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Communicationes ex Instituto Archaeologico

37/2021

Sigel: Antaeus

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Distribution of exchange copies by
the Library of the Institute of Archaeology, Research Centre for the Humanities
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The publication of this volume was supported by special grants of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences
and the Secretariat of Eötvös Loránd Research Network

HU ISSN 0238-0218

Desktop editing and layout by Archaeolingua
Printed in Hungary by the Prime Rate Kft.
Cover by H&H Design

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ABBREVIATIONS

ActaArchHung	Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae (Budapest)
ActaEthnHung	Acta Ethnographica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae (Budapest)
ActaOrHung	Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae (Budapest)
ActaMusPapensis	Acta Musei Papensis. A Pápai Múzeum Értesítője (Pápa)
Agria	Agria. Az Egri Múzeum Évkönyve (Eger)
AH	Archaeologia Historica (Brno)
AHN	Acta Historica Neolosiensia (Banská Bystrica)
AJMK	Arany János Múzeum Közleményei (Nagykőrös)
AKorr	Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt (Mainz)
Alba Regia	Alba Regia. Annales Musei Stephani Regis (Székesfehérvár)
AnalCis	Analecta Cisterciensia (Roma)
AnnHN	Annales Historico-Naturales Musei Nationalis Hungarici (Budapest)
Antaeus	Antaeus. Communicationes ex Instituto Archaeologico (Budapest)
Antiquity	Antiquity. A Review of World Archaeology (Durham)
AR	Archeologické Rozhledy (Praha)
ArchA	Archaeologia Austriaca (Wien)
ArchÉrt	Archaeologiai Értesítő (Budapest)
ArchHung	Archaeologia Hungarica (Budapest)
ArchLit	Archaeologia Lituana (Vilnius)
ArhSof	Археология. Орган на Националния археологически институт с музей – БАН (Sofia)
ARR	Arheološki Radovi i Rasprave (Zagreb)
Arrabona	Arrabona. A Győri Xantus János Múzeum Évkönyve (Győr)
AV	Arheološki Vestnik (Ljubljana)
Balcanoslavica	Balcanoslavica (Prilep)
BÁMÉ	A Béri Balogh Ádám Múzeum Évkönyve (Szekszárd)
BAR	British Archaeological Reports (Oxford)
BMÖ	Beiträge zur Mittelalterarchäologie in Österreich (Wien)
BudRég	Budapest Régiségei (Budapest)
Castrum	Castrum. A Castrum Bene Egyesület folyóirata (Budapest)
CommArchHung	Communicationes Archaeologicae Hungariae (Budapest)
Cumania	Cumania. A Bács-Kiskun Megyei Múzeumok Közleményei (Kecskemét)
DBW	Denkmalpflege Baden-Württemberg (Stuttgart)
EMÉ	Az Egri Múzeum Évkönyve (Eger)
EurAnt	Eurasia Antiqua. Zeitschrift für Archäologie Eurasiens (Bonn)
FolArch	Folia Archaeologica (Budapest)
FontArchHung	Fontes Archaeologici Hungariae (Budapest)
GMSB	Годишник на музеите от Северна България (Варна)
GZM	Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja Bosne i Hercegovine u Sarajevu (Sarajevo)
GZMS	Glasnik Hrvatskih Zemaljskih Muzeja u Sarajevu (Sarajevo)
HAH	Hereditas Archaeologica Hungariae (Budapest)

Hesperia	Hesperia. Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens (Princeton)
História	História. A Magyar Történelmi Társulat, majd a História Alapítvány folyóirata (Budapest)
HOMÉ	A Herman Ottó Múzeum Évkönyve (Miskolc)
INMVarna	Известия на Народния музей – Варна (Varna)
IstMitt	Istanbuler Mitteilungen (Tübingen)
JAMÉ	A nyíregyházi Jósa András Múzeum Évkönyve (Nyíregyháza)
Jászkunság	Jászkunság. Az MTA Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok Megyei Tudományos Egyesület folyóirata (Szolnok)
JbAC	Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum (Bonn)
JPMÉ	A Janus Pannonius Múzeum Évkönyve (Pécs)
KMMK	Komárom-Esztergom Megyei Múzeumok Közleményei (Tata)
LK	Levéltári Közlemények (Budapest)
MAA	Monumenta Avarorum Archaeologica (Budapest)
MacAA	Macedoniae Acta Archaeologica (Skopje)
MAG	Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft (Wien)
MBV	Münchner Beiträge zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte (München)
MHKÁS	Magyarország honfoglalás és kora Árpád-kori sírleletei (Budapest)
MittArchInst	Mitteilungen des Archäologischen Instituts der Ungarischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Budapest)
MFME	A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve (Szeged)
MFME StudArch	A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve – Studia Archaeologica (Szeged)
MMMK	A Magyar Mezőgazdasági Múzeum Közleményei (Budapest)
MŰÉ	Művészettörténeti Értesítő (Budapest)
MŰT	Művészettörténeti Tanulmányok. Művészettörténeti Dokumentációs Központ Évkönyve (Budapest)
NÉrt	Néprajzi Értesítő (Budapest)
NMMÉ	Nógrád Megyei Múzeumok Évkönyve (Salgótarján)
OA	Opisnica Archaeologica (Zagreb)
Offa	Offa. Berichte und Mitteilungen des Museums Vorgeschichtliche Altertümer in Kiel (Neumünster)
PA	Památky Archeologické (Praha)
Prilozi	Prilozi Instituta za povijesne znanosti Sveučilišta u Zagrebu (Zagreb)
PrzA	Przegląd Archeologiczny (Wrocław)
PtujZb	Ptujski Zbornik (Ptuj)
PV	Přehled výzkumů (Brno)
PZ	Prähistorische Zeitschrift (Berlin)
RégFüz	Régészeti Füzetek (Budapest)
RGA	Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde (Berlin)
RT	Transylvanian Review / Revue de Transylvanie (Cluj)
RVM	Rad Vojvođanskih muzeja (Novi Sad)
SbNMP	Sborník Národního muzea v Praze (Praha)
Scripta Mercaturae	Scripta Mercaturae. Zeitschrift für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte Gutenberg)
SHP	Starohrvatska Prosvjeta (Zagreb)
SlA	Slovenská Archeológia (Bratislava)
SlAnt	Slavia Antiqua (Poznan)

SIS	Slovanské štúdie (Bratislava)
SMK	Somogyi Múzeumok Közleményei (Kaposvár)
StComit	Studia Comitatus. A Ferenczy Múzeum Évkönyve (Szentendre)
StH	Studia Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae (Budapest)
StSl	Studia Slavica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae (Budapest)
StudArch	Studia Archaeologica (Budapest)
Századok	Századok. A Magyar Történelmi Társulat folyóirata (Budapest)
TBM	Tanulmányok Budapest Múltjából (Budapest)
Tisicum	Tisicum. A Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok Megyei Múzeumok Évkönyve (Szolnok)
USML	Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy (Turnhout)
VAH	Varia Archeologica Hungarica (Budapest)
VAMZ	Vjesnik Arheološkog muzeja u Zagrebu (Zagreb)
VMMK	A Veszprém Megyei Múzeumok Közleményei (Veszprém)
WiA	Wiadomości Archeologiczne (Warszawa)
WMMÉ	A Wosinsky Mór Múzeum Évkönyve (Szekszárd)
ZalaiMúz	Zalai Múzeum (Zalaegerszeg)
Zborník FFUK, Musaica	Zborník Filozofickej Fakulty Univerzity Komenského. Musaica (Bratislava)
ZbSNM	Zborník Slovenského Národného Múzea. História (Bratislava)
ZfAM	Zeitschrift für Archäologie des Mittelalters (Köln)
ZHVSt	Zeitschrift des Historischen Vereins für Steiermark (Graz)
Ziegelei-Museum	Ziegelei-Museum. Bericht der Stiftung Ziegelei-Museum (Cham)
ZRNM	Zbornik Radova Narodnog Muzeja (Beograd)

