

Agro-Town Regions of Peripheral Europe

The Case of the Great Hungarian Plain

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The concept of agro-town was elaborated by the geographers to describe a settlement that although it is chiefly populated by farmers and agricultural labourers has the size of a town and often includes urban institutions, urban social strata and functions. Such settlements are surrounded by vast areas of extensively used land which may extend to several tens of thousands of square kilometres. Agro-towns constitute settlement networks in themselves, without or with very few villages. In Europe agro-town regions are found in Andalusia, Southern Italy, Sicily and on the Great Hungarian Plain. In this paper the author makes a detailed study of the Hungarian agro-towns, describing their physical and social structure as well as their life-style and culture, and tracing their development and transformations back to the late Middle Ages. In the concluding chapter the Hungarian agro-towns are compared with their Mediterranean parallels. In spite of apparent differences (e.g. a general 'urbanity' and 'urban ethos' in the Mediterranean, and 'ruralness' in the Hungarian Plain) the paper points out basic similarities in the historic development and social significance of the agro-towns. The similar traits are interpreted as adaptations to more or less analogous situations in the periphery of the European continental division of labor.

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The concept of the agro-town was elaborated by geographers. Accordingly, the agro-town is a settlement-type characterized by specific contradictions: like villages it is overwhelmingly populated by farmers and agricultural labourers, but its size and population are as large as those of towns, and urban institutions, urban social strata and functions can also be found in it. The population of agro-towns usually amounts to several thousand inhabitants, occasionally to thirty and even fifty thousand, and the surface area of its fields may reach or even exceed some ten thousand hectares. (Niemeyer 1935, 1943, 1967: 67–70, Schwarz 1966: 116–117, 123, 447, Monheim 1969, 1972).

According to the theory of geographical location, the organization and arrangement of agricultural labour and of cultivated land in agro-towns is rather inappropriate or even "irrational". In the Middle Ages the villages of Northern Europe usually cultivated land surrounding them within a radius of 800 metres,

and in Europe the intensity of cultivation declined radically beyond the distance of four kilometres even in the recent past (Hansen 1976, Chisholm 1968: 48–59, 131). However, the major part of the fields of agro-towns lies beyond this limit, and as a consequence, it is used extensively with tiresome access and transport. The agro-towns do not represent some kind of intermediate type in a continuum leading from village to city, nor are they a transitory stage in the process of development. They can be regarded as autonomous and stable – as specific constructs which do not fit into the hierarchical settlement network of the agricultural landscape consisting of villages and towns. Wherever there are agro-towns, these constitute a settlement network in and of themselves without villages (or with very few of these) in regions extending to several tens of thousands of square kilometres. In areas of agro-towns even the "real" towns adjust themselves to the former, with a wide "agrarian

belt" of rural quarters surrounding an urban inner city, and agriculturists are constituting a significant proportion of their population.

According to the geographical literature, agro-town regions can be found in Europe in Andalusia, Southern Italy, Sicily and on the Great Hungarian Plain (Niemeier 1943: 330–331, cf. Blok 1969: 127–128). There are also agro-towns outside Europe: Niemeier refers to Japanese and Sudanese examples (Niemeier 1967: 69).

In a recent issue of this journal Anton Blok and Henk Driessen compared the agro-towns of Andalusia and Sicily. They have proved that the inhabitants of these towns are filled with an "urban ethos" in both regions, and that "urbanization" of settlement space and urban attitudes are dominant features of the culture of the entire Mediterranean (Blok & Driessen 1984). Blok and Driessen consider the Mediterranean a culturally "sufficiently homogeneous and unique" "ethnological field of study". The objective of their analysis is to identify correspondences and variations within this unit.

In this paper I intend to place the Hungarian agro-towns beside the Mediterranean examples. In this undertaking there is something of a challenge: at first glance, the two historic and cultural contexts might appear to be too dissimilar, permitting no comparison at all. I would like to stress, however, that in my project the starting point is a formal analogy in settlement morphology. Listing them under the same category of a settlement typology does not imply that the agro-towns cover local societies and cultures of a similar structure in various parts of the world. (At any rate, geographers have already pointed out some remarkable social similarities between Mediterranean and Hungarian agro-towns e.g. that in each agro-town region the proportion of agricultural proletarians is strikingly high and that the *latifundia* play a significant role, cf. Niemeier 1943). In my view the occurrence of this rare and "irrational" form of settlement in two rather different geographical and historical environments may justify putting questions such as: What are the circumstances behind their evolution and survival? What are the consequences of the concentration of agri-

culturists in town-size settlements upon the structure of the society and upon its culture?

Town and village usually represent two different levels of construction and transmission of culture. In the agro-towns, these two levels approach each other and intermingle. According to Blok and Driessen, the urban component has been victorious in the Mediterranean and the inhabitants of agro-towns define themselves unambiguously as "urban people". (The two authors do not indicate how agro-town people define themselves in the face of "real" modern industrial cities. Large-scale emigration towards city-regions indicates that they are aware of the limits of their own "agrarian" urbanity.) A comparison between distant and dissimilar regions by all means requires a critical treatment of the traditional stereotypes of "town" and "village", and an empirical investigation of the criteria defining the various types of settlements as well as of the local concepts of urbanity and rurality, in both cases.

Andalusia and the Tisza region are distant from each other; nevertheless, both belong to Europe and to the European economic "world system" which has functioned since the Early Modern Age (Wallerstein 1974, Braudel 1979). Defined in relation to the Northwest European core region, the agro-town areas of the Mediterranean and of Hungary are peripheral or semiperipheral. All agro-town areas were chiefly agrarian and produced predominantly bulk goods: grain, cattle, sheep, hides, and wool which were exported to the more central parts of the continent in great quantities. Landlords, aristocrats, noblemen and office bearers of a remote and strange state organization played an important role in the image of society formulated by the inhabitants of agro-towns here as well as there, until the recent past. This combination of feudal-agrarian and urban-civic features fits well within the general image of peripheral societies (cf. Linz & de Miguel 1966: 292–294, who coined the term "gentry Spain" for the agro-town regions; Schneider & Schneider 1976).

Recently, David D. Gilmore has expressed doubts about the explanatory value of center-periphery relations when used directly to explain local cultural developments in the Medi-

terranean (Gilmore 1982: 182–183). I do not agree with all of his criticisms; I would like to stress, however, that instead of developing “radial” explanations which link local processes to pressures and stimuli irradiating from the center, in the following analysis I wish to experiment with “perimetric” comparisons, based on the analogous peripheral positions of the societies under scrutiny. In the vast European periphery, agro-towns only occur in a small number of geographically limited areas. Agro-town systems seem to be rather peculiar and extraordinary adaptations to the conditions of the periphery, and as such the result of the concomitant working of several variables.

