

## Research project: Cities of the Croatian Middle Ages: Urban Elite and Urban Space (URBES)

The following papers present final results of the research project founded by Croatian Science Foundation (2015-2019) and conducted at Croatian Institute of History (Zagreb) titled *Cities of the Croatian Middle Ages: Urban Elite and Urban Space (URBES)*.<sup>1</sup> At the centre of this project was the relationship between the space and the society (elites) in a medieval town, a relationship that in recent international historiography has been stressed as key to understanding of the urban history of the Middle Ages.

During the last decades there were remarkable studies on medieval society and medieval space (done by historians, art historians, historical geographers, archaeologists),<sup>2</sup> but recently scholars, dealing with different European regions, have been concentrated on the new questions: (medieval) urban property market, social and residential mobility, on how the space was used and represented by urban society.<sup>3</sup> A recent approach in urban history is the so-called “spatial turn” that appeared in relation to the emergence of new, primarily IT technologies.

The research concept embraced in URBES project mirrored emerging research trends within European medieval urban history by focusing “upon humans behind urban constitutions, and multiple reasons why they try to influence the social and social spatial reality surrounding them.”<sup>4</sup> Although all social groups and institutions were very important in the shaping of a medieval town, elite represent the key social group within the medieval community, for their economic activity

---

<sup>1</sup> All results of the project see on: <http://urbes.s2.novena.web.info/en/home/>.

<sup>2</sup> Preliminary research on the relationship between urban space and society (social topography) within the pre-modern cities and towns, was studied as early as in the 1960s. Fundamental studies are also those from the 1970s and 1980s on Italian cities of Genoa, Perugia, Rome, Venice and Florence, on British towns or those on European towns in general. Since then, many urban historians focused on the relation between (medieval) urban space and urban society (especially regarding urban elites and their family structures and their relation to the urban space). In medieval town, the connection between owning real estate in town and civil law was strong: one of the basic criterions of citizenship was the ownership of real estate in town.

<sup>3</sup> Important studies that have launched complex and interdisciplinary research to identify space-society relationship have been conducted for medieval cities and towns (on London, Rome, Venice, Castille, Marseille or Czeck, Slovak and Hungarian towns, or towns of medieval Flanders).

<sup>4</sup> Jelle Haemers, “Urban History of the Medieval Low Countries: Research Trends and New Perspectives (2000–10)”, *Urban History* 38 (2011): no. 2: 345-354, 346.

and municipal offices. Since Central Middle Ages most of the urban land was divided among the wealthiest and most influential individuals and groups: urban elite. Medieval towns and cities both “visualize and symbolize the relationship between elites and spaces.”<sup>5</sup> Also, “in legal terms, medieval towns were towns of the landowning majority.”<sup>6</sup> Motives for elites’ investment in urban land were manifold: shaped by social and family structure, social status and economic factors. The position and size of urban estates assured legitimacy, as well as economic and social power to urban elites. The town at the same time obtained a warranty of economic stability beneficial to the entire urban society. By focusing on “urban elites” URBES also recognized them as undoubtedly social groups that were the most influential in the shaping of the urban spaces, both as governors and as key participants in the urban public life. In many ways, they formed the identity of the medieval cities and towns. Therefore, the goal of the URBES project was to provide answers to questions such as: What was the role of the urban estates (with regard to its size, location, level of possession and continuity) in the formation of medieval urban elites? How did (lay) elites in chosen cities transform through the chosen period with regard to the usage and possession of (urban) estates? What was their influence upon the planning of the urban space, and their social presence in the urban space? How did the social structure of the elites influence the shaping of urban space?

In URBES the urban space was also seen in terms of social space (in territorial claims etc.) and in the subjective sense (for instance how townspeople had experienced their urban space). Therefore, the concept of urban space used in URBES was not applied only to physical space but also social and cultural space. Urban space was a result of collision of social influences, just one of which was physical space, a particular location or geographic space. Space is understood as a construct, as a “fertile space,” which is defined by interactions of social participants with the local environment.