KATALIN SZENDE

THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF URBAN PRAGMATIC LITERACY IN MEDIEVAL HUNGARY¹

Zusammenfassung: Der vorliegende Beitrag kombiniert die Ansätze der Erforschung materieller Kultur und die Geschichte der pragmatischen Schriftlichkeit, um die Relevanz der Materialität für die Etablierung des Vertrauens in das Schreiben herauszustellen. Es stellt die maßgebende Rolle von Objekten, Materialien und Räumen in der Verwirklichung der mittelalterlichen „dokumentarischen Revolution“ in städtischen Kanzleien und Gesellschaften am Beispiel der königlichen Städte des mittelalterlichen Ungarns dar. Die Analyse der Entstehung der städtischen administrativen Schriftlichkeit hat ihren allmählichen Charakter gezeigt. Jeder Schritt stellte neue Herausforderungen und verlangte neue Formen der Glaubwürdigkeit auf institutioneller und materieller Ebene. Die Erwerbung und Aufbewahrung der städtischen Privilegien bedeutete die erste konkrete Begegnung mit dem Schreiben auf Gemeindeebene. Danach, die Etablierung der Bedingungen für die örtliche Produktion ähnlicher Dokumente benötigte die Existenz eines Stadtsiegels als Symbols der Gemeinde, und der vertrauten Person des Notars, zusammen mit der Beschaffung ausreichender Mengen an Schreibmaterialien und Geräte. Hinzu kam die Einführung von Papier, einer neuen Ressource, die die materielle Voraussetzung für die Einrichtung von Städtebüchern, einem spezifisch urbanen Genre für die Aufzeichnung von gemeinschaftlichen Angelegenheiten darstellte. Städtebücher als ein neues Format ohne Siegel und die formalen Elemente von Urkunden verlangten Vertrauen auf einer höheren Ebene. Schließlich boten die Archive und ihre Einrichtungen neuartige Mittel zur Geheimhaltung und Aufbewahrung der städtischen Dokumente. All dies lässt uns die Verflechtung von Materialität und pragmatische Schriftlichkeit auf zwei Ebenen erkennen. Einerseits machte es die Entwicklung der städtischen pragmatischen Schriftlichkeit notwendig, Schritt für Schritt neue Elemente der materiellen Kultur in den städtischen Kontext zu übernehmen. Andererseits spielte Materialität eine aktive und dynamische Rolle bei der Produktion des geschriebenen Wortes und trug zu dessen sozialer Einbettung und Akzeptanz wesentlich bei.

Keywords: materiality, trust in writing, urban autonomy, charters, seals, notaries, paper, municipal books, bookbinding, archives, medieval Hungary

Literacy and materiality

When we see the word “writing”, we tend to focus on the content rather than the form, the material, or the mechanical movements that created it. Likewise, the history of literacy is usually considered part of intellectual or administrative history. Related scholarship concentrates mostly on the information preserved and transmitted by writing, be it by handwriting, printing or electronic forms, or on persons and institutions involved in the process. The materiality of writing and its safekeeping may have been too obvious to capture historians’ attention until very

¹ While writing this article, the author was Senior Research Fellow at the “Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal Formations” (FOR 2779) research group of the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt and member of the ‘Lendület’ Hungarian Economic History Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

recently, when the profound changes brought about by digitization directed our attention to “the world we have lost”.²

Archaeology has by its nature taken a different approach to matters written. Even if only a minority of excavated objects or features carry writing or are connected to its production or storage, archaeology has profoundly influenced our way of understanding the significance of the written word for pre-modern societies. It has also allowed us to trace the presence of written culture in contexts where writing itself has perished. Such an investigation was conducted by Elek Benkő, the jubilant of this volume, regarding the Cistercian monastery of Pilis, a 12th-century royal foundation in the heartland of the Kingdom of Hungary. His masterly study uses book clasps and other book fittings to reconstruct, if not the contents of the forever-perished volumes, but the networks of trade contacts and supply systems that the monastery was part of.³ The results help us set Pilis in a web of monastic written culture and raise the possibility of the presence of a monastic scriptorium. This study inspired the present essay to expand the inquiries into the materiality of literacy in a different social context, that of the royal towns of medieval Hungary and their civic communities.

Elek Benkő’s and Péter Barkóczy’s article fits into welcome new trends both in archaeological and textual scholarship. The former is exemplified by Moreland’s pioneering monograph, ‘Archaeology and Text’, including, but not restricted to, examples from medieval Europe⁴ and the initiative of the *Institut für Realienkunde des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit* in Krems to consider texts as objects of everyday life.⁵ The potentials of building-archaeological research for revealing artefacts with writing have been highlighted by Birgit Kata’s studies.⁶ Further impulses are provided by the results of major research projects running to date such as the “Material Text Cultures. Materiality and the Presence of the Written in Societies Prior to Printing” at the University of Heidelberg,⁷ and the Medieval Literacy Platform at the University of Utrecht.⁸ The proceedings of the conference “Transforming Information: Record Keeping in the Early Modern World” also directed due attention to the material aspects of their subject.⁹

On another note, the Utrecht project has been instrumental in pointing out the importance of trust in writing as a factor in the growing acceptance and use of literacy in the legal and administrative realm.¹⁰ This approach builds on the work of several generations of social scientists and historians who established the fundamental role of trust as a “mechanism for reducing social complexity”¹¹ and on the subsequent adaptation of this concept as an analytical tool to pre-modern urban societies.¹²

² Historians of ideas have remarkably “immaterialized” all subjects connected to writing. For instance *Foucault 2002* 145, defined archives as “the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events”.

³ *Benkő – Barkóczy 2017*. Elek Benkő’s co-author, Péter Barkóczy contributed with the chemical analysis of the metal finds.

⁴ *Moreland 2001*.

⁵ *Brunner – Jaritz 2003*.

⁶ *Kata 2003*.

⁷ *Materiale Textkulturen. Materialität und Präsenz des Geschriebenen in non-typographischen Gesellschaften. Sonderforschungsbereich (SFB) 933, Universität Heidelberg*, <https://www.materiale-textkulturen.de/> (last accessed October 31, 2020). From among their publications see e.g. *Meyer – Schultz – Schneidmüller 2015*.

⁸ The series curated by the platform, the Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy (USML) dedicated several volumes to the materiality of script and writing, e.g. *Wilcox 2013; Barret – Stutzmann – Vogeler 2016*.

⁹ *Walsham 2016; Corens – Peters – Walsham 2018*.

¹⁰ *Weltecke 2008* and other contributions to the same volume.