This paper tries to elucidate the conditions and influences under which an agro-town system evolved on the Great Hungarian Plain. The analysis of the Hungarian case is based on the author's own fieldwork (mainly done in the 1950's), archival research, and the rich Hungarian literature on agro-towns (cf. Balogh 1947, 1973; Erdei 1943; Györfy 1942; Majláth 1943; Mendöl 1936, 1943; Tálasi 1946, 1977 etc.)¹. The paper does not deal with the transformation of the agro-towns of the Plain after World War II, i.e. with the impact of the socialist reorganization of agriculture, of the settlement policy of recent decades, and of industrial development. The sketch offered here is of historical nature and concentrates on the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century. Meanwhile, the envisaged “perimetric” comparison will be only partially realised. The author (who has not done fieldwork in Andalusia and Sicily, nor visited these regions) uses the image of Mediterranean agro-towns – derived from the anthropological and historical literature – as a point of reference, as a base of comparison for delineating agro-towns of the Hungarian Plain.

The physiognomy of the agro-towns of the Plain

It is not an easy task to define which settlements of the Plain are agro-towns and which are not². Niemeier's statement that in agro-town regions, even the “real” towns would assimilate themselves to the agro-towns, holds

true also for the Plain. On the other hand, most of the villages of the Plain are large, generally well above the lower limit of 1,500 inhabitants set by geographers for agro-towns. In the 1930's Tibor Mendöl listed 27 “towns of the Plain” and Ferenc Erdei 31 “agro-towns”, but Erdei added that in the 19th century most of his agro-towns were still in a “pre-agro-town” stage (Mendöl 1936, Erdei 1943: 61–67, Bácskai-Nagy 1984: 310)³.

The uncertainty of the borderline “upwards” towards the real towns and “downwards” towards the villages, as well as “sidewise” towards the country towns of other Hungarian regions, and the differences of approach are reflected in the Hungarian terminology of agro-towns. The term *mezőváros* (= agrarian town) is used meaning a slightly urbanized settlement having the partial legal privileges of a town, but it can be either a country town performing a central role among villages or an agro-town. This is how the large number of *oppida* were called – established in the 14th century with less rights than the *civitates*. In the 20th century, the agro-towns of the Plain were called *parasztváros* (= peasant-town), in response to which the ethnographer István Györfy suggested the term *gazdaváros* (*gazda* meaning the independent peasant proprietor cultivating his own land), saying that it was the wealthy farmers who determined the cultural profile of these towns (Györfy 1926, 1942). The same classification is expressed by the term *cívisváros* as well. The word *cívis* had come to stay from official Latin into the Hungarian language in the middle of the 19th century to denote the agriculturists and farmers of the free agro-towns who had the rights of burghers as contrasted with the rural peasants who had been in the position of serfs until 1848 (cf. Majláth 1943, Balogh 1947, 1973: 111–112). The geographer Tibor Mendöl and others stress the regional occurrence of the agro-towns by the term *alföldi város* (= town of the Plain). This term covered those “real” towns, free royal towns which had an significant cultural belt around the urban center such as Szeged and Debrecen, but also the giant villages with a modest urban centre (Mendöl 1936, 1943 cf. Schwarz 1966: 447).



Fig. 1. The confines of the agro-town: the outer row of houses which face the 'inner pasture'. Kiskunfélegyháza, 1905. Photo: László Madarassy.

At the time of the national survey, carried out between 1784 and 1787, only 6.7 per cent of the population of Hungary lived in settlements of more than 5000 inhabitants. This proportion was between 30 to 70 per cent in the counties of the Plain. At the same time the majority of the population of the country – i.e. 58 per cent – lived in villages containing less than one thousand people, whereas in the Plain this proportion was 0.2 per cent in Csongrád county, 1.6 per cent in Csanád county and 2.8 per cent in Békés (Rácz 1980: 102). This clearly indicates the dominance, almost the hegemony, of the rather large agricultural settlements.

Even in the case of historical towns performing urban functions, outsiders were surprised by their rural physiognomy. In 1797 Robert Townson described Debrecen as follows: "To what circumstance Debretzin owes its exist-

ence I don't know; nor can I divine what can have induced thirty thousand people to select a country destitute of springs, rivers, building materials, fuel, and the heart-cheering vine, for their residence. Debretzin, though it has the title and privileges of a town, must be considered as a village: and then it is perhaps the greatest village in Europe. But should it be considered as a town, it is one of the worst, though its inhabitants are not the poorest. It is surrounded with a hedge, and the town-gates are like our field-gates, and stuck with thorns and brambles. The houses, with only a few exceptions, consist merely of the ground-floor; they are thatched, and have the gable-end turned towards the street: these are not paved; but, in a few of the most frequented, balks are laid down in the middle for the *Pietons*" (Townson 1797: 238).

We may add that besides the 47 per cent of



Fig. 2. Street in an agro-town with houses in rural style. Kiskunfélegyháza, 1910. Photo: László Madarassy.

agriculturists, the artisans (46 per cent) and merchants (7 per cent) together were in the majority in Debrecen (Balogh 1973: 78). A considerable number of people of higher qualifications lived in the city. Townson also spoke with several of these, who had studied in universities in England and Scotland. In the Calvinist college of the town, the upper grade of which Townson regarded to be a university, there were altogether 1600 persons studying, including the junior pupils (Townson 1797: 231).

The most prominent feature of "ruralness" was the spacious location of buildings and the dominance of single-storey houses. When assessing these facts one should take into account that in 19th-century Budapest too the single-storey buildings were dominant and the lesser rural nobility also usually lived in single-storey houses, sometimes roofed with reed or straw.

In the 1930's the geographer Tibor Mendöl conducted a detailed survey of the spatial distribution of rural and urban architectural forms in 27 agro-towns of the Plain. His maps show an overwhelming dominance of rural forms: urban functions and urban architecture appear usually only as small islands in the centers of the settlements. The criteria used by Mendöl in differentiating rural and urban parts of the settlements mirror contemporary conditions and notions on the Plain. Rural quarters were characterized by one-storey houses in peasant style, standing at right-angles to the street, with spacious farm-yards and economic out-buildings. Houses standing parallel to the street and forming a closed unbroken façade displayed the urban aspirations and urban occupations of the owners, and were classified by Mendöl as a "small town residential area". In some areas the "rural" and the

