

# *The Typology of Polish Towns during the XVI<sup>th</sup> - XVIII<sup>th</sup> Centuries*

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They are hundreds of definitions of a town resulting from a large variety of urban situations occurring in different regions and in different periods. Polish scholars regard the special juridical situation as the main feature of a town; the settlements endowed with city rights (among others — personal freedom of the inhabitants according to the saying 'Stadluft macht frei') are acknowledged as towns — even if their size, inner structure of functions sometimes differ substantially from the Western type of town.

The diversity of urban centres leads inevitably to attempts at their classification. Polish towns, as everywhere else, can be classified though with considerable simplification, according to some basic criteria, such as their legal position, their size, their functions. In this article we will try to establish the typology of Polish towns in early modern times according to those three basic criteria.

1. A crucial element defining the status and character of a town in Poland was its legal position, which resulted mostly from the circumstances of its origin and its foundation. Polish towns in the early modern period should be thus divided into royal, referred to the sources also as 'free cities' and private ones. Of the 1,336 towns existing in Polish territory at the beginning of the seventeenth century 368, that is only 27.5%, were royal towns; 964, that is 72.2%, others owed their existence to the organising efforts of private landowners: magnates, clergy, rich gentry.<sup>1</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> See M. Bogucka - H. Samsonowicz, *Dzieje miast i mieszczaństwa w Polsce przedrozbiorowej* (The History of Towns and Towndwellers in Pre-partitioned Poland), (Wrocław 1986), p. 400.

urbanisation process, which in Poland began as early as the ninth century, accelerated during the sixteenth century and following centuries. According to A. Wyrobisz's recent estimates, 25% of Polish towns were established in the sixteenth century and 8% in the first half of the seventeenth century; this means that overall in this period one third of Polish towns were created.<sup>2</sup> Their foundation resulted mostly from the urbanising activity of the nobility. In Little Poland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries only 19 out of 186 towns were royal ones - that is, 10,2%. In Great Poland only 5 out of 50 towns which were founded in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries were royal ones - that is about 10%. In Mazovia in the sixteenth century they were 40 towns - of which 4 were royal ones - again 10%.<sup>3</sup>

The growth in number of private towns had a big impact on Polish urbanisation. Historians rightly stress the fact that this phenomenon resulted in cutting off the majority of town-dwellers process in Poland from the direct protection both of the Polish state as well as of Polish Kings. It is true that private town-owners very often asked the King to confirm the foundation and endorse the privileges given to the new town; nevertheless they controlled every aspect of town life, even though its inhabitants enjoyed - at least to some extent - personal freedom and were given many privileges and rights comparable to those possessed by the inhabitants of the royal towns. The right to take legal action against the owner was limited to a very small group of private towns.<sup>4</sup> Private towns were also usually smaller than royal towns, they belonged mostly to groups III and IV shown below in our tables. The modest demographic size of the private towns contributed to their general weakness and increased their subordination to the

<sup>2</sup> A. Wyrobisz, "Rola miast prywatnych w Polsce XVI i XVII w." (The Role of Private Towns in Poland during the XVIth and XVIIth centuries), *Przegląd Historyczny*, 1974, no. 1, passim.

<sup>3</sup> M. Bogucka, H. Samsonowicz, *Dzieje miast*, p. 399.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 395-96.

owners. The existence of private cities on such a large scale - a phenomenon well known also in Bohemia and Hungary - greatly influenced the whole structure of urban society in Central Europe and gave the urbanisation process in those parts of the European continent quite distinct features.