¹¹ *Luhmann 1979*; the original German title published in 1968 was: *Vertrauen: Ein Mechanismus der Reduktion sozialer Komplexität*.

¹² *Reynolds 2012; Blockmans 2010*.

The present essay sets out to combine the frameworks briefly outlined above and to point out the relevance of materiality for achieving trust in writing, using the case of royal towns in the medieval Kingdom of Hungary as an example. In other words, it will investigate the contribution and agency of objects, materials and spaces in realizing the medieval “documentary revolution” in urban chanceries and societies in a realm of East Central Europe that represented the eastern borderland of Latin Christianity. In doing so, I will follow the intellectual path laid out by Moreland: “I will critically assess what we mean when we talk about applying ‘agency’ and ‘materiality’ in our studies of the early medieval period, and ask whether adopting these perspectives will help us to understand better that past *in its own terms* – or whether they will make such understanding even more remote.”¹³

Urban administrative literacy, step by step

Around the turn of the first millennium, when the Kingdom of Hungary joined the community of Christian states, the Carpathian Basin was sparsely inhabited. Accordingly, urban development also started relatively late. Archaeologists often distinguish between a “pre-urban” development phase of old cultic, administrative and trading centres, and an “urban” phase of later towns. I would be reluctant to subscribe to this terminology since the early centres also fulfilled urban functions in their own environment. However, it would be appropriate to call them “pre-literate” since reading, writing, and written administration played a very minor role, if at all, in their internal life and external connections. This was one of the features that changed gradually, but significantly in the second phase of medieval urban development, which led to the emergence of fully-fledged towns during the 13th and 14th centuries. In these towns, the use of writing became part of everyday practice for an increasing proportion of the population.

The analysis of the appearance and diffusion of urban administrative literacy has revealed not only its relatively late appearance compared to, for instance, monastic literacy, but also its gradual character. From acquiring urban autonomy and having a municipal seal that enabled the towns to issue authentic documents to the appearance of civic archives, one can identify several distinct steps, each of which represents a new and higher degree of trust in writing and the expansion of its use.¹⁴ At the same time, each step was shaped by specific conditions of materiality, and immaterial as well as material consequences. In what follows, I will explore the new challenges and the material solutions to them in the subsequent steps.

The acquisition of municipal liberties and autonomy

The development of municipal literacy had to start with the acquisition of municipal liberties. Town privileges were standard elements of medieval legal practice from the high medieval period onwards. Max Weber’s thesis that “at least partial autonomy” was among the main defining criteria of towns has become an axiom of urban research. In the Kingdom of Hungary, this process began in the early 13th century, first as a sort of development policy where the charters laid down the rights and duties of new settlers called “guests” (*hospites*), both migrating from abroad and moving within the country. The main issues regulated were autonomy and the right of jurisdiction over the members of the community; economic privileges; and ecclesiastic privileges, namely electing their parish priest. These liberties were then transferred to inhabitants of other, already well-established settlements in the centre of the kingdom. Until the Mongol invasion of 1241/42, ten such charters have come down to us as originals or in later transcriptions. After this enormous

¹³ Moreland 2017 218.

¹⁴ Szende 2018.

cataclysm, the process of social transformation accelerated and by the end of the 13th century, a further 38 such charters have been preserved, with more to follow in the 14th century.¹⁵

Few things are more immaterial than the concept of liberty, but its acquisition and leverage by the communities had several tangible concomitants. The conveying of liberties took the physical form of a royal charter. In fact, for most of the inhabitants of the privileged settlements, the charters were “best considered as written objects rather than as texts”.¹⁶ The safeguarding of these objects was vital for the community. Among the preconditions to the authenticity of a donation charter or any other legally binding document, its physical integrity was one of the most apparent and easily controllable features.¹⁷ Therefore, protecting that most valuable piece of parchment from damages by fire or water, or from theft was indispensable. Keeping this in mind explains why it was such an important concession to the community of Pest (part of modern-day Budapest) in their charter of 1244 (later taken over by Buda) that they were not obliged to produce the original document with the king’s golden seal in court cases, but it sufficed to present a copy of it.¹⁸

Despite the efforts for preservation, very few of the earliest charters of privileges issued by kings of the Árpádian Dynasty in the 13th century have come down to us as originals. The earliest is the charter of Trnava (Nagyszombat/Tyrnau, Slovakia) from 1238, although without its golden bull.¹⁹ The costs of preparing the charter were, as a rule, covered by the recipients, but we very seldom know how much money this exactly meant. A later episode in the adventurous history of Trnava’s municipal charter offers an example of the expenditure involved in its reissuing. In 1437, the town council wanted to have their municipal charter confirmed by King Albert (1437–1439) after the tribulations of Hussite rule over the town (1435–1436). As the town accounts specify, the procedure started with redeeming the above-mentioned 1238 charter from the Hussites. Next, the judge and two burghers had to visit the king in Buda after his coronation and they stayed there for five weeks to complete their mission, to present the original to the royal chancery, to pay for its confirmation and hand over their gifts to the monarch. The expenses of all this exceeded 200 florins, of which the charter itself cost 84.²⁰

Exceptionally, some of the liberties awaiting the settlers could be – literally – set in stone. This rare epigraphic document on a stone slab kept to date in the Hungarian National Museum was most likely found by one of the roads leading to Buda (*fig. 1*). It reads as follows:

*Gaudeat hic sospes
veniens huc civis et ospes
ac veniam lapsi
capiant et premia iusti*

Let here rejoice in protection
all burghers and guests who come;
let the fallen receive grace
and the just get reward.²¹

¹⁵ Fügedi 1961; Szende 2015.

¹⁶ This expression is borrowed here from the description of the “Acculturation to Documentary Practices” in Île-de-France in the 11th and 12th centuries in *Bedos-Rezak 2011 22*.

¹⁷ *Guyotjeannin – Pycke – Tock 1990 64–66, 369–370*.

¹⁸ *Kubinyi 1997 39–41*.

¹⁹ *Marsina 1987 30–31*.

²⁰ *Rábik 2013 32–34*. The expenditure is noted on Fol. 60r.

²¹ *Györffy 1975 240, fig. 150*.

Beyond their physical existence on parchment or otherwise, municipal liberties had far-reaching consequences on the development of urban literacy, including its material aspects. In order to make full use of the rights obtained through the charters and to comply with the duties listed in the same documents, urban communities had to familiarise themselves with the use of writing. Both for securing property rights and control over municipal land and taxation, as well as recording and following up judgments made by the municipal court, recurrence to writing and its various instruments was indispensable. It is these instruments that will be in our focus in the following steps.

The design and use of authentic seals

The autonomy of urban communities included their capacity to issue authentic documents concerning matters within their purview. From in the 13th century onwards, authentication was linked to the use of an authentic seal, the examples being set in Hungary by the operation of the royal chancery and the places of authentication, i.e. ecclesiastical bodies authorized to issue authentic documents.²² Just like the liberties themselves, the right to have such a seal prepared also depended on seigniorial authorization. This principle is concisely summarized in the *Tripartitum*, the summa of Hungarian customary law compiled by Stephen Werbőczy in 1514 and printed in 1517: “In addition, cities and towns have authentic seals which kings and princes have granted them, and which confirm facts and matters which are moved and come to pass before them and in their midst.”²³

In spite of this later normative formulation, there are no 13th-century royal charters preserved that grant the use of municipal seals other than those granting municipal liberties. This may be due to the more ephemeral character of the matter (once a seal was lost or replaced, its granting became irrelevant), or it may have been sufficient to receive an oral permission or to start using a seal with the coat of arms of a community based on the customary acknowledgment of the symbol. However, some 14th-century charters allowing towns to use, renew, or authenticate seals have indeed come down to us. For instance, Sopron received Charles I’s (1301–1342) approval in 1340 for sculpting a new matrix (although without describing its image): “having destroyed and abolished their old and publicly known seal let them carve a matrix for a new authentic seal”.²⁴ Fortunately and exceptionally, the matrix mentioned in the text has survived and is still kept in the town archives of Sopron (*fig. 2. 1*).