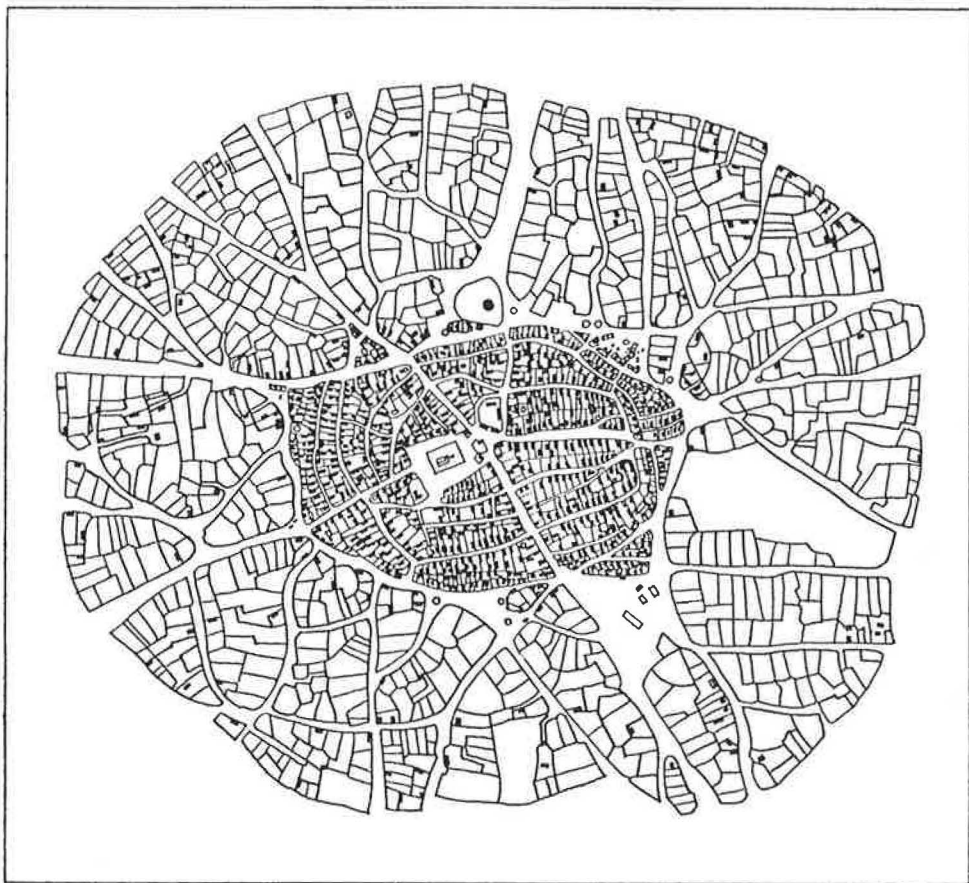


Fig. 3. The map of Hajduböszörmény in 1782 (population: 6,304). The agro-town Böszörmény was re-populated in 1609 by peasant-soldiers called "hajdu". It is an often quoted example of the "divided" settlements of the Plain, in which the farm-yards were segregated from the residential area. In the 17th century, the densely built-up inner residential quarters were enclosed by a fosse. The residential area was surrounded by the zone of the spacious farm-yards. The shape of the wide, outward broadening radial streets is explained by the fact that the herds, continuously growing in their numbers, were driven through these streets to the pasture which surrounds the town. (After Györffy 1942 (1926) and den Hollander 1980.)

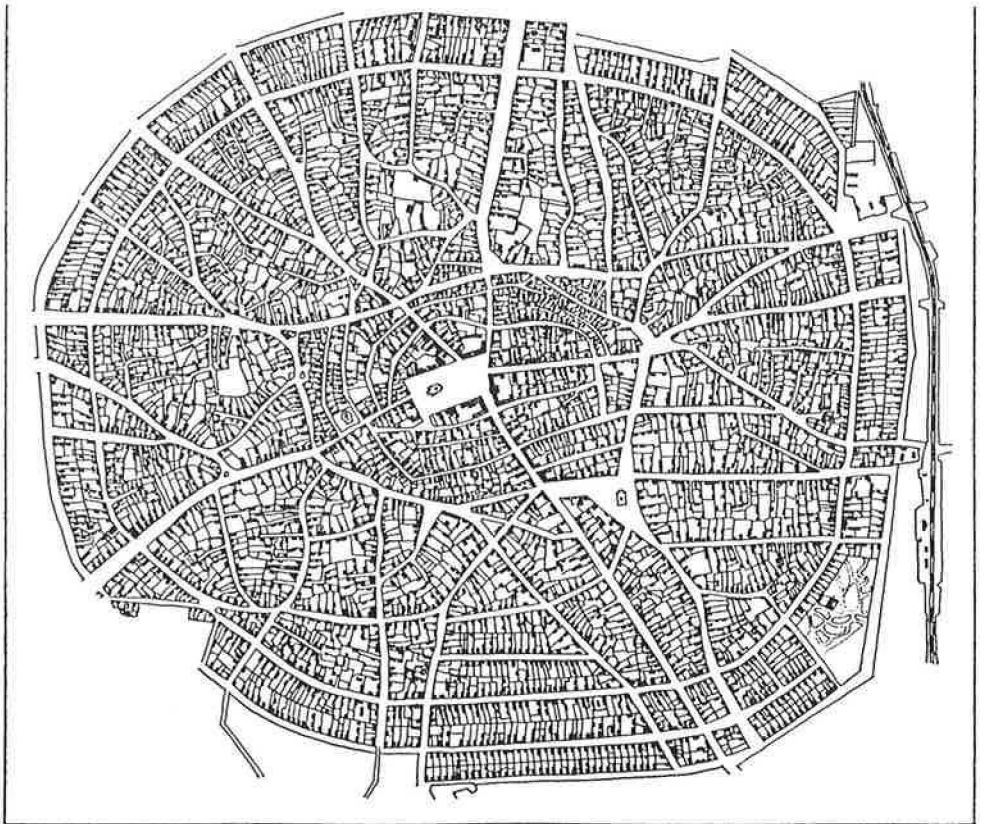
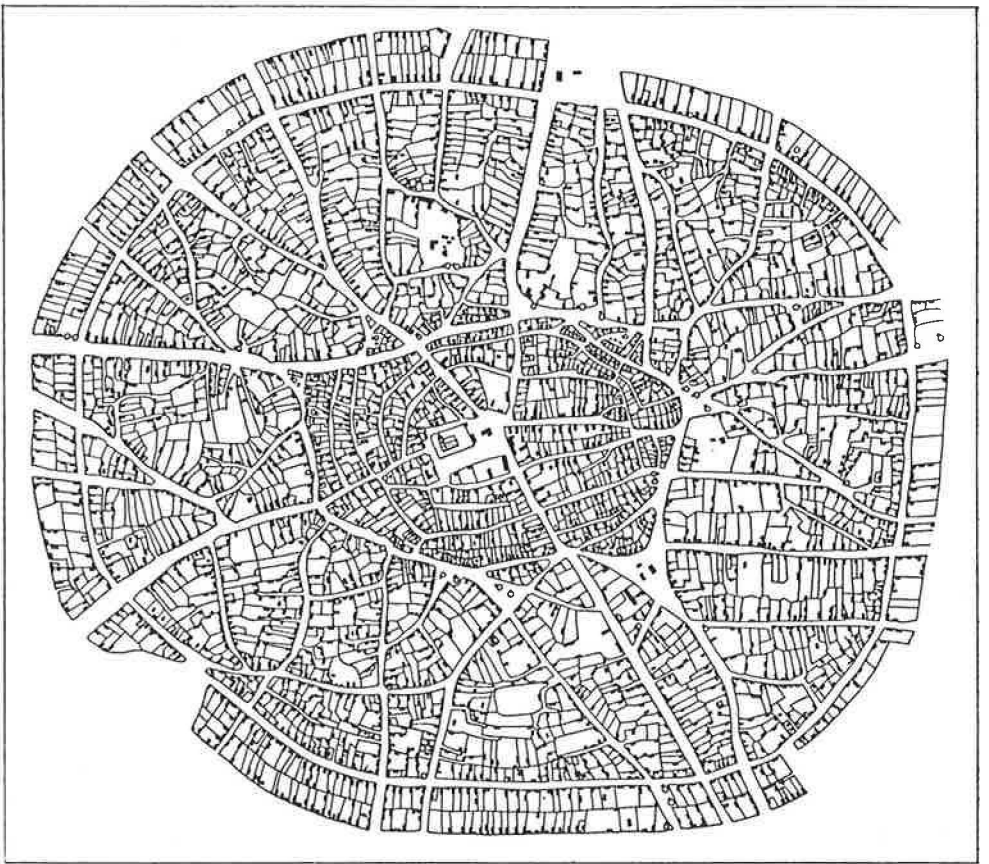
Fig. 4. Map of Hajduböszörmény in 1842 (population in 1839: 15,790). The former separation of dwelling-house and farm-yard disappeared, the growing population constructed houses in the zone of farm-yards. Around the town, new house building-sites were measured out from the pasture. (After Györffy 1942 (1926) and den Hollander 1980.)