In general, academic research on the history of cities and towns in Croatia has a long tradition, from which emerged a very important and valuable results on whose foundations scholars today can move in new directions. However, some topics related to medieval urban history of Croatia are more explored, as is the focus of the research was on individual cities and towns or particular regions much more than the others (not all cities are equally well preserved as it is not the

---

<sup>5</sup> Peter Štih, “Plemstvo in mes ta med severnim Jadranom in Panonij v srednjem veku, nekaj zapažanj, prvenstveno na slovenskih primerih” [Nobility and Towns between the Northern Adriatic and Pannonia in the Middle Ages], in: *Mestne elite v srednjem in novem veku med Aplami, Jadranom in Panonsko nižino*, Janez Mlinar and Bojan Balkovec (eds.) (Ljubljana: Zveza zgodovinskih društev Slovenije, 2011): 7-24, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Katalin Szende, “Some aspects of urban landownership in Western Hungary”, in: *Power, Profit and Urban Land: Landownership in Medieval and Early Modern Northern European Towns*, F. E. Eliassen and G. A. Ersland (eds.) (Aldershot, Hants: Scholar Press, 1996), 141-166, p. 153.

same level of preservation of the documentary material). The research on urban space and on the history of urban elites were also not neglected in Croatian academia but were mostly studied separately, within different historical disciplines. The study on urban elite has been located in political and social history, employing related methodological approaches that has achieved a great deal. On the other hand, urban space was studied predominatnly by art historians and archaeologists. The URBES project wanted to contribute with understanding of urban societies in Croatian regions with employment of new questions and interdisciplinary approaches on the relation between the urban society and the urban space.

The research was focused on selected medieval cities of two geographical regions of nowadays Croatia: (coastal region and interamnum of sava-Drava rivers), leaving out central so called “mountainous region of medieval Croatia” because of its specific types of non-agrarian settlements that deserve different kind of research attention. The foci of URBES project were selected medieval Slavonian towns that developed from the thirteenth century onwards as free royal cities: Gradec – nowadays Zagreb, and Varaždin (both politically and economically the most significant towns in medieval Slavonia) and selected Eastern Adriatic cities, from Istrian urban communes on the north to Dubrovnik in the south: Istrian urban communities of Labin and Rovinj; northern Adriatic island commune of Rab; Zadar, the civic centre of medieval Dalmatia; Trogir, the city with the longest urban continuity in Croatia; Šibenik, selected as new medieval town that developed from a castrum into a civitas; and finally Split and Dubrovnik, whose urban development began as late as early Middle Ages although their tradition went back to Antiquity.

This project examined the period between the High and Late Middle Ages (mid-thirteenth to mid-sixteenth centuries). Mid-thirteenth century was for the most part the period of rapid spatial, demographic, economic and social urban development. This period of growth resulted in the expansion of urban space, stronger real estate market and increased investment into urban land. It is also the period of growing legal practices in urban centres and introduction of public notaries that onwards provide systematic documentary data for the research (from the late 13th and 14th centuries documents recording properties and elites in selected cities). By contrast, mid-sixteenth century in Slavonia, central Croatia and Eastern Adriatic was the era of major political and social changes. For each individual city, research timeframe depended on the state of the data and the level of previous historiographical research. Some of chosen medieval towns are exceptionally well preserved in terms of their pre-modern heritage, offering unique opportunities for comparing medieval urban space with the archival data, while others have not many medieval material remains.