Royal permission was even more important in case of contested authority. Louis I’s charter attesting to the authority of the municipal seal of Cluj (Kolozsvár/Klausenburg, Romania) in 1377 was issued in response to a complaint by the envoys of the town, stating that the major courts and dignitaries of the realm refused to accept documents issued under their seal. The refusal was probably due to the fact that by 1377 Cluj had not yet reached the highest level of autonomy (it was granted to the town in 1405); nevertheless, the king confirmed that

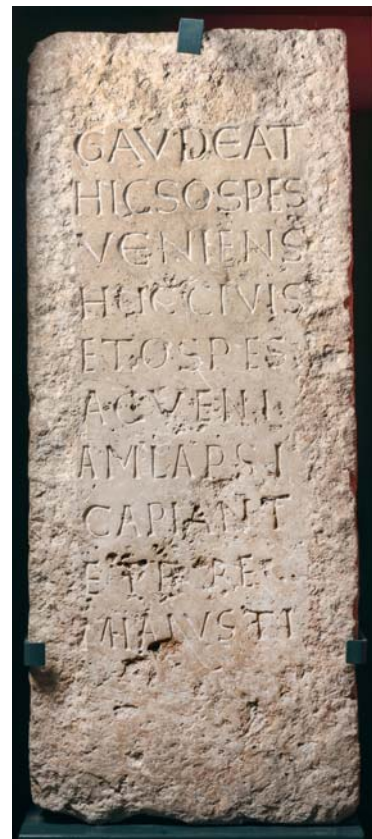


Fig. 1. Column with inscription greeting the settlers, probably in the boundaries of Buda.

Hungarian National Museum, Budapest (©Photo: József Rosta)

²² Hunyadi 2003; Szende 2018 72–83.

²³ Werbőczy 2005 [1517], 242–243 (Part II, title 13, 3§).

²⁴ Házi 1921–1943 Vol. I.1, 77–78.



Fig. 2. Municipal seals and seal matrices with architectonic elements,
 1. Imprint of the municipal seal of Sopron, endorsed by King Charles I
 in 1340 appended to a document issued on March 15, 1389,
 HU MNL Sopron Archives of Győr-Moson-Sopron county, DL 276. (©Photo: József Kücsán);
 2. Seal matrix of the town of Cluj (Kolozsvár/Klausenburg), 1480.
 National Archives of Romania, Cluj-Napoca Branch (©Photo: Ágnes Flóra);
 3. Reverse side of the seal matrix of the double seal of the Esztergom Latini, 1240s-1250s,
 based on an earlier model. Hungarian National Museum;
 4. Seal matrix of the reginal town of Óbuda, 1370s. Hungarian National Museum

“Our burghers of the said *Clusuar* are allowed and authorised from now on, following the custom of our kingdom, like our other royal towns, to issue letters of advocacy under the seal of their community, on which the image of three towers is said to be sculpted, in whatever issues and causes pertaining to them, namely in court cases and lawsuits to be brought up and handled in front of any secular or ecclesiastical court of our kingdom. And we wish to attribute full authority to such letters of advocacy in our entire kingdom through the testimony of our present charter.”²⁵ The king’s intention to increase the trust in the probative value of the municipal seal added significantly to the authority of the urban community. In Ágnes Flóra’s words, “[t]his was not only an important step in the development of urban literacy and the establishment of a local chancery, but it also represented one step forward towards the free status of the town, i.e. direct subordination to the king”.²⁶ (*fig. 2.2*)

The next step after receiving the royal permission in oral form or in writing was to have a matrix prepared. This was an act of utmost importance. The fact that the community had an object with a symbolic image that personified and authenticated its legal actions was one of the most significant manifestations of its corporate existence and the trust in its corporate decisions.²⁷ Despite the destruction or possible melting down of municipal seals, a number of seal matrices of medieval Hungarian urban communities have come down to us. Their survival may have been a result of institutional continuity and the preservation of the pertaining archives. A systematic cataloguing of all extant seal matrices is a desideratum of Hungarian research on sphragistics that the current study cannot solve. Only a few selected highlights will be presented that shed light both on the material aspects, and the role of seals in the display of power.

Pride of place is taken by the two gilded bronze matrices of the double seal commissioned by the *Latini*, the Romance-speaking (Walloon) settlers of Esztergom (*fig. 2.3*). The original design presumably dates from the 1220s or 1230s; the extant piece was restored to the community in the 1240s or 1250s, after the Mongol invasion.²⁸ The matrix of the obverse bears the royal coat of arms of the Árpáadian Dynasty, the reverse depicts an elaborate town wall with four bastions and a large gate decorated with iron bars, flanking a tripartite palace-like building with tracery windows. This scene is situated by a riverside, presumably the Danube, replete with fish, also a reference to the material realities of the time. Its legend invokes the commissioners: SIGILLVM · LATINORVM · CIVITATIS · STRIGONIENSIS, but was soon after its preparation adopted and used by the entire civic community.²⁹

The other extant matrix from the *medium regni* is approximately 150 years younger than the pieces from Esztergom, although less elaborate (*fig. 2.4*). This silver object belonged to the town of Óbuda (“Old Buda”, currently a district of Budapest), as indicated by its legend: SIGILLVM+CIVITATIS+VETERI+BVDENSIS. It “features an octagonal tower, flanked symmetrically by building wings. On the tower and the wings there are Gothic tracery windows. In front of the building there is a polygonal ashlar wall with a gate in the middle. On either side of the tower there is a coat of arms, on the right the Anjou Hungarian royal arms with lilies and stripes, on the left the Polish arms with the eagle, above them with tiny figures, possibly an eagle next to a

²⁵ 18 May 1377, edited in *Werner – Zimmermann 1897* No. 1071, translated by the author.

²⁶ *Flóra 2019* 39.

²⁷ *Bedos-Rezak 2011* 238–252; for Hungary: *Szende 2018* 98.

²⁸ *Vattai 1963*; *Kiss 2007* 65.