Fig. 5. Map of Hajduböszörmény in 1910 (population: 28,159). The building-up of the territory is much denser than on the previous map. The houses, however, constitute an unbroken and closed façade along the streets only in the center, around the main square and along the main streets. At the eastern skirts of the town, the railroad station, opened in 1885, can be seen. (After Györffy 1942 (1926) and den Hollander 1980.)

"small town residential" arrangements were mixed, forming a transitory type. The "small town center" was characterized by shops and offices, mostly in single-storey buildings. In small agro-towns, this area was limited to the main market-place. Real "urban architectural

forms", multi-storied office buildings, specialized shops, and large tenement-houses formed spatially significant units only in the "real" cities of the Plain (in Debrecen, Szeged, Kecske-mét etc.).

Mendöl was interested to find out how the



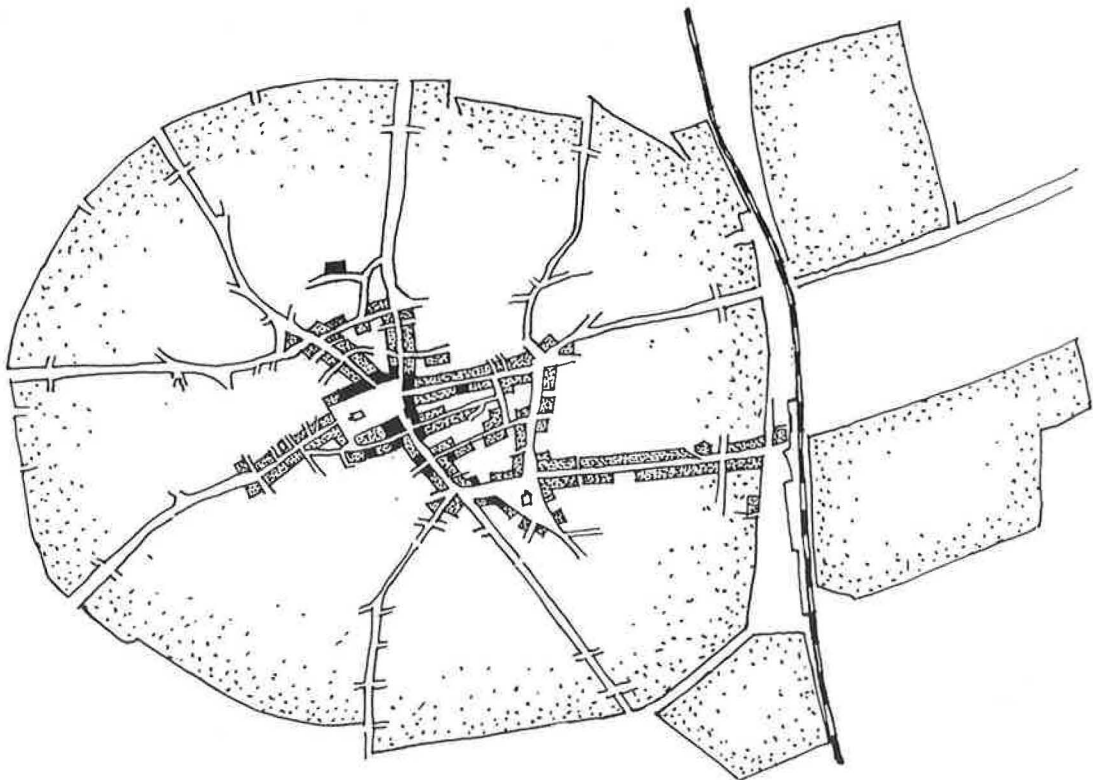


Fig. 6. Distribution of urban and rural architectural forms (defined according to local norms) in Hajdúböszörmény in the 1930's (population in 1930: 28 914). Simplified map, based on Tibor Mendöl's more detailed survey (Mendöl 1936).

hierarchical relation between urban center and rural hinterland worked in the Plain. Apparently, the agro-towns were not "central places" (in the sense of Christaller's theory) since there were no villages around them; they could not therefore fulfill central functions for the latter units. The contradiction between urban theory and the reality of agro-towns was removed by Mendöl in the following way: We may assume – he suggested – that the enormously big farming population of the agro-town is an amalgamation of the inhabitants of several villages. If these villages were existing separately, they would develop a market-center – a small country town – among themselves. The little urban nucleus of the agro-town might be identified with this virtual market center. Thus in the agro-town the rural hinterland and the central area are united in a

single settlement structure. In accordance with this hypothesis, the urban nucleus was usually separated by clear-cut boundarylines from the rural quarters of the agro-town.

