

VII. PRAGUE, WROCLAW AND KRAKOW – THE TOWNS OF NEW EUROPE. CONCLUSION

An important factor shared during the period of interest by Prague, Wrocław and Krakow were political conditions that mainly resulted from the rivalry between the Přemyslid and Piast rulers. It was particularly strong during the stage of the formation of the states in the 10th century but in a later period as well, until the final incorporation of Wrocław and the duchies of Silesia into the Kingdom of Bohemia. Of significance in the development of Krakow, including its domestic and defensive architecture was the brief reign in the city of King Wenceslaus II of Bohemia (1291–1305). The impact of these political developments and events on processes examined in the present study is only signalled here as their more extensive discussion is given elsewhere (Zientara 1975; Łowmiański 1985; Žemlička 2002). The political developments apart, the territories of Bohemia, Silesia and Lesser Poland gradually grew closer in their culture, mostly independently of the intentions of their rulers, through economic ties and the use of similar organizational solutions.

Features shared by Prague, Wrocław and Krakow during their proto-urban phase included the presence of a secular power centre, a cathedral and the residence of a bishop as well as a settlement with a non-agrarian economy and some other settlement foci. The whole formed a loose-knit, polycentric agglomeration with a topographical layout that depended on natural conditions. With this, the list of key similarities ends and features distinctive for each town need to be recalled. Each centre had its proper rhythm of development and scale. Prague, the central hub of the Přemyslid state was the first to rise to the level of a supraregional commercial centre as early as during the 10th century. Its economic prosperity is reflected by the expansion of the suburbium by Prague Castle. Less clear is the economic role of Krakow during the same period. Its important economic position is

confirmed to-date only by the discovery in the area of the suburbium of Okół of a great deposit of raw iron weighing close to 4 tons. This find is definitely impressive but only one of a kind. In the case of Wrocław, the matter seems more unambiguous. We know that during the 10th–11th century its castle had no substantial crafts-and-market hinterland.

The 12th century was a time of significant acceleration in the development of Prague, marked by the shift of the point of gravity of crafts-and-market settlement to the right bank of the Vltava across the river from Prague Castle. Around the middle of that century, it already had a community of foreign merchants. The success of their economic activity would be confirmed most notably by elite stonebuilt houses erected from around 1200. Most of them stood in the large marketplace and the streets which originated next to it in an irregular pattern. The economic significance of the right bank-settlement from the point of view of the interests of Prague Castle is supported by the construction of a bridge over the Vltava, at first timber, and starting from the 1170s, stonebuilt – the first of its kind in East Central Europe. In Wrocław there was a settlement of craftsmen on the left bank of the Odra during the 11th century but it increased in importance not earlier than during the second half of the 12th century, more precisely, starting from around 1200. Nevertheless, its subsequent development was dynamic, and at least some of its inhabitants were *hospites* from the West and as in Prague, they were Germans, Jews and immigrants from the Romance languages' zone. In Krakow, the acceleration of development came even later, during the first half of the 13th century. This is evidenced by the development of the crafts settlement to the north of Okół. Ethnically foreign *hospites* appeared there by the 1220s. In each of the discussed centres, they gained juridical autonomy but without having their

community incorporated as a town in the new law. The accepted view is that the major setback in the development of Krakow was the Mongol invasion of 1241. On the other hand, there is no evidence that this event caused lasting damage in Wrocław. Currently, the identification of traces of this invasion in this town continues to be unresolved.

The transformation of Prague, Wrocław and Krakow to a form regulated by the new law should be viewed as an element of the major economic and social transformation which swept across Europe during the High Middle Ages. It was largely the effect of the dynamic development of the region lying to the west of the Elbe, where an economic boom resulted in intense demographic growth. Colonisation of East Central Europe was one of its consequences, and the processes of incorporation of villages and towns are understood as a form of organization and fiscal control of this movement. The network of proto-urban centres in East Central Europe was not intensively developed. Nevertheless, we may observe the beginnings of their transformation during the period predating incorporation, understood as a legal act. The first stage of transformation was the already noted acceleration in their development from the mid-12th century onwards. It took place at a time when, in the west of Europe, the urban process was already at an advanced stage and the compromise between territorial lords and the emerging town communes ushered in new legal solutions. The rapid growth of towns in the region promoted commercial exchange and expanded its geographical range. Partners or intermediaries in this activity in the East were none other than the proto-urban centres, mainly Prague but also Wrocław and Krakow. They already had their communities of foreign merchants. In addition, we have no evidence that the legal situation of the time posed any obstacles to their activity.