²⁹ The earliest imprint of the double seal survived on a municipal charter from 1265: National Archives of Hungary, Collection of original documents prior to 1526 (HU MNL OL DL 76145); it continued to be used in the 14th century, the deed at the, HU MNL OL DL 6292 for instance is dated to 01.08.1375. For a comprehensive list of documents corroborated with this seal see *Vattai 1963* 39, note 8.

lily.”³⁰ The coats of arms clearly signal that at the time of the preparation of the matrix, in the 1370s, Óbuda was under the overlordship of the Queen Mother, Elisabeth Piast. The building presumably bears some resemblance to the excavated remains of the queen’s castle that stood in the town.³¹

Beside the matrices of the seals of Sopron and Cluj, mentioned above in connection with the royal grant, the seals of the mining towns are of particular interest.³² The mining towns located in the northern and eastern range of the Carpathians (now in Slovakia and Romania) were engaged in the extraction of the most important mineral resources of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary. They rose to prominence first in the mid-13th century, under the reign of the Árpádians, when silver was the main produce; and then again from the 1320s onwards, under the rule of the Angevin Dynasty, when gold was added to the range of production and copper also gained in importance. Compared to the relatively protracted pace of the development of municipal literacy in other Hungarian urban centres, this process was swifter in the mining towns, the granting of privileges was followed much faster by the appearance of the first municipal seal, the employment of notaries, and the setting up of municipal books.³³

Remarkably, the shape and character of the municipal seals also changed between the two major periods mentioned above. Those towns where the mines were already in operation in the “silver age”, namely Rodna (Radna/Rodenau, Romania), Banská Štiavnica (Selmečbánya/Schemnitz, Slovakia), Banská Bystrica (Besztercebánya/Neusohl, Slovakia), Hybe (Hibbe, Slovakia) and Krupina (Korpona/Karpfen, Slovakia) have rounded seals with an escutcheon in the middle, and carry static images of architectonic and heraldic features as well as mining tools: the hoe, the chisel, the pickaxe and the hammer (*fig. 3. 1*).³⁴ The conformity of the visual appearances may be due to the mining towns following a model copied from each other, or a shared practice created with the assistance of the royal chancery.

In the “golden age”, the shape and imagery of the matrices and seals changed significantly, following the main artistic trends of the mid-14th century. The shapes of the seal imprints were often angular (hexagonal or octagonal) and the imagery “came to life”, showing mining or devotional scenes, or the combination of the two, in an almost cartoon-line manner. The most prominent examples are Kremnica (Körmöcbánya/Kremnitz, Slovakia), Nova Baňa (Újbánya/Königsberg, Slovakia) (*fig. 3. 2*) and Baia Mare (Nagybánya/Frauenbach, Romania), but even the rounded seal of Telkibánya from this period depicts some mining activities. The most illuminating image on the workflow in mining is to be found on the municipal seal of Baia Mare (*fig. 3. 3*), featuring “a rocky mountain with the entrance of a mine. In the cavity a miner kneels, working with a pickaxe in his left hand and a hammer in his right. At the bottom of the hill there is a lawn with pieces of ore which another miner collects with his hoe. The hillside is flanked by flowers and two four-leaved oak branches, on top of the hill there sits Saint Stephen with the coronation regalia. The legend reads: S[igillum] D[e] R[ivulo] D[ominarum] MUTVVS AMOR CIVIV[m] OPTIMV[m] E[st] CIVITATIS F[ir]MAME[n]TV[m].”³⁵ For the seals of Nova Baňa and Baia Mare, as well as that of Rudabánya in episcopal ownership, the matrices have also been preserved, while others are only known from their imprints appended or attached to the documents.³⁶

³⁰ Description by E. Kiss, in: *Benda et al. 2016* 165. Cat. 4.H.3.

³¹ *Buzás 2015* 714, 718–719.

³² I have published a detailed study on this aspect of municipal literacy and sphragistics: *Szende 2020*. The following paragraphs are based on the conclusions of that article.

³³ See Table 4 in *Szende 2018* 327 for an overview.

³⁴ *Szemán 1996*.

³⁵ Description translated from *Bándi 1982* 197.

³⁶ The matrices and Nova Baňa and Rudabánya are kept in the Hungarian National Museum; that of Baia Mare was kept until 2011 in the Historical Museum of Baia Mare, when it was stolen; its copy is kept in the National Archives of Hungary: HU MNL OL V 8–1170.



Fig. 3. Municipal seals and seal matrices of mining towns, 1. The municipal seal of Banská Štiavnica, 1275. National Archives of Hungary, HU MNL OL DL 923; 2. Matrix of the municipal seal of Nová Baňa, before 1348. Hungarian National Museum; 3. Copy of the municipal seal matrix of Baia Mare, c. 1350. National Archives of Hungary, HU MNL OL, V 8–1170; 4. The municipal seal of Kremnica, 1331 (©Drawing by Anna Grüll)

The seal of Kremnica, which bears the oft-debated image of Charles I or perhaps St. Catherine next to an ore-mill and a smelting furnace (*fig. 3.4*), may be conjecturally matched with some information on a well-known goldsmith of the period, Peter son of Simon from Siena, who worked on the matrix of Charles I's majesty seal and probably also on the design of Charles's first golden florin. For these services to the court, he was lavishly remunerated by a royal grant to the estate of Jamník (Jemnyk, Slovakia) in Szepes county. The spatial and chronological proximity of the donation (the Spiš/Szepesség/Zips region, where Jamník lies is in the vicinity of the Upper Hungarian mining towns) allows us to assume that besides the king's majesty seal, the Italian

goldsmith was also commissioned to prepare matrices for other seals as well, including that of Kremnica.³⁷

The mining towns offer telling examples of how monarchs of different dynasties used the instruments of municipal administration in general, and the physical form, legend and imagery of the seals in particular, to assert their own authority over this strategically most important branch of the economy. In the “silver age”, i.e. under the Árpádians, the royal presence can be detected through heraldic motifs, and perhaps through the uniformity of the visual appearance of the seals. The indication of royal overlordship through the coat-of-arms emphasizes the ruling dynasty rather than a particular monarch. In the “golden age”, i.e. in the Angevin period, the legends as well as the imagery directly refer to the reigning king, showing his figure and his name. “Karolus” appears on the seal of Kremnica and “Ludowicus” on that of Nova Baňa, whereas on the seal of Baia Mare the figure of St Stephen is seated on top of the mountain just like King Louis I is depicted on his majesty seal.³⁸ The medium of the seal with its capacity to be reproduced like “printing before printing” lent itself eminently for royal propaganda.

Once the matrix was ready, seals could be prepared in beeswax of natural colour or coloured with green and red with the help of additives (Spanish wax became known only later); silk, flax, or hemp cords were used to append the seal to the document. Metal bulls appear only exceptionally in the urban context: towns were occasional recipients of golden bulls issued by monarchs, and papal bulls in lead may have ended up in their archives. Their own production was, however, restricted to wax seals. The colour of the seals was defined by royal grace: green was more prominent than the natural wax, but red was even more prestigious than green.³⁹ As, for instance, a royal grant to Sopron for using red wax from 1465 “like other royal towns” (*instar aliarum civitatum nostrarum*) testifies, by this time royal towns typically enjoyed this privilege.⁴⁰ Detailed studies on the uses of seals issued by urban communities would be needed to highlight the proliferation of seal matrices and their differential use, following the hierarchical structure of administration: secret seal, closing seal and private signet rings of municipal officials. From the early 14th century onward, the charters of privilege were as a rule corroborated with the big or double seal, and the patent and closed charters with the smaller or secret seal, if the community had one, or sometimes several in different sizes.⁴¹

Just like with charters of privilege, safekeeping was a major issue concerning seal matrices as well. The most extensive explanation on this can be found in the municipal law code of the town of Buda, the *Ofner Stadtrecht*: “Who should keep the municipal seal over the year. A German councillor has to keep both municipal seals, the small and the large, but separately; the large that one does not use for anything else than for sealing letters of privilege has to be locked up and sealed with the signet rings of at least two German burghers. The small seal has to be kept by a German councillor, locked in his chest, and the town notary should have the key to that chest.”⁴² Materiality apparently plays a crucial role here: signet rings, chest and keys were all there to control access to these precious objects. Trust in the seals as objects ensuring the continuity of municipal authority between changing mayors and councillors, as well as distrust in those who might have abused this instrument was equally present.