The territory of the agro-towns was utilized according to a zonal pattern. The settlement was surrounded by the "inner pasture" where the herds of milk cows, of draught animals and of pigs were turned out each day. Further away, this pasture was followed by the zone of arable land, either used in a common crop rotation system or in separate sections. Next to this, there were plots of arable land and meadows held in private property, and finally the "outer pasture" where the herds were kept on the pastures from spring to autumn grazed. Thus, the built-up area of the town had its limits drawn with a sharp, definite line even as late as the 1950's. The outer row of houses

faced the barren pasture across the road surrounding the town (cf. fig. 1). In other agrotowns vineyards and vegetable gardens were distributed in the proximity of the settlement. In the 19th century Debrecen also had its vineyards on the periphery of the town. In the 18th century, particularly in the northern part of the Plain, the residential areas of several agrotowns were surrounded by the zone of the farm-yards (cf. fig. 3). In the inner part there were only dwelling-houses. In these settlement, the separation of house and farm-yard deeply influenced the life of the entire local society. Men slept in the stables of the outer zone beside their valuable horses which they were fond of, while the town houses were used only by the women, children and old people who lived there continuously (cf. Györfy 1942 (1926), Hofer 1965, Fél-Hofer 1969: 79–93). On winter evenings men gathered to talk around the open fire-place in the stables. Among the wealthy, land-owning burghers of the agrotowns it was mainly the servant or the adolescent son who stayed in the outer stable, the heads of the family being tied to the town house by the public and social life of the town. In the outer farmyards trees were grown and vegetables were also planted, while hay and straw were stacked up. Thus, as in the Mediterranean, the outer farmyards gave a fresh green surrounding to a number of agrotowns. On the other hand, the separation of economic activities and buildings from the houses lent a special urban feature to the inner residential quarters, though the houses themselves had a rural appearance. (This separation was common even in the villages of the Northern Plain, cf. Fél-Hofer 1969: 33–38).

Finally, the *tanya*'s, meaning scattered, isolated homesteads in the fields, used and inhabited seasonally or during the whole year, were an organic component of the image of the agrotowns of the Plain. *Tanya*'s should be definitely distinguished from the *masseria*'s and *cortijo*'s within the terrain of Mediterranean agrotowns, as the latter were manors of *latifundia*. In contrast to these, the *tanya*'s of the Plain were built by farmers from the towns. In the vast fields of the big agrotowns a large number of *tanya*'s were established: at Kecskemét

and Hódmezővásárhely they numbered more than 5000 at the beginning of this century (cf. Erdei 1943, den Hollander 1947, 1960–61, 1980, Hoffmann 1972, Rác 1980, Orosz 1980, Pölöskei-Szabad 1980).

The development of the agro-town system in the Plain

In Hungary, the stratum or class of serf-peasants, living in feudal society under similar conditions evolved during the 12th and 13th centuries. At that time the Plain was covered by a network of small peasant villages just as it was in other parts of the country (Szabó 1966, Maksay 1971, 1978, 1985).

In the second part of the 14th century, many villages were deserted all over Europe as a consequence of the Black Death and the crisis of economic production. In Hungary, far from the seas, the plague caused relatively minor damage, yet the effects of depopulation can be observed. Due to the inadequacy of sources it is difficult to give an exact picture of the losses, but it is thought that the proportion of deserted villages was much greater in the Plain (occasionally as high as 70 per cent) than elsewhere (where it averaged 15 to 20 per cent cf. Szabó 1966: 177, Maksay 1979: 82–83, 1985). From this period on, the development of network of the Plain turned off from the rest of the Carpathian Basin; the network itself became more and more "wide-meshed", i.e. sparse and thin.

At that period several villages were granted the right to hold markets and limited urban privileges; they became *oppida*. The landlords were interested in the creation and development of *oppida* under their jurisdiction, and they organised their big landed estates around *oppida* as centres (Fügedi 1974). While the villages became depopulated and even in the surviving ones the population often decreased, the *oppida* grew larger. To highlight the exceptionally quick career of an *oppidum*, the case of Debrecen may provide a good example. The original extension of its fields was only 1710 hectares in the early 14th century. Its landlords, great barons holding high offices of the kingdom, began to organize the estate of Debrecen



Fig. 7. The 'boulevard' separating the old settlement area and the outer zone of the building-sites measured out in the early 19th century (cf. picture 4), in 1954. Photo: Tamás Hofer.

at that time. They subordinated the villages to their estate management at Debrecen but, in addition, they even encouraged the population of nearby villages to move into Debrecen. The land of these villages was at first mortgaged or leased to the town; later it became the permanent property of Debrecen. The town itself purchased land. Its area was already 40,000 hectares at the end of the 14th century, and more than 48,000 hectares by the early 15th century (Balogh 1976). Of this land, they must have used at least 17,000 to 20,000 hectares as pasture and it is very likely that the inhabitants of Debrecen were already engaged in large scale animal husbandry at this time. During subsequent centuries the territory of Debrecen grew with the area of rented *puszta*'s (the fields of depopulated villages) and reached the extent of 100,000 to 130,000 hectares, and by the 19th century it was consolidated at 93,000 hectares. In this vast territory, archaeological excavations and historical records identify the location of exactly 50 deserted medieval villages, 22 with churches among them, and of two monasteries.

In the 14th–15th centuries large scale cattle-ranching developed on the pastures of the Plain. In Hungary a new cattle species was

bred, which was larger than the European average, and with big horns. It soon became very popular in foreign markets. Already in the 15th century the most important constituents of Hungarian export was cattle driven on foot in large numbers towards Vienna, Nuremberg and Venice (cf. Makkai 1971, 1978, Westermann 1979, Hofer 1985). Cattle and sheep, also playing an important role in export, were raised on the Plain. In the *oppida* of the Plain a significant and well-to-do stratum of cattle breeders, entrepreneurs and cattle-dealers appeared, who could accumulate considerable capital and give an impetus to urban development. Hungarian historians are reluctant to talk about the possible causal relationship between the massive decay of villages in the Plain, their transformation into pasture and the cattle-breeding boom. But in my view the "cattle mono-culture" (cf. Hofer 1985) may have had a significant role in that the *oppida* were interested in the lease and acquisition of an increasing number of *puszta*'s, ultimately in this way contributing to the destruction of the medieval settlement network.

In the 16th century, the struggle against the Osman Turks' advance from the Balkans extended over the Plain as well. After the fall of

Fig. 8. A street in Hajdúböszörmény, in 1954.
Photo: Tamás Hofer.