In each of the three towns, the watershed of incorporation had a slightly different character. The intensive and successful – in settlement terms – development of the proto-town limited the extent of the incorporation transformation. Where there was a lack of stability during the pre-incorporation phase the impact of incorporation on the structure of the town was greater. The spatial structure of proto-urban right bank Prague in 1234 was sufficiently formed and useful that when concluded, the incorporation contract caused no drastic change to the layout of the settlement. The pre-existing stonebuilt architecture fossilized at least some of the plots, reducing the scope of the incorporation activity to fiscal regulations only. Much of the older settlement was integrated into the

future intramural town. A different fate was met by the suburbium near Prague Castle, on the left riverbank, which was not regarded by the territorial lord as worth sustaining or further developing. In Wrocław, we have to recognize the new settlement hub as the first incorporated town which was added to the pre-existing agglomeration. Its regular street plan, centred on the marketplace, became one of three structures soon enclosed by fortifications. The other two are the pre-incorporation settlement and the strip of ducal land on the Odra River. The dynamic development of the new entity soon resulted in the absorption of the earlier settlement and further expansion. In Krakow, too the pre-existing suburbium of Okół was not included in the incorporation. The new town was laid out in a zone adjacent to it from the north, on the site of the ironworking settlement destroyed by the Mongols. The regular town plan was developed there in its full form, dictated by fiscal targets, adjusted to economic objectives and also testifying to the high skill of the surveyors. From today's point of view, the layout of Krakow from the 13th/14th century may be regarded as an artful piece of town planning. A common feature of the incorporation watershed was an obvious reduction in the size of the earlier settlement structure. The place of a loosely organized agglomeration of several elements was replaced by a more focused urban centre with a visibly emphasized multi-functional central district. In each town of interest, it was a market square, already in place in the older settlement in Prague and newly laid out in Wrocław and in Krakow.

The principle, used in Krakow and presumably in Wrocław also, of the legal segregation of the indigenous and immigrant population is explained in literature as motivated by the wish to retain the earlier settlements whose indigenous inhabitants were bound by traditional obligations towards the ruler (Piskorski 1990/91, 225; Rajman 2004, 346; Moździoch 1996, 33). Due to the need to keep these obligations in force, the duke's people were debarred from joining the town commune. Quite soon, this precipitated the material decline of the pre-existing settlements, and subsequently, their deterioration, or alternately, absorption into the incorporated town. Some attempts were made to have them incorporated separately, but these failed to bring the expected results. Still insufficiently understood is the later fate of the inhabitants of pre-incorporation settlements who remained in the traditional system of feudal obligations. Did they add to the number of the urban lower class deprived of town rights? Were they relocated to ducal villages? Written sources are silent on their subject. Thus, the

demographic base of the transformed towns were the *hospites* – mostly German speaking colonists – some of them already present in the East prior to incorporation but most arrived in its wake. As Mateusz Goliński noted (2012, 22–27) it was for them that the new town law was introduced, to provide for their status and to safeguard the interests of the duke.

Was the model of the burgage plot transplanted to East Central Europe as a ‘readymade product’, fully formed in its legal, fiscal and spatial detail in the towns of the West? This is something most urban researchers wish to see, especially those working with the method of measurement analysis. In the light of the knowledge we have today, we need to assume that in the towns of Western Europe the plot was not the result of a single invention. Its form evolved over time and its appearance was not uniform. In most towns of the 12th and early 13th century, plots had a variety of plans, conditioned mostly by the irregular street layout. In many centres that functioned from the Early Middle Ages such plots, soon fixed by masonry buildings, survive until today. This is the reality reflected in the Old Town in Prague. Here most plots have an irregular form and the measurement method is not applicable. One might say that the model of a regular plot, an elongated rectangle in plan with an evidently fiscal function, was late in arriving to Prague. The town had already taken form prior to any legal regulations.

Rectilinear plots of equal sizes are known from early medieval proto-urban centres in Northern and North-western Europe. Even so, there is no proof that they were the direct model for the founders of towns such as Freiburg im Breisgau and others similar to it, where at least some plots of regular size were laid out. The idea itself resulted more from the choice of the most simple and, at the same time, the universal option. Their popularity in many cultures far removed geographically and chronologically from each other was the result of just this simplicity and practical advantages without ruling out, at the same time, their aesthetic value. The plot on a plan of an elongated rectangle had an area easy to calculate that was helpful in fairly determining the amount of payment charged from it. It was the layout most compatible with the urban mode of life, where the workplace and the dwelling were in the same location. The front of the plot, which doubled as the street edge, marked the boundary between private and public space. At the same time, in the spirit of European cultures and in contrast to Middle Eastern ones, it lent emphasis to the open character and representative nature of the house.

A typical urban domestic building is situated exactly on the boundary with the public space. Other situations where it is found at the rear of the plot illustrate the way of life of those who in social terms were foreigners in the urban community. Thus, these might be houses of members of the feudal or Church elite, in which case they usually had the form of a tower, or, just the opposite, rear buildings of inferior status, leased out to people who had no town rights. This second phenomenon, illustrating the way of life of the urban lower class, was widespread in the town. Aspiration to social advancement could, even if infrequently, result in a residential tower being occupied by a townsman.