To study an urban group in urban space in its both physical and social terms requires complex approaches taking into account many elements: collective biographies, legal criteria, economic concerns and physical legacy. To understand property-acquiring strategies of urban elites in medieval towns we need information on family/kinship networks, their careers and economic activities. The distribution of elites' real estate must be linked not just to the political and clan affiliations (or the places of origin of certain families) but also to communal urban planning, legal and economic framework, and with demographic processes. Furthermore, URBES addressed different levels of "closeness" and "openness" of urban elites of Eastern Adriatic cities as well as of cities of Central European type. Instead of firmly closed elites, medieval towns of the North had so-called open oligarchy: individuals could join the governing stratum as long as they were sufficiently wealthy or well connected. Such elites were investigated in Gradec and Varaždin. In Istria, as well as on the island of Rab, openness of the governing elite had idiosyncratic features. Both elites (nobility and wealthy citizens) were defined by landowning and office holding. In Central and Southern Dalmatia, by the mid-14th century membership of more or less oligarchical councils was often determined by heredity, and lineage. In addition to the governing/office-holding elites, here we must also mention the so-called "secondary" urban elite that emerged following the closure of city councils in the mid-fourteenth century. They comprised elite citizens that were wealthy, held public administration offices mostly in chancelleries and came together in elite urban confraternities.

The interdisciplinary analysis of this "elite-space" relation conducted by URBES used comparative methods to place cities of the Croatian Middle Ages in a broader European context. Although the cities of the Croatian Middle Ages are in the centre of URBES, we focused on the issues that go beyond the scale of individual towns in order to make comparisons of similar phenomena between cities and towns in a broader geographical and political context, and to trace residential mobility of the urban elites. For instance, URBES (in relation to development of urban space) followed strong liaisons of urban elites of nowadays north-eastern Croatian cities with elite of nowadays Slovenian cities (Štajerska region); compared elite-space relation of Dalmatian and Istrian cities in broader context of *Stato da mar*; or Dubrovnik in comparison with Venice.

The novelty of this project layed in the systematic investigation of archival sources with respect to urban development. The URBES project reconstructed and analysed the matrix of chosen urban elite families, households, properties and buildings in chosen cities of nowadays Croatia, and traced their evolution over time, gaining new insights into social and spatial structures and the agents and circumstances of urban change. URBES combined methodological tools of prosopography and social topography in order to reconstruct the most influential element of the urban society (elite), their personal relations, social positions and

interactions with urban space. Prosopography enables researchers to build collective biographies of urban elites. In URBES, the fragmentary biographical details were investigated in relation with the urban land and with the urban space in general. Social topography refers to the positioning of social groups in urban settlements: their location, distribution, size and continuity of the estate are among the most important factors shaping the urban space as well as the identity of cities from the Middle Ages onwards. The levels of the possession are also relevant (meanings of concepts such as ownership and lease have changed radically through the Middle Ages. In the URBES we understand social topography as a research method that involves not only reconstruction of estates but also recording the dynamics of process in the formation of the distribution of social groups in urban space.