Buda, the capital (1541), a great part of the Plain fell under Turkish military occupation and administration. The settlement network decayed partly as a result of the fights, and partly as a consequence of the rather heavy Turkish system of taxation. The cattle-breeding agro-towns, however, were in a privileged position: they paid their taxes directly to the Turkish treasury and no Turkish garrison or Turkish administrator was housed in them. This situation was presumably partly due to the nature of cattle-ranching itself. At the end of the 16th century in some years as many as two hundred thousand cattle were driven to the West from the Plain under Turkish occupation. The Turks collected a duty on the cattle up to ten per cent of its value. The royal Hungarian (Habsburg) authorities did the same on the other side of the border. The Turks wanted to maintain this significant source of their income (cf. Szakály 1971).

The towns administered their internal affairs almost as independent city-states, as republics. Between the rivers Danube and Tisza the alliance of the "Three Towns" (Kecskemét, Nagykörös, Cegléd) independently meted out justice, even pronouncing death sentences, and maintained armed troops for their defence. La-

ter, in the 18th and 19th centuries those settlements which survived the Turkish occupation played a decisive role in formulating the cultural profile of the entire Plain.

Land used by the agro-towns had grown tremendously. *Pusztas* were rented within a radius of 40 to 50 kms or even further away (simultaneously from the Turkish as well as from the Hungarian landlords, since Hungarian administration and feudal rights remained in force on Turkish territory as well, in the form of a specific dual rule). The *pusztas* which were rented for a long time became attached to the adjoining fields of the agro-towns; this is how such giant dimensions have evolved (in the decade following 1910 the fields belonging to Szeged occupied 764 sq kilometres, to Debrecen 956 sq kilometres and to Kecskemét 939 sq kilometres, cf. den Hollander 1960–61: 75). In my view, an extremely important element in the development of the agro-town system was the fact that the towns were interested in possessing huge areas of land because of the extraordinarily long "operational radius" of their agriculture (large-scale ranching; hay-making, wintering and winter grazing on distant meadows; seasonal, itinerant cultivation on scattered plots). They were interested in develop-



Fig. 9. The zonal land-use pattern of Hódmezővásárhely, at the end of the 18th century. The town is surrounded by the 'inner pasture', then follows the broad zone of privately owned holdings (used as ploughland and meadow) and the 'outer pasture'. The *pusztá* Derekegyháza was the property of Count Károlyi's estate, with a manor and a castle in its centre. (After *Hódmezővásárhely története*, Vol. I., a reconstruction based on Ernő Tárkány-Szücs' work.)

ing the extensive uninhabited space between the agro-towns. Later in the 18th century, the cattle boom ended and the utilization of land also changed, but the settlement network remained the same due to its internal stability and inertia (i.e. due to the vested interests of communities and landlords in the preservation of the existing pattern of land-ownership).

In my opinion, there is a close connection between the emergence of the agro-town system and the extensive agriculture of the 16th and 17th centuries, which demanded huge territories for cultivation. This hypothesis can be supported by contrary examples from other areas

of Hungary. During the period of Turkish wars, villages were devastated in great numbers west of the Danube, too. Here, however, the *pusztá*'s (the fields of the deserted villages) were not incorporated into the "long-range" agricultural production systems of some surviving settlements. Here, after the Turks were expelled (1686–1691), the network of villages was restored.

After the expulsion of the Turks in the early 18th century, great regions in the southern part of the Plain were completely uninhabited. Several scholars have independently identified frontier conditions on the Plain in the sense of

Turner's thesis (den Hollander 1947, 1960–61, 1975; McNeill 1964; Makkai 1970; cf. Hofer 1985). In the devastated regions, certain settlements became populated by a spontaneous migration of peasants, while others were settled by the organized efforts of the landlords and of the state. Except for the southernmost zone, the re-settlement resulted in the creation of new (newly populated) agro-towns, and the medieval network of villages was not reconstructed.

With the return of Hungarian public administration, attempts were made to restore the feudal rights of landlords and the bonds of the "second serfdom". These efforts encountered difficulties: the surviving settlements acquired a great degree of autonomy and self-government under Turkish occupation and the new settlements were often granted similar privileges to attract settlers to deserted places. Furthermore, a considerable part of the Plain belonged to free peasant districts, such as the towns of the peasant soldiers called *hajdu* near Debrecen and the 23 settlements of the Jász and Kun districts, whose inhabitants were also free peasants obliged to do military service. The agro-towns under the authority of landlords usually settled their obligations by paying rent in one sum; thus the inhabitants did not perform *corvée*, and they were exempt from direct local control by the landlord's bailiffs. From the mid-18th century onwards, when free land was becoming more and more scarce and opportunities for migration diminished, the large estates improved their position: they established their own manorial farms and by modifying and cancelling contracts, they tried to press the inhabitants of the agro-towns to perform *corvée* and to make them personally dependent serfs. Regionally the weight and significance of the large estates became most oppressive in the southwestern part of the Plain – in Békés, Csongrád and Csanád counties. Later this region was called the "Stormy Corner", as it was here that the agrarian socialist movement was strongest and where the bitterest conflicts broke out between the *latifundia* and the agricultural proletariat.

The aristocratic landlords themselves did not live in the agro-towns. Their palaces were in

Budapest, in Vienna, or occasionally on some of their *puszta*'s. The landlords of Hódmezővásárhely (which had 26 thousand inhabitants and 75 thousand hectares of land in 1825), the Count Károlyi family only had a single-storeyed "inspector's house" in the town, with a residential part for the family of the count. The most significant buildings of the agro-towns were the churches, occasionally the country or district halls and the town halls, usually with a prominent tower, where constant vigil was kept against fire.

From the 18th century onwards the differentiation of rural society accelerated all over the country. Land held in villeinage was fragmented due to the system of partible inheritance; the proportion of landless cottars and day-labourers grew quickly. These processes were more pronounced in the agro-towns, where social stratification was more accentuated. At the top, even in towns under the direct administration of manorial estates, the wealthy serfs could accumulate greater richness than anybody else in the villages. At Hódmezővásárhely Count Károlyi had such a serf, who had 14 full units of land (*telek*) held in villeinage (about 360 hectares), and another serf, who as an entrepreneur in animal husbandry, employed 40 herdsman and shepherds and had one thousand cattle, one thousand sheep and about 300 horses on the pastures (Hódmezővásárhely története 1984: 558). In the free towns the land was owned by people having the rights of burghers or by the descendants of the primary settlers who acquired the privileges. When later the commons were subdivided and allotted to private owners, this land also got into their hands. Later immigrants and the landless felt themselves dispossessed, and sometimes heated debates on the distribution of land led to disturbances. (Only a few towns allocated or sold land to immigrants).