For all of the stated reasons, the regulation of the plot plan became a progressive tendency in the 12th–13th centuries, where this was possible. It was easiest to apply in new town districts, or in centres founded *a novo* in an area with no pre-existing development. This was possible also in Wrocław and in Krakow. In the former, plots were laid out in an area free of development, outside the pre-existing settlement, and in the latter, in the place of the settlement destroyed by warfare. The decisions on plot sizes in both towns were taken independently, adjusting them to local needs.

If we accept that urban civilization spread to East Central Europe in an already established form then the houses built in Prague, Wrocław and Krakow would have to correspond to patterns used earlier in centres of Western Europe, but it is not so. In each of these towns we can find local solutions and the pool of potential prototypes is quite large but at the same time, misleading. We cannot hope to link with any certainty the urban domestic houses of Prague, Wrocław and Krakow with those known in Northern Europe or the High German region. Instead, we have to assume a high flexibility in the spatial solutions used which, nevertheless, fit the broader concept of a merchant or a craftsman’s house. The indigenous model of the log house was not continued either.

Timber buildings in post-in-ground construction houses appear for the first time in the built environment of Prague during the 12th–13th centuries. They had a larger surface area than indigenous log houses and were partly sunken. The true harbinger of new times in Prague is the Romanesque stonebuilt houses. The lack of close analogies and, at the same time, their obvious concentration on the right bank of the Vltava lead to the conclusion that their model was developed locally to meet the needs of the financial elite, i.e. prosperous merchants engaged in lucrative long-distance trade.

Timber post buildings introduced into Prague and other towns of Bohemia and Moravia prior to the incorporation were not typical for Wrocław and Krakow. Studies of Wrocław in particular show that starting from the early decades of the 13th century the technologically advanced frame system had come into use and houses usually had two storeys, one of them partly sunken. The stone Prague houses, on the other hand, have no counterparts in Wrocław or Krakow. Here a different system was used, apparently more suited to the local needs, and even more so to the local means. Whereas in Prague a stone house resulting from a single building project tended to represent a complete and functional whole, in Wrocław the process of construction unfolded in stages. The norm was to start from simple forms and add other segments in succession, or to divide the interiors into smaller ones. The size of the area occupied by a house varied, ranging from small buildings, square in plan, to larger ones in the shape of an elongated rectangle. The position of the latter in relation to the street could also vary – more frequently they were set with the ridgepole to the street but some houses stood with their gable end to the line of the plot frontage. The earliest houses tended to have two, sometimes, three storeys and the ground floor usually partly sunken.

Masonry houses of Wrocław were slightly later compared to those of Prague, but antedate those of Krakow. In the central town of Lesser Poland, the first stonebuilt houses appear during the final decades of the 13th century. There a special feature is the presence of residential towers (alternately, tower houses) set at the rear of the plot presumably forming a functional whole with the timber house. There is reason to believe that they originated at the stage of the development of this town when it still had no regular fortifications. Houses of later date, from around 1350 assumed the form of a typical urban townhouse set in line with the street.

In each town, the building material and strategies were adjusted to local conditions and stylistic conventions. In Prague, locally sourced limestone was used, carefully dressed to the form of Romanesque ashlar. In lowland Wrocław, where there were no nearby outcrops of building stone, brick was used. The style of buildings erected mainly during the second half of the 13th century combines Late Romanesque and Early Gothic elements. The builders of Krakow, similar to those of Prague, had at their disposal the locally available building stone – Jurassic limestone but in contrast to Prague the masonry walls were built in keeping with the local Gothic convention by laying broken stone in layers.

Town squares and streets were essential elements of the public space of medieval towns and the way they were used differed from that proper to the plot and the house. They brought together technical, social and symbolic functions. They were the site of economic activity but also a place to display one's membership in the community and one's proper place in its internal hierarchy. They served as a place of assembly and transfer of information; behaviour in them was subject to control. The usefulness of squares and streets for daily communication depended on maintaining them in a proper condition. In each town, methods used in the metalling of its street surfaces were different. There were some common tendencies however, mainly the evolution from casual methods, unsophisticated in terms of construction, to the laying of permanent cobbled surfaces by way of municipal projects. In each town, the structure of street surfaces investigated archaeologically is a reflection of increasing public problems and the ways of solving them that were undertaken in response. The condition of the street surface was improved to the level required by the current function of the street, one that could be achieved with the technological and financial potential of the townspeople then available. During the early stage of the development of towns, when the level of disturbance to the natural environment was not too great, projects of road construction, improvement and maintenance were not extensive. Mounting unfavourable changes resulted in an organized intervention by the community and the reduction of nuisance. The policy of the town council, at first liberal, changed with time into an active one, even restrictive in relation to the owners of plots fronting the street.