2. The size of Polish towns constitutes another important factor of their typology. Some elements of the demographic classification can be found directly in documents of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Besides the main division into two groups, *civitates and oppida*, more diversified and specific qualifications were in usage. The tax register of 1520 distinguishes, for example, 4 groups of towns: 1. *civitates maiores* (Cracow, Poznań, Lwow); 2. *civitates et oppida secundi ordinis* (Kazimierz, Wieliczka, Bochnia, Sącz, Biecz, Pilzno, Tarnów, Proszowice, Miechów, Lelów, Sandomierz, Lublin, Radom, Opoczno, Wiślica, Szydłów, Opatów, Iłża, Bodzęcin, Kalisz, Kościan, Wschowa, Bydgoszcz, Brześć, Płock, Wieluń, Łęczyca, Gniezno, Łowicz, Wolborz, Uniejów, Koźmin, Żnin, Buk, Słupca, Rawa, Sochaczew, Brzeziny, Piątek, Szamotuły, Grodzisko, Koło, Przemyśl, Krosno, Sanok, Jarosław, Przeworsk, Łańcut, Rzeszów, Brzozów); 3. *oppida habentia fora annua et septimanalia*; 4. *oppida non habentes fora*.<sup>5</sup> In 1590 towns were also divided into 4 groups: 1. *civitates primi ordinis*; 2. *civitates secundi ordinis*; 3. *civitates tertii ordinis*; 4. *oppida non habentes fora*.<sup>6</sup> In 1673 the Sejm Constitution divided all towns into two classes. The first one included a) extra big towns (according to Polish standards) such as Cracow, Poznań, Lublin, Warsaw, Zamość; b) *civitates primi ordinis*; c) *civitates secundi ordinis*; d) *civitates tertii ordinis*. The second class included small towns and townships subdivided again into three sub-classes: *prima*, *secunda*, and *tertia*.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Corpus iuris Polonici*, ed. O. Balzer, (Kraków 1906), vol. III, p. 597.

<sup>6</sup> *Volumina legum*, ed. J. Chryzko, (Petersburg 1859), vol. III, p. 597.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, vol VIII, p. 88.

In 1775 Polish towns were divided according to their size, importance and occupation structure into 4 groups.<sup>8</sup> Only Warsaw was included in the first group. The second group included larger towns such as Cracow, Poznań, Wschowa; and the third, smaller townships, which were endowed, however, with urban rights and had more than 300 households. The 4th group was composed of small rural townships with fewer than 300 households. In 1793 a new classification was drawn up for the first time with the use of administrative and not only demographic criteria.<sup>9</sup> The towns were grouped into three categories: 1. 'main centres', such as Warsaw, Cracow, Lublin, Sandomierz, Łuck, Wilno, Grodno, Brześć, Litewski, Kowno, Nowogródek; 2. towns with over 400 households in which the meetings of the gentry from *voivodships* and the provinces were held; 3. townships endowed with city rights and where at least one parish was established, even if they had actually fewer than 400 households.

The classification used in the sources from early modern times - however instructive - lacks precision; the dividing lines between groups are rather fluid and many towns appear at one time in one group and another time in another group. Greater accuracy was possible only after more sophisticated methods of analysis were used. The global results of recent demographic research on Polish towns are given in the two tables set out below.

As we can see, at the end of the sixteenth century (Table 1) group I (towns with more than 10 thousand inhabitants) comprised only 7 centres: Poznań (18-20 thousand), Warsaw (10-12 thousand), Cracow (22-25 thousand), Gdańsk (40 thousand), Toruń (12 thousand), Elbląg (15 thousand), Lwów (20 thousand), that is 0.5% of the total. Likewise, there were only a few towns with between 2 and 10 thousand inhabitants (a little more than 15% of the total). In Great Poland in this group there were: Gniezno

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* vol. VIII, p. 398.