Deep cleavages divided the people of the agro-towns: the landowner and the landless, the common people and the "true-born" privileged families. Noblemen also settled in agro-towns, and the wealthiest *gazda*'s could also acquire titles of nobility. Some of their sons might become civil servants or join the professions. Thus the agro-towns produced their own



Fig. 10. An old-style peasant *tanya* (homestead) in the fields of Kiskunfélegyháza, 1905. Photo: László Madarassy.

local elite and intelligentsia, mainly from their own agricultural population, from the farmers to whom the others were continually linked as relatives.

At the bottom of local society, the day-labourers and servants became more removed from the land owning strata than in the villages. The landless were more numerous in the agro-towns. In 1786 the proportion of cottars was 33 per cent in the population of Hungary under feudal jurisdiction, but in the already mentioned Hódmezővásárhely it was 57 per cent and by 1847 it grew to 70 per cent. In the villages cottars and day-labourers were attached to landowning peasants by enduring personal ties of patron-client relations. In the agro-towns these relations functioned more impersonally. At Hódmezővásárhely e.g. there had been a "market of men" since 1790, where day-labourers offered their labour every morning and the local farmers hired their farm

hands. The agrarian proletariat of the agro-towns became more organized through the practice of seeking employment in groups for river control, railway construction, earth works, share-cropping, and from the end of the 19th century onwards (in addition to share-cropping) they worked with threshing machines, etc.

During the 18th and 19th centuries the population of the Plain grew quickly and the importance of the Plain grew speedily within Hungary. In 1720 the density of population on the Plain was 5 to 10 people per sq kilometre as against the national average of 29.4. By the mid-19th century the proportions had become balanced by a density between 45 and 53, but in 1910 the averages of 71 to 84 on the Plain were above the national averages of 64.6 (cf. Rácz 1980: 102, Hoffmann 1972, 88–99, Hanák 1972: 357–362).

This population increase was allowed due



Fig. 11. *Tanya* in the fields of Hajduböszörmény, 1954. Photo: Tamás Hofer.

flexible changes in agricultural production and the settlement network. Grain-farming fast expanded to the detriment of the pastures. The regulation of rivers and the drainage of marshlands contributed considerable to the increase of arable areas. Particularly after the construction of railways, wheat had become the main agricultural export as well. During the wheat boom between 1850 and 1870 almost all arable land was put under the plough in the Plain.

Such an expansion of arable land was made possible by the establishment of scattered *tanya*'s. In the wide fields of the agro-towns during earlier centuries, huts and sheepfolds as well as herdsmen's corrals, and on distant meadows shelters and stables were erected for the wintering of animals. From the second part of the 18th century onwards, however, new types of buildings appeared on the fields, which were increasingly associated with the cultiva-

tion of cereals. At first, only men stayed in the fields during peak periods of agricultural work and for wintering the animals. Prior to the spread of maize, potato, and fodder beet, etc., requiring hoeing, women practically had no role whatsoever in the work in the fields. In the early decades of the last century, at harvest time, hardly any men could be found in the agro-towns; every man was out in the fields. But from the beginning of the 19th century onwards, a growing number of entire families moved to the *tanya*'s for permanent residence. Either the married son went, while the "seat" of the family remained in the town, or the *gazda* himself moved out with all his family, giving up the house in town. Public administration strictly forbade these moves, but to absolutely no avail. Around 1850 10 to 20 (and in some cases 30 to 40) per cent of the population of agro-towns already lived in isolated *tanya*'s. By the turn of the century, this emigra-

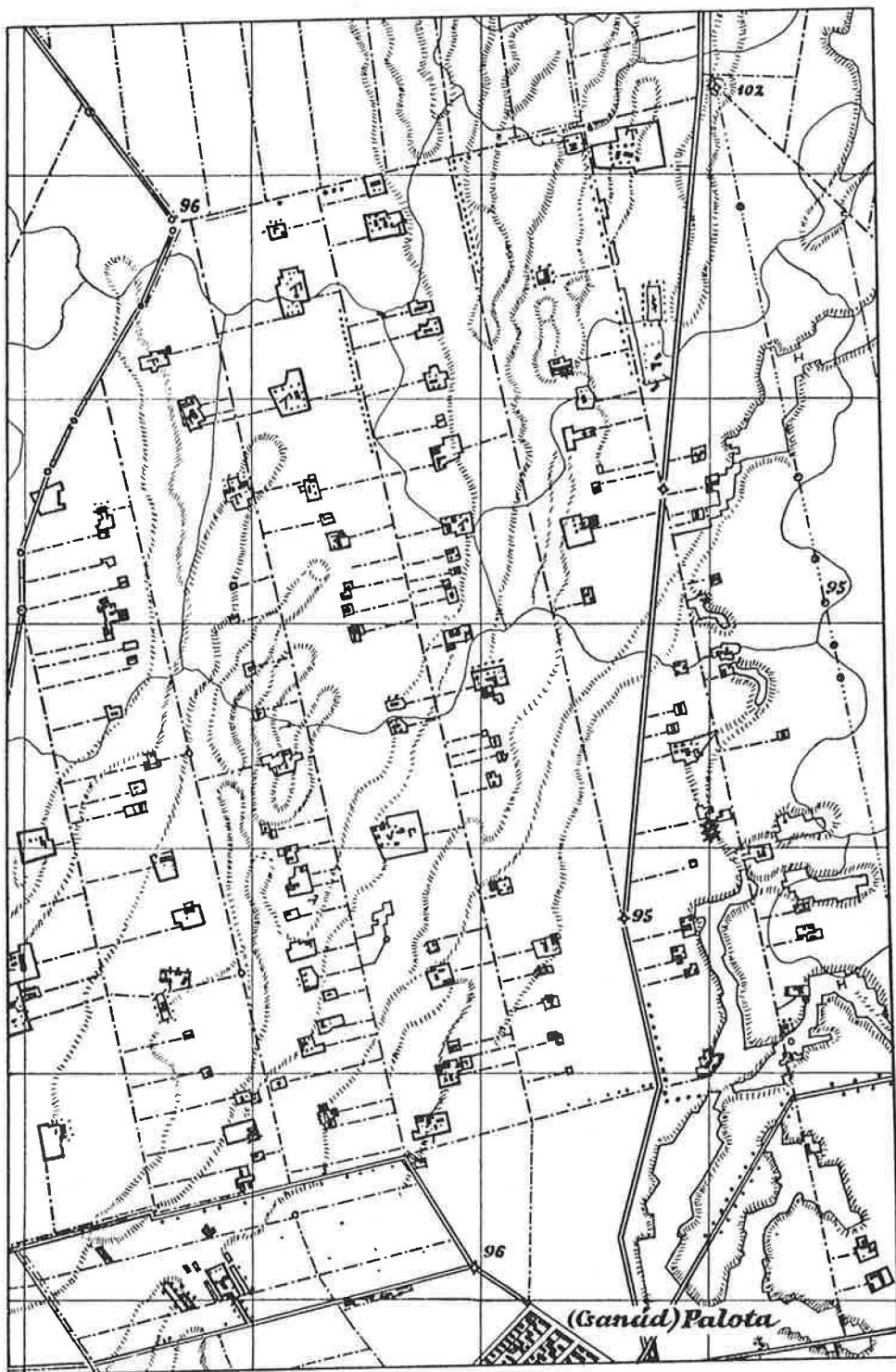


Fig. 12. Part of the cadastral map of the fields of Makó, showing a great number of *tanya*'s. (After den Hollander 1980.)