Steps taken to maintain proper sanitation in the town may be described in a similar manner. These now more regular measures were aimed at the elimination of emerging hazards as the regulatory and controlling role of the town government increased. The build-up of deep layers of refuse in the squares and streets of Prague, Wrocław and Krakow led to the introduction of regulations on the cleaning and removal of waste outside these towns. As the town population grew so did problems with sanitation. Apparently, until the 14th century the period of most interest to us here, efforts made by the townspeople to keep their town clean produced results satisfactory for them. However, by the end of the Middle Ages and beyond the situation deteriorated and continued to do so until the disastrous conditions of 17th–18th centuries.

The transformation of Prague, Wrocław and Krakow in the 12th–14th century was a part of a more

general process of urbanisation in East Central Europe. It took place as part of a complex process of economic and social transition, recently referred to by historians using the term ‘commercialization’ (Gawlas 2006, with a list of literature). The process involved the reorganization of and an increase in the density of the network of central places which were developing a significant non-agrarian economy, which was understood as an element of exploitation of the territory subject to a feudal ruler (cf. Urbańczyk 2002). Individual parts of the continent were affected by this process in a different rhythm and with substantial differences in quality. One of the research topics examined as part of the problem of the commercialization of the continent is the relationship of the former post-Carolingian zone, ‘older Europe’, to the area brought into the sphere of Western European civilization during the 10th–13th century. At the present stage of research and discussion, we may conclude that the acceleration of the urban process in East Central Europe was not so much the result of the will of political and ecclesiastical elites of the day as of the economic, social processes and population growth observed in the 12th–13th century in the region west of the Elbe. In other words, the economic prosperity of Cologne, Nuremberg or Lübeck was translated by way of trade into the development of the towns of ‘new Europe’. A widely observed effect was a tendency towards the unification of broad tracts of the continent within the framework of the new urban civilization. This was true also of phenomena investigated by archaeologists such as urban lifestyle, increased consumption and transformation of material culture.

An essential factor in the development of central urban foci was supraregional contacts made within the network of trade routes. Researchers in economic history have examined Prague, Wrocław and Krakow within the Sudety-Carpathians region, and understood to encompass Bohemia, Silesia, Lesser Poland, Slovakia, the Hungarian Plain and Transylvania. The main resources of interest for the supraregional trade included precious metal ores – gold in Slovakia, Transylvania and Silesia, silver and lead in Bohemia, Silesia and Lesser Poland, copper in Transylvania and salt in Lesser Poland, some products of agriculture and crafts, important in the exchange of inexpensive commodities of standard quality, such as cloth from Silesia and Lesser Poland. This area, regardless of

the existing ethnic divisions and fluctuating state borders, was identified by Marian Małowist (1973, 6–25), and studies continued by his successors have brought new conclusions as to the character of this zone, its internal and external ties and its role in the economic development of the whole continent (Dygo 2006; Myśliwski 2006). The intensification of the development of Prague, Wrocław and Krakow and incorporation transformation associated with it raised the economic rank of these towns and their role in the continental network of commercial exchange.

These ties were realised mainly along the east to west axis. A trial analysis of the trans-European route, which linked the Atlantic coast with the Black Sea by way of the Sudety-Carpathians zone, was undertaken recently by Grzegorz Myśliwski. This would be the route referred to, or at least its stretch between Cologne and Kiev, as *Via Regia* or *Hohe Weg* (Myśliwski 2006, 254, 2009, 74–81, with a list of literature). Determining the time of its origin, range and changes in its itinerary during its early phase as well as the intensity of use is not easy, not only because of the limitations of sources. The functioning of the route was also influenced by factors such as changes in the economic situation of individual centres, topography and the calendar of annual fairs, market privileges and restrictions. Henryk Samsonowicz (1973) assumed that *Via Regia* was in use in the Early Middle Ages and increased in importance only during the 13th century with the development of commercial centres in East Central Europe. Wrocław made its mark on this route not later than around the mid-12th century by its spring fair, ten days after the feast of St Vincent, granted to the Benedictine Abbey in Ołbin in 1149 (Młynarska-Kaletynowa 1986, 44, with a list of sources and literature).

Prague played the role of an intermediary in the overland trade with the East for southern German towns, mainly Nuremberg and Regensburg. From Prague the route continued to Slovakia and onwards to Kievan Rus, or alternately, along the Danube to the Black Sea. There was also a route through Olomouc to Krakow, where it joined the *Via Regia*. Other major commercial partners for Prague were towns of the south – Vienna, and beyond, northern Italian centres, most notably, Venice. Wrocław and Krakow used the Odra and the Vistula as waterways that linked them with the Hansa region. Both these towns for a period were part of the Hanseatic League.