³⁷ 28.03.1331: *Fejér 1832* 529–530; *Marosi 1986* 249–256.

³⁸ *Marosi 1987* 376–377.

³⁹ This issue is discussed in detail on the basis of surveying the material from market towns and seigniorial towns by *Lakatos 2019* 83–86.

⁴⁰ *Házi 1921–1943* Vol. I.5, 181–182. Data on the uses of wax colour have been collected by Tibor Neumann, who will hopefully publish an overview study on the theme.

⁴¹ *Kubinyi 1961*; *Kubinyi 1972*; *Szende 2018* 95–98.

⁴² *Mollay 1959* Cap. 53, 81. See also the handling of the seal matrices at the time of municipal elections, *Mollay 1959* Cap. 62, 84.

Issuing authentic municipal documents

Having obtained an authentic seal, royal towns started to pursue their document-issuing activity. After the first sporadic traces from the 1250s, the written output of Hungarian towns took off from the 1290s.⁴³ The documents were related to their external relations with the monarchs, other towns, the Church and the nobility, as well as internal affairs such as the exchange of real estate or the administering of justice. This is not the place to assess issues of content, just to make a few remarks on the outward appearance. The first documents, as it is to be expected with incipient practice, give a mixed impression as far as the sizes, the quality of parchment, the ink and the lining of the sheet are concerned. In several cases, there is evidence for cooperation with the local places of authentication (ecclesiastic bodies authorized to issue authentic documents, performing similar tasks as public notaries did elsewhere in Europe) in formulating and writing down the first municipal documents,⁴⁴ and it can be reasonably assumed that these chapters and monasteries were instrumental in the procurement of the necessary writing tools and materials at the outset. Taking over a specific means of authentication, the chirograph (preparing the text in two copies and cutting them apart along a line with the letters of the alphabet) also points towards the influence of the *loca credibilia* on the early municipal practice.⁴⁵

The next, truly revolutionary step in the materiality of pragmatic literacy was the introduction of paper as writing support. Although this material was already known, produced and traded in the Mediterranean since the 11th century, the breakthrough in its use only took place in Italy in the mid-13th century and a few decades later north of the Alps. In Hungary, the first document written on paper was dispatched by the papal legate Gentile da Montefiore in 1310.⁴⁶ In the following decades, the new material found its way into both ecclesiastic and secular chanceries. This means that trust in the new fabric was established relatively fast. From the mid-14th century, towns received mandates and letters from the king and the royal dignitaries on paper and started writing their own documents on paper, too. Acts pertaining to the internal administration of the towns, especially in financial matters, were regularly written on paper, often earlier than the sealed deeds and charters were. This applies in particular to the earliest municipal books, which will be discussed later. Paper's favourable weight/value ratio made it an ideal commodity of long-distance trade. The demand of Hungarian administration was met mainly by the production of German paper mills. The most famous of these was the *Hadermühle* at Nuremberg, owned by the Stromairs (Stromers), a family that had members in most major trading hubs of Central Europe, including Buda. By the end of the 15th century, paper may have also been produced in Buda, at one of the mills in the "industrial suburb" of Felhévíz, north of Buda. Likewise, from the 1520s, industrial plants in northern Hungary also embarked on the production of the new writing and printing support.⁴⁷

However efficiently the use of paper spread, certain types of charters and deeds remained exclusively written on parchment, allegedly considered to be more durable and prestigious. These were charters in the form of privileges, with a hanging seal, and the credit contracts on loans taken from Christian as well as Jewish creditors. When collecting the credits, only contracts of full physical integrity could be enforced, and after the repayment the contract was deliberately invalidated by making V-shaped cuts on the parchment, probably with a pair of scissors.⁴⁸

⁴³ See the list of the earliest municipal documents in *Szende 2018* Appendix 3, 340–351.

⁴⁴ *Hunyadi 2003*; *Rady 2015* 37–43; on their influence on municipal literacy: *Šedivý 2005* 84–88; *Goda – Majorossy 2008* 80.

⁴⁵ *Szende 2018* 82–84.

⁴⁶ *Rácz 2011* 32–43. The letter issued on 02.05.1310, is kept in the National Archives of Hungary, HU MNL OL DL 40326.

⁴⁷ *Decker 1982*.

⁴⁸ *Szende 2014* 269–270.

Employing professional notaries

The increase in the volume of written production necessitated employing professional and trustworthy notaries and setting up municipal chanceries. The materiality of the documents reflects this next major step through the regular layout as well as the dorsal notes that were introduced in order to facilitate information retrieval. The notaries were the first salaried employees of the municipal administration, as entries on their revenues in the municipal accounts or in the statutes testify. The above-mentioned *Ofner Stadtrecht*, written in instalments between 1403 and 1440, included a two-page pricelist on the various types of documents that could be ordered from the chancery.⁴⁹

Besides the testimony of the products, some documents reveal evidence pertaining to the person and material cultures of the notaries. For instance, the last wills of several notaries from Bratislava (Pozsony/Pressburg, Slovakia) have survived, the most famous of them being Liebhardt Egkenfelder, who served the town between 1441 and 1456. His testament reveals a well-equipped household and a rich wardrobe, with several robes made of expensive imported cloth, leggings in red, lilac, green and black, and a small “home arsenal” consisting of two hand-held guns (one of iron and one of brass), a long sword, three daggers, a lance and a pair of spears.⁵⁰ Even more relevant for our theme is that he lists his private library – one of the richest of his time, consisting of 38 hand-written volumes, partly copied or compiled by himself. Moreover, he also mentions the binding of the books, some with wooden boards (*in preter*), and many in soft vellum (*losch*, often colored red) or the combination of the two. A small excerpt illustrates the wealth of information in every single item:

“*Item* a German legal book bound in red vellum in boards, in my handwriting.

Item a German formulary bound in red vellum, good *dictamina*, in my handwriting.

Item a German book bound in red vellum in boards, in which one finds the reign of Alexander the Great; how the city of Acre was lost; Cato, and Teichner in German, all in my handwriting.

Item a German book on medicine, half-quire with five registers, bound in red vellum in boards, in my handwriting.”⁵¹

Two of the books mentioned in his will have survived up to this date and testify his scribal prowess and intellectual acumen.⁵²

Data from early modern Transylvania confirm that the notaries were respectable and well-paid members of the urban community. Their skills were so much in demand, not only as writers and archivists, but also as envoys and diplomats, that towns competed for them by offering higher wages than their neighbours. The incomes of civic notaries indeed covered their refined lifestyle and material well-being, and increased trust by making them less prone to corruption.⁵³

Setting up municipal books

The institutionalization of urban chanceries in the 14th and 15th centuries, heralded by the employment of professionals, elevated municipal administration to new dimensions and capacities. Chanceries had to meet growing demands of the royal administration and the town’s inhabitants as well. The increasing volume of tasks inevitably led to the use of municipal books, registers of accounts, and protocols of litigation brought before the local court.

