers' Party they emphasized the truly democratic character of the institution, in line with the demands of the era. Thus, apart from occasional gatherings and funerals within the districts, the centuries-old tradition of the district warden in Eger ceased to exist in the mid-20th century (PETERCSÁK 2014a:203–204).

The revival of the tradition in Eger became possible in 1995–1996, following the change of regime, in the framework of the Local Patriotic Association. In 2000, the Eger Association of District Wardens was founded, which operates according to present-day laws, although its organizational structure and activities are based on the old traditions. The newest generation of wardens operates as an association, on three levels. The basic organizational unit is the district, in which members of the association who have previously held office elect a new warden every year. At this level, the committee member in the role of active district warden, in cooperation with the wardens of the city's other districts, organizes programs, gatherings, and social work to uphold the values of the district, while at the same time acting as the district's spokesperson towards the municipal authorities. The second group of wardens comprises all those in office in the given year (16 persons). It is they who appear in the official warden's costume, the hundred-pleated cloaks, carrying their ribboned staffs, the symbol of office, on 15 to 20 occasions each year, at celebrations and Church events organized by the city. The third level is the association as a whole, which determines the strategy and the tasks for the future. Today, over 300 respected citizens of Eger can claim to have been district wardens, and all of them meet at the monthly gatherings. These are generally organized by the warden of the district and are occasions for presenting the respective district to others and for friendly conversation over a modest meal. The gatherings are also ideal occasions for delivering presentations on the historical and artistic values of the city and the city's development plans. The communal lunch that follows the inauguration of the new district wardens in the city hall on February 9 (Fig. 2), like the evening ball for the new officials, are ways of promoting camaraderie among the wardens. The association participates jointly in the family program organized on Pentecost Monday and in the commemoration of King St. Stephen on August 19, when its members take part in a torchlit procession from István Dobó Square to the statue of István Dobó in Eger Castle. Founded a few years ago, the wardens' choir is another way of strengthening community spirit among the members. The choir performs at gatherings, Church events, and masses, as well as at national programs and even abroad.

Tourists as well as local citizens have an opportunity to encounter the district wardens, as they are present in their regalia at the opening of the Eger Bull's Blood Festival and the related prayers at the Statue of St. Donát (Fig. 3), during the autumn harvest procession, and at the consecration of the wine on St. John's Day. Ethnic Hungarians from beyond the country's





Fig. 2. The captain-general of the Eger association inaugurates the new district warden. Eger, Hungary, 2012. (Photo by Tamás Majoros)

borders might also come across them, as they typically take part in the Pentecost *Șumuleu Ciuc* (Csíksomlyó) pilgrimage in Romania. The district wardens of today still have an important role to play in perpetuating earlier traditions and as advocates for the preservation and promotion of local values in their respective areas of the city. Each year, the mayor's office requests reports and suggestions from the districts concerning the condition of the different areas of the city, which are taken into account when drafting the city's budget. For the city's districts, the gatherings of locals that provide opportunities for cooking and discussion, and the common work carried out under the leadership of the wardens, generate authentic micro-communities that focus attention on local values in today's fast-paced, globalized world. In keeping with tradition, today it is as important as ever to support the needy and undertake charitable work.

In 2014, the living tradition of the Eger district wardens was inscribed in the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage, being unique in Hungary in preserving a centuries-old practice of tradition inheritance from generation to generation. It is a social custom that strengthens the identity of individual city districts. Through their appearance at community events, as representatives of the entire social structure the members of the association raise awareness among the city's inhabitants of the importance of preserving and popularizing traditions that are an integral aspect of local consciousness and cultural heritage. The visibility afforded by its inclusion in the national inventory can contribute to the promotion of the district warden tradition to a wider public, and to encouraging the revival and fostering of similar social traditions in other settlements. A conference held in Eger on October 15, 2018, and the





Fig. 3. Eger district wardens taking part in a ceremony at the statue of St. Donat. Eger, Hungary, 2010. (Photo by the author)

subsequent volume of proceedings *Tizedesek, utcakapitányok, fertálymesterek a Kárpát-medencében* [Decurions, Street Captains, and District Wardens in the Carpathian Basin], published by the Eszterházy Károly College in 2016, served a similar purpose (PETERCSÁK 2018:241–242).

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