

Cities and Economy in Europe Markets and Trade on the Margins from the Middle Ages to the Present. Edited By Katalin Szende, Erika Szívós, and Boglárka Weisz.

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The International Commission for the History of Towns (ICHT) was founded in 1955 to provide a platform for comparative urban historical research and to strengthen international collaboration among scholars in the field. To advance this mission, the Commission organizes regular conferences on key themes in urban history. Between 2016 and 2019, the ICHT dedicated a four-year cycle to exploring the essential functions of urban spaces, hosting four conferences on the topic. The series began in 2016 in Kiel, where discussions revolved around the social roles of urban spaces. The following year, Kraków shifted the focus to political dimensions, while Salzburg (2018) explored their role in religious life. The series culminated in 2019 with a conference in Budapest, co-organized by the ICHT and the “Lendület” Medieval Hungarian Economic History Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, where scholars examined their economic significance.

This volume was expressly conceived to help raise attention to regions traditionally regarded as fringes of Europe, which remain underrepresented in mainstream international historical research. In alignment with the objectives of the ICHT, the editors aim to offer a broader comparative framework for future analyses while contributing to subsequent syntheses in the field. In addition to the aforementioned margins, the volume’s other key themes are markets and trade—concepts that have constituted fundamental pillars of urban existence since the emergence of urban settlements. The thirteen studies comprising the book’s two parts each engage with one or more of these central themes. The introduction likewise focuses on the three themes highlighted in the book’s subtitle, demonstrating how different scholarly traditions have conceptualized them in diverse ways, thereby generating distinct research trajectories. Furthermore, the editors provide an overview of current research trends and major projects in these fields, while also highlighting the

novel contributions made by the volume's individual studies to these thematic areas. Markets and marketplaces constitute the most comprehensively examined theme in the book, with nearly half of the thirteen studies dedicated to this subject. The contributions examining this topic exhibit significant temporal and spatial diversity, ranging from tenth-century Italian examples to nineteenth-century cases from territories constituting modern Ukraine. Despite these temporal and geographical disparities, the studies focusing on medieval and early modern periods demonstrate remarkable thematic coherence, offering mutually reinforcing perspectives that collectively provide a holistic understanding of marketplace dynamics. For instance, Rosa Smurra's contribution to the volume demonstrates how Italian markets under ecclesiastical jurisdiction during the turn of the millennium gradually transitioned to civic authority. Furthermore, as markets became central hubs of urban trade, communal buildings emerged in marketplaces specifically to regulate trade and monitor revenue from collected duties. The town hall, the most significant of these structures, embodied the political, economic, and cultural aspirations of the urban community. Markets evolved in tandem with shifting commercial practices, resulting in corresponding architectural adaptations to marketplace spaces—a phenomenon explored in depth by Olga Kozubska's analysis. The author examines early modern cases from territories corresponding to modern Ukraine, where town halls in smaller, typically privately-owned towns lost their original administrative functions and adapted to serve commercial needs.

The morphology of marketplaces is examined in greater detail in Boglárka Weisz's study within the volume. The author highlights that in the medieval Kingdom of Hungary, markets could be classified into three distinct forms—street, fusiform, and square—which she illustrates through various case studies. Similar to Italian examples, marketplaces in Central and Eastern Europe often functioned as the central squares of settlements, serving as key economic and social hubs. The overall prosperity of a settlement was frequently reflected in the condition of its market square and the presence of administrative or ecclesiastical buildings adjacent to or near the marketplace. In many cases, the specific form a marketplace took was the result of organic urban development, traceable back to the earliest phases of the market's establishment. The origins of marketplaces are explored in depth in two studies within this volume. Dan Dumitru Iacob, examining examples from the Romanian Principalities, demonstrates that markets either emerged spontaneously at major traffic hubs or were established at the initiative of an overlord. In cases where a market was already in operation, it required formal legitimization by the prince. When a new market was established (also a prerogative of the prince), several factors had to be considered, including its distance from existing markets and the selection of a feast day that did not overlap with those of neighbouring fairs. As highlighted in

the joint study by Anna Paulina Orłowska and Patrycja Szwedo-Kiełczewska, the success of newly established markets was fundamentally conditioned by their relationship to existing market networks. Through case studies from medieval Greater Poland, the authors illustrate situations where rapid urban commercial expansion outpaced settlement infrastructure, necessitating market relocations due to spatial constraints.