**1. Polish towns according to their size  
at the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>10</sup>**

Province	I		II		III		IV	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Great Poland	1	0.5	27	10.5	200	78.5	27	10.5
Mazovia	1	0.9	27	25.2	35	32.7	44	41.2
Royal Prussia	3	8.3	4	11.1	25	69.5	4	11.1
Warmia	-	-	1	8.3	7	58.3	4	33.4
Podlachia	-	-	2	8.0	21	84.0	2	8.0
Little Poland	1	0.5	32	15.2	98	46.2	80	38.1
Red Ruthenia	1	0.4	10	4.7	119	55.4	85	39.5
Wolhynia, Podolia, Ukraine	-	-	45	10.6	62	14.6	319	74.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>567</b>	<b>44.1</b>	<b>565</b>	<b>43.9</b>

*I - more than 10 thousand inhabitants*

*II - between 2 and 10 thousand inhabitants*

*III - 600-2000 inhabitants*

*IV - less than 600 inhabitants*

**2. Polish towns according to their size in the second half  
of the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup>**

Province	I		II		III		IV	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Great Poland	1	0.5	29	13.9	103	49.5	75	36.1
Mazovia	1	0.8	3	2.9	46	44.3	54	52.0
Royal Prussia	3	7.0	2	4.7	38	88.3	-	-
Warmia	-	-	1	8.3	11	91.7	-	-
Podlachia	-	-	2	5.4	21	40.5	20	54.1
Little Poland	1	0.6	8	4.7	104	61.2	57	33.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>55.3</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>35.9</b>

<sup>10</sup> The table does not cover the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. See M. Bogucka - H. Samsonowicz, *Dzieje miast*, p. 371.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379

(4-5 thousand), Kalisz (3-4 thousand), as well as Sieradz, Szadek, Łęczyca, Wschowa, Kościan, Konin, Koło, Piotrków, Leszno, Warta, Żnin, Międzyrzecz, Szamotuły, Śrem, Pyzdry.<sup>12</sup> In Mazovia in group II we find Plock, Lomz'a, Przasnysz, Ciechanów, each with more than 4 thousand inhabitants, then Łowicz, Pułtusk, Rawa, Sochaczew, Brok, Ostrw, each with more than 3 thousand inhabitants.<sup>13</sup> Even in Royal Prussia small towns were the most numerous (the III group accounting for 88.3%) and the high urbanisation of this province (the share of burghers in the total population of this province was 36.5%<sup>14</sup>) was based on the existence of three big centres (Gdańsk, Elbląg, Toruń), where 61.8% of Prussian burghers lived<sup>15</sup>. In Warmia the biggest town - Braniewo - had between 5 and 6 thousand inhabitants; other towns (91,7% in group III) had from 1,500 to 2,500 inhabitants. In Little Poland group II was comparatively large (15.2%), with mining centres such as Wieliczka (4-5 thousand), Olkusz (5-6 thousand), Bochnia (3 thousand) as well as lively trade centres such as Sandomierz, Kazimierz, Biecz and Nowy Sącz (each between 4 and 5 thousand inhabitants). But the most numerous group here was also group III (46.2%). In Red Ruthenia the biggest towns were - beside Lwów - Przemyśl (5-6 thousand) and Zamość (4-5 thousand). But again the most numerous was group III (55.4%). In Ukraine, group II included Kijów, Braclaw, Winnica, Kaniów which together made up only 10.6% of the total. The most numerous group in this region were the smallest towns found in group IV, counting less than 600 hundred inhabitants. Almost 75% of Ukrainian towns belonged to this group.<sup>16</sup>

To sum up: at the end of the sixteenth century the large and

<sup>12</sup> *Dzieje Wielkopolski* (The History of Great Poland), ed. J Topolski, (Poznan 1969), p. 461 nn.

<sup>13</sup> *Atlas historyczny Polski: Mazowsze w drugiej połowie XVI w.* (Historical Atlas of Poland: Mazovia in the Second Half of the XVIth century), (Warszawa 1973), p. 83.