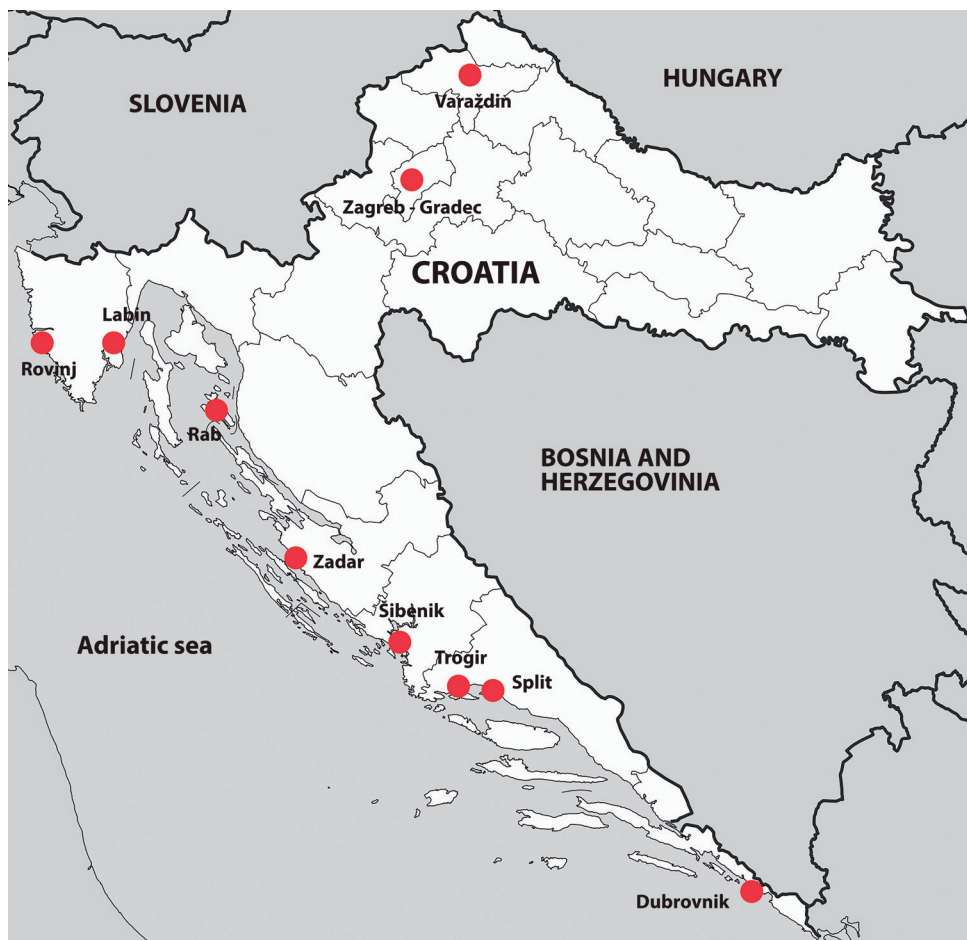
To be more precise, URBES studied the relation between urban elites and urban space through: the analysis of structure of the chosen urban elites (familial, juridical, social, and political); the examination of elites' position in the urban life of the studied cities; the reconstruction of chosen urban estates of the elites in studied cities; the structure of estates, the system of ownership and plots, and in general the spatial presence of the urban elites and the analysis of elite-space relationship in urban development of the studied cities.

URBES project was based on a systematic investigation of archival sources with respect to urban development. The most significant sources for the "elites-space" relation are registers of notaries (the relevant data are preserved mostly in different disputes, deeds of gift, as well as sale contracts, wills and inventories listing personal possessions). Data from narrative sources, such as chronicles, and pictorial sources, or later-period maps will be also used. Reconstruction of a social group is very complex undertaking: in this early period, possibilities of tracing the structures of all the families are limited (matching of the names, consolidate identities etc.). Individual historical records do not reveal much about the examined issues, and records of property holding are an intractable and bulky category for the research of medieval town. The data were thus collected systematically into a database that may be used in further quantitative and qualitative analysis to study the medieval city. URBES database has two main dimensions: 1. information on urban elites – their family history, composition, size, social mobility, social and political identification; and 2. information on their estates (size, position, function) (<http://urbes.s2.novenaweb.info/en/database/>). The relationships between townsmen and their properties were very complex - many local and external circumstances determined these relations. Often the lordships over the urban land interlocked. Location of certain social structures in the urban space depended on many factors: economic and legal position of the subject; family and political relationships between individual social groups and planned urban politics. In general, the way the property was distributed within society in medieval

towns reflects and reinforces social relationships and hierarchies. Urban land was much more than a space to use or upon which to erect a building.

The project members analysed, published and edited, in hard copy and online, the results of individual and joint research. The results of the project included individual and multiauthored comparative studies as well as methodological studies. Project web page has been available containing information on the content and phases of the project, methods and collaborators; databases; space reconstructions; and publications. Here published jointly-authored studies are the result of a final project workshop, whose aim was to address key themes and approaches across several related urban spaces, doing comparative research on several regions of Croatia that followed different patterns of urbanization and elite development.<sup>7</sup>

Irena Benyovsky Latin\*



<sup>7</sup> The workshop took place on 17th May 2019 at Croatian Institute of History (Zagreb).

\* Project leader of URBES (September 2015 – September 2019).