⁴⁹ *Mollay 1959* Cap. 50, 79–80.

⁵⁰ *Majorossy – Szende 2010* No. 183, 241–248; See also *Spiritza 1967* and *Szende 2018* 127–128.

⁵¹ *Majorossy – Szende 2010* 242.

⁵² Budapest, Library of the Hungarian Franciscan Province, Múz.1, Esztergom bequest and Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale Albert I., Ms. 8879–80.

⁵³ *Flóra 2014*.

The introduction of the book format into chanceries all over Europe, urban or otherwise, was indeed the most practical way of keeping large amounts of information accessible in whatever order was needed.⁵⁴ This was facilitated by the extensive use of paper as an affordable writing support available in sufficient quantities. The introduction of books was not dependent on royal grants in the way that the seals were, thus the format and size of the extant volumes offer the best clues on the process of “book formation”. One regularly finds in archives quires of paper that were folded lengthwise to create stand-alone booklets. Records of mid-term financial significance such as tax lists or municipal accounts are frequent examples of this type. These may have only been collected and bound together as a book later. Among other examples, the first judicial protocols and property registers from Gradec (the royal town of Zagreb, Croatia) illustrate this practice.⁵⁵ As the use of the book format developed, full-width paper folios were bound together from the outset, reflecting a conscious choice for the long-term preservation of information. For instance, the property registers or testamentary protocols in Bratislava, with an almost unbroken series of volumes spanning several centuries exemplify this new level of institutionalization.⁵⁶ Books set up with such ambitions, but abandoned in the course of their use, leaving behind an abundance of empty folios, are also important testimonies of urban literacy. In these frequently encountered cases, the void material tells stories of reorganization, loss of importance, or scribal negligence.

Besides its practical advantages, the shift from charters to books presented strong conceptual challenges, also involving materiality. Books lacked practically all the physical features that ensured the authenticity of charters and the trust vested in them: they were written on paper, without the formalized layout of the single-sheet documents (including writing only on one side of a leaf), and carried no seals or other visual signs of authentication. Furthermore, they very often switched to a vernacular language instead of Latin – to German in case of towns in Hungary. The means to overcome this “trust deficit” was to increase the consistent, regular and structured character of information in the books. This was often accompanied by features of the physical layout, the use of headings or other features separating documents or sections, or alphabetic indexes. The legal form of deleting content from municipal books, by crossing out rather than removing the page, was also a practice ensuring confidence. The most crucial element, however, was the strict regulation of access to the books and the limitation of persons authorized with adding entries to them to the municipal notary. This ties into the question of safekeeping and archiving, to be discussed below.⁵⁷

The materiality of municipal books was strongly connected to binding, which may sometimes be the most durable feature of a volume, as Elek Benkő’s above-quoted study exemplifies. Several different binding methods developed and coexisted, showing varying levels of professionalism. Stitching the quires together with a hemp cord, adding a cover leaf usually of parchment, often combined with reinforcing the middle of the quire at the place of the stitches with a piece of old parchment (*fig. 4*), could easily be carried out by the scribe or notary. A helpful tool in holding the bundle together could be lace ending in a metal tag, “similar to the tip (‘aiglet’) on a modern shoelace”, used elsewhere for filing documents (*fig. 5*).⁵⁸ The cover sheet could be a reused

⁵⁴ *Arlinghaus 2015*.

⁵⁵ *Notae ex cathernis civitatis Zagrabiensis, 1375–1391* Hrvatska Akademija Znanosti i Umijetnosti, Zagreb, Arhiv (HAZU), II d 233, in 11 quires *Protocollum fassionale super possessiones et fundos, 1384–1402*, HAZU II d 233, in 6 quires; *Liber citacionum et sentenciarum, 1412–1448*, HAZU II d 234, in 10 quires.

⁵⁶ See the Introduction to *Majorossy – Szende 2010*.

⁵⁷ *Szende 2018* 152–201. Legally binding deletion was also done by the town scribe for a fee, see e.g. *Mollay 1959* Cap. 56.

⁵⁸ *Wolfe – Stallybrass 2018* 183–186 identifies this instrument for filing in Early Modern English private archives. Quote from page 184.

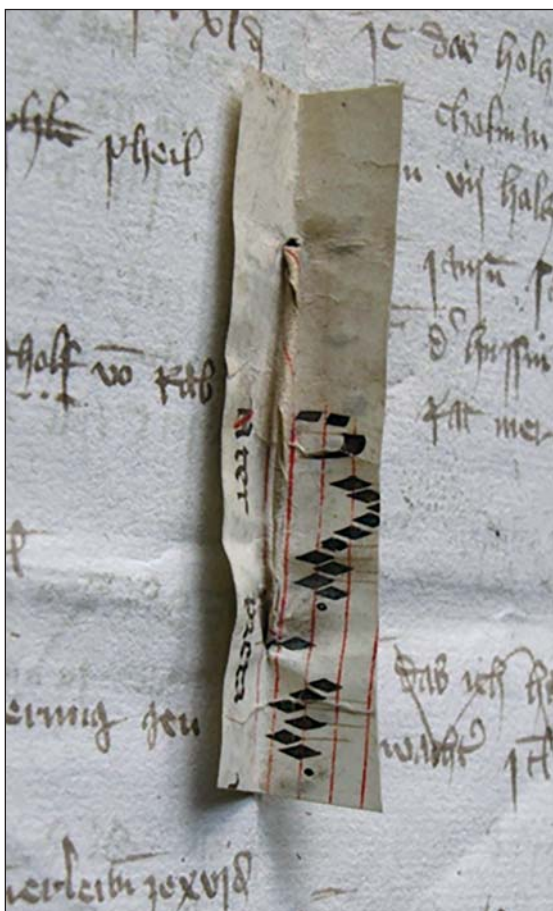


Fig. 4. Parchment piece with notation strengthening the binding of the 1404 municipal accounts of Sopron. HU MNL Sopron Archives of Győr-Moson-Sopron county, DL 3270 (©Photo: Katalin Szende)



Fig. 5. “Italian-style” parchment binding of the 1427. municipal accounts of Sopron, with metal tag on the lace. HU MNL Sopron Archives of Győr-Moson-Sopron county, DL 3284 (©Photo: Katalin Szende)

document that was no longer relevant, or a parchment codex leaf. The latter raises important questions of provenance and access, and there is a growing corpus of evidence indicating that trade in easily transportable dissected codex folios is responsible for at least part of the archival binding materials.⁵⁹ In other cases, it is possible to connect the availability of sheets to local events or cataclysms, for instance in Sopron with the expulsion of the local Jewish community in 1526, and later with the Reformation.⁶⁰ In case of the reuse of Hebrew codex leaves, intentional humiliation may have accompanied the pragmatic considerations.⁶¹

More professional expertise was required for fixing the quires by way of a spine made of horn or bone and sewn together with a hemp cord (*fig. 6*); this method could be combined with soft parchment or leather cover or wooden boards. Besides the surviving books themselves, we have anecdotal evidence on persons practicing the bookbinder’s craft in Hungarian towns.⁶² However, professional bookbinders appear as municipal employees only from the 17th century onwards.⁶³

⁵⁹ Lauf 2014.

⁶⁰ Szende 2007; Szende 2008.