<sup>14</sup> M. Bogucka - H. Samsonowicz, *Dzieje miast*, p. 364.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 375.

medium-sized towns of group I and II made up only about 12% of the total while 88% were small or very small towns. Another characteristic was the ratio between group III and IV in different parts of the country. In the so-called eastern borderlands group IV totalled 43.9% and group III - 44.1%, that is, they were almost equal. In central Poland, however, the largest was group III (58.7%); group IV, composed of the smallest towns, made up only 28.6% of the total. In general at the end of the sixteenth century the burger's share could be estimated at around 20-25% of the total population.<sup>17</sup> Both the size of Polish towns as well as the share of town-dwellers in the population structure of the country were rather insignificant, at least according to West-European standards. It was, however, a situation rather similar to the situation in all Central European countries, e.g. Bohemia and Hungary.

After many devastating wars and rapid agrarianisation of the country since the middle of the seventeenth century, the urban underdevelopment of Poland grew worse in the second half of the eighteenth century. Table 2 (restricted to central Poland and Royal Prussia, not including the south-eastern regions lost to Poland in the first partition of 1772), shows only 6 towns in group I: Poznań (11-12 thousand inhabitants), Cracow (21 thousand), Gdańsk (50 thousand), Toruń (10 thousand), Elbląg (11-12 thousand), Warsaw (90-100 thousand).<sup>18</sup> At the end of the sixteenth century the number of urban centres in group II fell from 11.5% to 7.8%. Small centres in groups III and IV, which in table 1 made up 88%, in table 2 rose

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360 nn. In my article "The Grain Fields, Lords and Serfs" in: *Rural Landscapes*, ed. Wim Blockmans and Juan Gelabert (series Making of Europe), Connecticut 1994, Educational Corporation, p. 58, the editors included (neglecting my protests!) an evidently erroneous statement: "around 80% of Poland's population in the late Middle Ages were free peasants", which underrates Polish urbanisation. Because of this error and others I warn the readers against this publication. At the end of the Middle Ages the urban population in Poland should be estimated at about 15-20%, nobility at about 8-10%, which means that peasants made up at most 70% only of the total population. A law in 1496 decided that only one peasant could leave the village yearly - how could we truthfully speak about a free peasantry in those times?

<sup>18</sup> M. Bogucka - H. Samsonowicz, *Dzieje miast*, p. 381.

to 91% of the total. In some regions the number of very small towns in group IV rose very quickly - for instance in Great Poland from 10.5% to 36.1%, in Mazovia from 41.2% to 52.0%, in Podlachia from 8% to 54.1%. Unfortunately the situation in Little Poland in tables 1 and 2 could be not compared because table 2 does not cover the eastern regions of this province, lost in 1772, in which the small towns were the most numerous.

In general it could be said that the share of very small towns in Poland's urban structure grew rapidly during the early modern period. At the same time the share of burghers in the total structure of the country's population shrank - at the end of the eighteenth century it should be estimated at about 16% only.<sup>19</sup>

3. If we now move to the classification category which emphasizes towns' functions we first should point out that about 90% of all Polish towns were of the mixed kind, with both commercial and manufacturing activities geared mostly to the needs of a local market. Only a few large towns were involved in long-distance trade, which included international commerce. In this group we find sea-ports (Gdańsk, Elbląg), big river-ports (Cracow, Warsaw, Toruń) and the centres situated at major crossroads of overland routes (Poznań, Lwów, Zamość, Lublin - but also Cracow and Warsaw). As a special group of commercial towns, the medium-sized centres along the river should be mentioned, where grain, and forest products were bought and where ships and rafts for their further transportation were built, repaired, sold or rented (such as Sandomierz, Kazimierz, Włocławek). Some medium-sized towns situated on land routes were also involved in long-distance, overseas trade (Biecz, Stary and Nowy Sącz, Gniezno and others). In fact, every Polish town in the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries fulfilled some commercial function. Medium-sized and even small centres collected the agricultural products of their regions, selling at the same time imported luxury goods to the

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 366 nn.

gentry. Small towns were engaged in busy local trade with petty nobles and peasants, buying and selling agricultural products as well as all basic commodities. Some of those small townships also acted as intermediaries between their rural hinterland and large cities. In many towns services for the transit trade flourished: they offered merchants in transit accommodation, meals, waggon transport, repairs, etc. These towns could also be included in the commercial category.