The complex functional dynamics of marketplace spaces are further explored in several additional contributions to the volume. Pavel Lukin, using the example of medieval Novgorod, demonstrates that the marketplace was not only a key site for commercial, religious, and cultural activities but also played a crucial role in the political life of the city. Beyond its economic functions, the marketplace served as a public space where the city's highest political authority convened, making it central to urban governance and decision-making. In addition, the marketplace was of significant religious and ceremonial importance, closely linked to the ecclesiastical buildings located within it. Furthermore, marketplaces played a vital role in the circulation of information, often serving as the site of public shaming rituals and executions (Weisz). However, as early modern sources indicate, marketplaces were not solely spaces of commerce and authority—they also catered to the social needs of visitors, offering opportunities to satisfy curiosity and seek entertainment (Iacob).

The second part of the volume examines trade and urban economy through six studies. Despite the geographical distance between late medieval/early modern Castile and early modern Norway, both regions exhibited remarkably similar developments in urban growth. In both cases, large-scale maritime trade profoundly influenced the port infrastructure, which not only facilitated exports but also drove urban expansion. In Castile, merino wool—derived from transhumant sheep herds—remained the dominant export commodity from the mid-fifteenth to the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, in pre-modern Norway, timber was the most important export material. As a direct consequence of the timber trade, nearly two dozen new ports emerged, many of which later developed into fully established towns. Maritime commerce enabled even seemingly peripheral regions to integrate into Europe's commercial networks during this period. This is precisely what Michael Potterton demonstrates in his study, using the example of medieval Ireland. Unlike most other contributions in this volume, which primarily rely on written sources, Potterton's analysis draws on archaeological material excavated in Ireland during the 1990s and 2000s. This rich archaeological material vividly illustrates how deeply Ireland was embedded in broad and dynamic international trade networks during the period.

While maritime commerce features prominently, the volume also addresses overland trade networks. Mária Pakucs' study focuses on merchants who played pivotal roles in the commercial life of South-Eastern Europe between 1500 and

1700 through the Transylvanian towns of Braşov and Sibiu. The author emphasizes that merchants frequently labelled as “Greek” in Transylvanian sources neither constituted a cohesive ethnic group nor shared uniform cultural characteristics. Furthermore, she underlines that the rise of the Ottoman Empire did not lead to the decline of these trade routes; on the contrary, commercial activity intensified even further under Ottoman rule. Even before the advent of printing, there was a significant demand for paper in Europe, particularly in royal courts and universities. In his article, Franz Irsigler identifies how paper production spread and locates its main centres in late medieval Central and Western Europe. The author accentuates that paper production did not necessarily develop in the immediate hinterlands of major consumption areas but rather emerged in peripheral regions. Departing from the volume’s prevailing focus on commodities, commercial spaces, and traders, Peter Eigner’s study approaches the topic from the perspective of consumers. His study specifically traces how Vienna’s transition to a consumer society during the twentieth century resulted in the decline of traditional groceries and pubs—institutions that had long shaped the city’s local identity.

The volume does not include a separate section dedicated to its third key concept, as the studies engage with the question of marginality on multiple levels and in diverse ways. The regions discussed in the studies were situated at the fringes of the continent not only in a geographical sense; many of them lay within areas described in the scholarship as “inter-imperial”—that is, located among various configurations of the continent’s major powers: the Holy Roman Empire, the Habsburg Empire, the Byzantine Empire, the Ottoman Empire, Kievan Rus, the Golden Horde, and the Russian Empire. These complex geographical, political, and cultural conditions inevitably shaped urbanization patterns in the territories situated between empires. Articles that do not exclusively address marginality (such as those dealing with Vienna, Italy, or the Holy Roman Empire) have intentionally been incorporated to provide reference points and bases of comparison for the volume’s other studies, ensuring a broader analytical framework.

The book is rich in visual materials, featuring numerous illustrations and maps, including some that were created exclusively for this volume. The studies within are thorough and comprehensive, based on extensive research, and supported by exhaustive bibliographic references. This meticulous attention to detail makes it a valuable resource for anyone seeking in-depth knowledge on the subject.

In conclusion, the editors convincingly argue that urban history must, by definition, adopt a comparative approach to identify broader patterns beyond local case studies. They emphasize that themes such as markets, trade, and margins are of global significance and hope that their work will serve as a valuable foundation for further comparative research. The book not only meets this objective but also

emphasizes a crucial perception about methodology: urban development cannot be fully understood without examining its connections to marginal regions and their resources. For instance, the construction of medieval English churches was deeply intertwined with Irish oak exports, just as early modern secular architecture relied on the Norwegian timber trade. By illuminating these interdependencies, the book demonstrates how core urban developments were often shaped by distant, peripheral economies. This approach enriches our understanding of urbanization, proving that the margins were never truly marginal, but in many cases central.