⁶¹ Keil 2003 49–61.

⁶² Rozsondai 2020.

⁶³ Dominkovits – Szakács 2007.



Fig. 6. Spine and binding of the first municipal book of Sopron begun in 1390.
HU MNL Sopron Archives of Győr-Moson-Sopron county, DL 2988
(©Photo: Katalin Szende)

Municipal archives and other methods of record keeping

As we ascend the ladder of municipal literacy, one rung after the other, the last and most advanced stage is the establishment of municipal archives, first as a mobile collection and then an assemblage solidly tied to a designated space. By its nature, archiving needed the most tangible material toolkit beyond the documents themselves and has thus attracted most attention by scholars engaged with the materiality of writing.⁶⁴ Archiving was a reciprocal process: the modes of placement of the records reflect on their retained or changing relevance for their keepers, but at the same time, methods of filing and record-keeping tell much about the communities and individuals that practiced them.⁶⁵ Not every medieval town reached the most advanced level of municipal literacy of having a designated archives space, but used other means of storing their records. The documents were often simply deposited in a chest or trunk that was taken to the house of the actual judge and moved over to his successor's home after each municipal election. In smaller towns this practice remained unchanged until the early modern period.⁶⁶

The first step toward archiving proper was to gain an overview by adding short dorsal remarks on the contents and compiling a list of documents from these. The process often involved discarding or reusing a part of the collection. For instance, the cover of Sopron's first extant archives register was the scrap parchment of a royal deed from 1346.⁶⁷ A similar list of charters of privilege kept in the municipal archives has been preserved in Sibiu (Szeben, Hermannstadt, Romania).⁶⁸ Parallel to this, deposition in a safe and fire-proof space, for instance the sacristy of the local parish church, could be negotiated. A further advantage of using the upper floor of the sacristy, like St. Barbara's chapel at St. Giles's in Bardejov (Bártfa, Bartfeld, Slovakia), was restricted and controlled access,⁶⁹ at the same time, this reduced immediate contact with the material for day-to-day business.

⁶⁴ Head 2019; Friedrich 2018 111–138.

⁶⁵ Wolfe – Stallybrass 2018.

⁶⁶ Szende 2004; Lakatos 2019 48.

⁶⁷ Házi 1921–1943 Vol. I.1, 89.

⁶⁸ Dincă 2015 73 and note 15.

⁶⁹ Iványi 1910 V–VI, quotes the parish accounts from 1487: “*Item exposita super labore et edificatione reservatorii privilegiorum in capella Sancte Barbare*”.



Fig. 7. Archives cabinet in the town hall of Bardejov (Bártfa/Bartfeld) (©Photo: Béla Zsolt Szakács)

The ideal long-term solution was to erect a town hall or transform a building for this purpose, an investment that only the most important civic communities could afford.⁷⁰ Indeed, the proportion of town halls to the number of communities granted urban status in medieval Hungary was much lower than in the Duchy of Austria or the Kingdom of Bohemia in the same period.⁷¹ Town halls also housed a court room and the municipal chancery, so the small number of such buildings draws attention to the limitations of municipal literacy as well.

Wherever available, accounts on the building, furnishing and upkeep of town halls offer valuable insights into the material culture of record-keeping. For instance, the accounts of Prešov (Eperjes, Slovakia) mention a major expense for a chest (*ladula civitatis*) in 1442, as well as further boxes (*scatularium*) and containers (*retentorium*) year after year, reflecting the growth of the collection. In 1510, the town paid a blacksmith for an iron grid for the archives window (*pro cratere ad fenestram conservationis privilegiorum*) and a painter (*pictor*) for painting it.⁷² Exceptionally, not only the accounts but also the building and the furniture have been preserved intact in the town hall of neighbouring Bardejov.⁷³ In 1511, when the building was finished, a special archives cabinet was also ordered: “Item, to Master John who made a cabinet for the storage of the charters of privilege, fl. 9½.” This piece of furniture, an ash cabinet with four doors, still stands on the first floor of the town hall (*fig. 7*), in a room next door to the court room where the judicial procedures took place under the auspices of the depiction of the Last Judgment.⁷⁴ This unique ensemble conveys the essence of the workings of the civic community and its material and spiritual buttresses.

Conclusion: Beyond antiquarian interest

The aim of this overview was to show that there is more to studying the material culture of medieval urban literacy than simply satisfying antiquarian curiosity. Besides collecting the often scattered and disparate information on artefacts, buildings and physical circumstances associated with the written products by municipal authorities, one needs to place them into their social context and understand what part they played in the process. Thinking in contexts and processes instead of isolated objects not only adds to the appreciation of the individual objects, but also helps in bridging the gaps caused by the uneven survival of the evidence. This is particularly relevant for the towns of medieval Hungary where the source material has been subject to heavy losses. One also needs to pay attention to direct and indirect references in the written record to the artefacts and conditions connected to their creation, use and survival.

Taking all this into account helps us realize that materiality and pragmatic literacy were strongly intertwined. On the one hand, the gradual development of urban literacy made it necessary to embrace new elements of material culture that had hitherto been part of monastic, ecclesiastical or courtly environments and adopt them to the urban context; on the other, materiality played an active and dynamic role in the production of the written word and impacted its social embeddedness and acceptance.

Each of the successive steps in the introduction of written urban administration presented new challenges of adaptation and required new forms of underpinning credibility by institutional as well as material means. The latter were particularly important for those who did not possess the ability of reading and writing. The agency of materiality manifested itself in various ways

⁷⁰ Majorossy 2012 155–210.

⁷¹ Sedivy 2019 Tab. 1. 170.

⁷² Iványi 1931 4–5.

⁷³ Mikó 2004.

⁷⁴ Kovalovszki 1980 10–13; Szeghyová 2018 68–69.

throughout the process. The granting and safekeeping of the first royal charters meant the first trustful encounter with writing on a community level. Establishing the circumstances for the local production of similar documents already entrusted probative value to the common symbol (the seal) of the municipality and to the person of the notary hired by it. It also needed the procurement of sufficient amounts of writing support, ink and sealing wax. Paper was an especially ingenious resource and the material precondition of introducing municipal books, a specifically urban genre of recording collective agendas. Lacking the visual and material features of individual documents, they presupposed trust in the institution of municipal chanceries on a different level. Finally, secrecy and safekeeping required ordering and restriction of access for which new spaces and instruments needed to be introduced.

The examples presented here from the towns of medieval Hungary show both quantitative changes and qualitative breakthroughs similar to other European towns, following the inner logic of the gradual increase of trust in writing and the institutionalization of authority. Therefore, the model presented here may be useful for comparative studies across cities and regions. It would also be worthwhile following up how epigraphic manifestations of writing carved in stone such as building inscriptions or epitaphs, or cast in metal like church bells or baptismal fonts (another of Elek Benkő's fields of expertise) complemented the material culture of urban literacy. Even if the growth had its limits and not each and every town had the incentive and capacity to employ a professional notary, operate a chancery or set up an archive, by the 15th century the tangible presence of written artefacts became an integral element of urban life. It was not only a vehicle of autonomy, but also an instrument of economic control and social discipline. In our modern times, when written culture and administration undergoes fundamental changes and takes on new digital forms, it is even more urgent to be aware of how materiality in municipal administration shaped human lives over time.

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