There were few centres of specialized production in Poland - such as the mining towns of Wieliczka, Bochnia and Olkusz in Little Poland, or the textile-producing towns of Great Poland (Brzeziny, Wschowa, Bojanowo, Rawicz, Szadek). The towns of Iłża, Łagów and Potylicz in Little Poland were famous for their pottery, which was sold in the whole country and even as far as the Duchy of Lithuania.<sup>20</sup> In general, however, production was rather dispersed with a variety of crafts and other semi-specialist occupations in every town. The biggest centre of production (textiles, ship-building, ironware production, glass production etc.) was Gdańsk with its more than 3 thousand legal craftshops and an equal number of illegal craftshops in the first half of the seventeenth century.<sup>21</sup> But even in the small towns more than 20 different occupations were recorded.<sup>22</sup> Crafts were particularly numerous in private towns, whose owners wanted to have many different specialists at their disposal and service. As a result the emergence of some really big production centres, which manufactured goods on a large scale, cannot be regarded as typical in Poland in early modern times.

No banking centres emerged in Poland in the same period, at least not centres which are comparable to Italian, German or French ones. The biggest financial operations were concentrated in

<sup>20</sup> Cf. A. Wawrzyńczyk, *Studia z dziejów handlu Polski z Wielkim Księstwem Litewskim i Rosją w XVI w.* (Studies in the History of Trade between Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Russia in the XVIth C.), (Warszawa 1956), p. 67-68.

<sup>21</sup> M. Bogucka, *Gdańsk jako ośrodek produkcyjny w XIV-XVII w.* (Gdańsk as a Production Centre in the XIVth-XVIIth Centuries), (Warszawa 1962), pp. 163-165.

<sup>22</sup> M. Bogucka, H. Samsonowicz, *Dzieje miast*, p. 436 nn.

Gdansk and in other big towns, such as Cracow, Lwów, Lublin, where rich merchants encountered the gentry. In the second half of the eighteenth century Warsaw did become a large modern banking centre. Credit operations were also conducted during the so-called 'contract gatherings' held in different cities such as Poznań, Lwów, Przemyśl, Luck, Betz and others. Contract gatherings had developed from fairs where transactions for the sale and purchase of landed property, leasings and rentings were carried out; they were attended by magnates and the gentry as well as by rich burghers who offered loans and other financial services to the gentry.

Many towns, such as Głogów, Ceglów, or Szczuczyn, were founded in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries as markets for the big landed estates owned by magnates and rich nobles. This category of town had a characteristic layout with a very big central square, rural architecture and large plots used often as gardens and fields. The inhabitants of these townships combined urban activities - trade and crafts - with rural or semi-rural occupations: brewing beer, rearing cattle and pigs, cultivating gardens and fields. Some scholars maintain that in the middle of the seventeenth century every second Polish burgher earned more than a half of his livelihood from agriculture and gardening. The agrarian functions of Polish towns - production of foodstuffs and of alcohol - greatly affected the economy of the country, especially from the middle of the seventeenth century.

A very important group of new towns founded in this period mostly in the eastern borderlands, were residential cities. They served as a context to the magnate's residence, built in Italian style (we could cite here the example of Zamość, Żółkiew and later Rydzyna). Often at the same time they served as a fortress against the permanent threat of Turkish and Tartar invasions (the most famous examples of this category were Żółkiew and Brody). Many of these cities, however, quickly gained considerable importance in trade, too, keeping up extensive commercial relations between East and West. They fulfilled the complicated residential and military as well as economic functions, at the same time serving as fortresses

and markets, or transit places. Therefore they hardly fit into one typology.

Foundations which grew out of religious feeling should be regarded as a distinct group of towns. These consisted of so-called "Calvaries": chapels and routes conceived as a reproduction of the Stages of the Cross along with monasteries. The surrounding small towns based their existence upon catering for clergy and pilgrims. The most famous examples are Kalwaria Zebrzydowska in Little Poland, Pakość in Kujavien, Wejherowo in Royal Prussia. As a typical pilgrimage centre we should mention Częstochowa with its famous monastery and church as well as others centres for religious worship of the Mother of God such as Święta Lipka, Gidle, Borki, Piekary Śląskie, Berdyczów etc., where church and monastery were the centre of the city and where the urban social structure was dominated by butchers, bakers, shoemakers, that is, by crafts which were certainly most necessary in a place playing host to a large number of pilgrims every year.

Many Polish towns fulfilled administrative and socio-political functions. There were two capitals in Poland in this period: the old one, Cracow, where coronations and burials of the kings were celebrated and - since 1596 - the new capital, Warsaw, where the residences of kings and dignitaries of the state were established. Here general diets as well as royal elections were also held.

Several medium and small-sized towns also fulfilled socio-political functions. They served as meeting places for the gentry's conventions (so-called *sejmiki*) and law tribunals (Koło, Kalisz, Środa, Wieluń, Wschowa, Łęczyca, Sieradz, Dobrzyń in Great Poland; Piotrków, Korczyn, Proszowice, Opatów, in Little Poland; Czersk, Ciechanów, Liw, Łomża, Różan, Raciąż, Zakroczym in Mazovia; Malbork and Grudziądz in Royal Prussia; Chełm, Bełz, Wisznia, Halicz in Red Ruthenia). They housed offices of jurisdiction and were seats of royal officials, the so called *starostas*. Because of these functions some of the medium-sized towns, such as Piotrków or Radom, retained many characteristic features of a capital town. The Polish gentry preferred to choose a small town

rather than a larger one for their conventions. It is difficult to establish the exact reason for such behaviour: was it to reduce the high costs of a stay in a large city or rather a wish to avoid, if possible, contact with urban life, regarded by the Polish gentry as inferior in comparison to rural living? Another factor was possibly the long distance to the large towns - hence the natural wish to make a shorter trip and be home earlier, which meant assembling in the nearest urban centre. This is why the category of administrative towns and those where the nobility's conventions were held were especially numerous.

An important group of towns were centres especially connected with science and education. During the period there were only two university towns in Poland: Cracow in Little Poland and (since 1579) Wilna, in the Great Duchy of Lithuania. But in the sixteenth century, the Academy of Lubrański in Poznań and, from the middle of the sixteenth century, the famous high schools in Gdańsk and Toruń, virtually operated as universities, drawing young people from the whole country as well as from abroad. In Zamość an academy was founded in 1594, which was intended to become a rival to the University of Cracow. In many medium-sized towns there was a mushrooming of secondary schools with an extremely high level of teaching and with a wide range of research activities, such as the Protestant schools in Raków, Pińczów, Leszno, Sieraków and Jesuits colleges in Pułtusk and Braniewo. The number of scholars and students in some medium-sized and small towns sometimes exceeded the number of burgers. The existence of an academy or of a high school always had a strong impact on the town's life and often superseded its original functions. In Wilna, however, and in Cracow and Zamość, which were large towns with diverse economic and social functions, the professional bodies of teachers and students numbered a few hundred persons and represented only a small sector of a much bigger and diversified urban community.

To sum up: the number of functional categories of Polish towns was rather large. It would, however, be hard to find many "pure"

examples of towns of a certain type: nearly every Polish town in the period under study could fit into several of the above mentioned functional categories.<sup>23</sup> The classification according to legal status (royal-private) and size appears clearer, though we should remember that demographic factors were also changing constantly. Nevertheless attempts at classifying towns are very important for building a general picture of the urbanisation process of Polish lands in early modern times.

<sup>23</sup> A. Wyrobisz came to similar conclusions in 'Functional Types of Polish Towns in the XVIth-XVIIIth Centuries', *The Journal of European Economic History*, vol. 12, no 1, 1983, pp 69-103.