tion reached almost 50 per cent, for instance, at Kecskemét, where intensive viticulture, fruit-growing and horticulture developed on the sandy soil. In 1943, when Niemeier compared the Plain with Andalusia, Sicily and Southern Italy, he regarded the system of *tanya*'s as a very positive feature which enabled a more intensive utilisation of the land and the sustenance of a larger population (Niemeier 1943: 342). In the meantime, the *tanya*-system caused serious social problems in Hungary, because problems in medical care as well as educational, cultural and social services for the population living on *tanya*'s were not adequately solved: on many *tanya*'s poverty and the narrowing of social contacts could be experienced (cf. den Hollander 1947, 1960–61). Assessing this situation, den Hollander qualified the Plain as a frontier region where development was stuck at the phase of extensive cultivation (cf. den Hollander 1975).

In the beginning the *tanya*-system forged a close link between the town and the seasonal cultivators of the fields. But the permanent migration of complete families to the *tanya*'s brought about a social and cultural rift between *tanya*-society and the mother town. *Tanya* residents continued to visit the church in the town, they had their weddings celebrated there, and carried their dead to the town cemeteries. Administratively, they belonged to the town hall, they found market and shops in the town, but their customs and behaviour, their dress, etc. increasingly shifted away from the ways of the town. People moved to the *tanya*'s from other settlements as well, usually from more backward rural regions. In statistics this was indicated by the fact that the proportion of Roman Catholics in the population of the *tanya*-region around the Protestant agro-towns was growing (Csalog 1980). A difference in prestige developed between townspeople and those of the *tanya*'s, with the latter obtained a reputation of being uncivilised and uncouth.

Culture and ethos of the agro-town

On a cultural map of Hungary in the 19th and 20th centuries, we might locate cultural types

linked to social strata, to categories of settlement (villages, cities) and to regions. Where in this diversified picture, can we place the lifestyle and culture of the agro-towns of the Plain? What have been the affiliations and associations, and on the other hand, the cleavages and contrasts, which have defined its position among other cultural types or subcultures? In what direction was the "agro-town culture" moving in this changing "cultural environment" during the observed two hundred years? Only a sketchy answer can be given to these questions in the following section. First, I will present how these questions were raised and answered earlier in Hungarian ethnology and sociology.

Hungarian "national ethnography" as was the case in other Central, Northern and Eastern European countries in the 19th and early 20th century focused its attention on the "traditional" culture of the peasantry and was engaged in reconstructing the "ethnic cultural heritage". Traits related to industrialization and modernization, like factory-made utensils and urban manners, were considered cosmopolitan and were excluded from ethnographic research (cf. Hofer 1984: 135, 142). Thus, Hungarian ethnographers emphasized the peasant features of agro-town culture. For instance, in the perception of Hungarian "folk art", the products of artisans living in towns of the Plain and working for *civis*-peasant customers, occupied a distinguished place. Nevertheless, it was noted that the "folk culture" of the agro-towns differed from that of villages in adjacent regions. In contrast to the colourful peasant costumes of some rural areas, women in the agro-towns wore more urban dresses with floor-length skirts and modest colouring. In the mid-19th century, observers described that the wives and daughters of *civis*-peasants held parasols in their gloved hands, while the male members of the family were dressed according to peasant fashion in wide trousers of white linen (cf. fig. 13; Kresz 1956: 183–184).

The ethnographers were the first to describe the settlement pattern of the Plain, the segregation of dwelling-houses and farmyards, the isolated *tanya*'s and the zonal pattern of land use. The vast pastures, the large herds and the



Fig. 13. Inhabitants of Kecskemét in 1852. In contrast to the men who are dressed in a rather rural style (wide white linen trousers, long sheepskin cloak), the women's costumes have a more urban appearance (especially in the case of the socially higher standing woman to the right, with long skirt, fashionable bodice). (After Kresz 1956.)

life-style of mounted herdsmen recalled the memory of the ancient nomadic Hungarians. Even grain-farming on the Plain – ethnographers pointed out as early as the beginning of the 19th century – differed very much from the peasant farming of surrounding regions. It was characterized by a more mobile work organization and relatively little labour-input and therefore it was suitable for the cultivation of distant fields. The harvested wheat was not bound in sheafs, but stacked up like hay: the stacks were then hauled to the threshing-floor where the grain was threshed by the feet of horses, no barns were constructed, etc. The image of a special folk culture of the Plain was taking shape (cf. Tálasi 1946): This culture appeared to be more traditional and ancient than the culture of the surrounding rural regions – due to its extensive traits. The impression was created that it was only the agro-towns of the Plain which preserved the “most authentic” old Hungarian folk culture.

In the 1930's and 1940's under the shadow of German political expansion and the Second World War, a vivid debate flourished among Hungarian sociologists, ethnographers and historians with regard to the problems of modernization and the future of the peasantry. Participants in this debate referred to the agro-towns of the Plain from different angles. The sociologist Ferenc Erdei, who was the son of a peasant family living in an agro-town, held the view that agro-towns surrounded by *tanya*'s offer a special Hungarian way to accomplish urbanization and the bourgeois transformation of the peasantry without a painful breakaway from peasant traditions (Erdei 1942, Dénes 1980). German scholars raised the question whether there was any genuine Hungarian urban development in the Carpathian Basin, or whether all cities were to be attributed to foreign (mostly German) settlers and influences from medieval times on. Hungarian historians and ethnographers pointed to the example of Debrecen, which evolved from peasant villages into a city in the 16th century without any foreign immigration (cf. Mendöl 1944). In those years, research on the history of agro-towns was closely linked to questions of national identity.

The character of the agro-towns and scholarly views about them can be interpreted in the context of Hungarian society at the time (the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th). After the bourgeois revolution of 1848 the structure of Hungarian society was characterized by the coexistence of two social pyramids. One of the pyramids was constituted by the old feudal structure which was dissolving very slowly (with the aristocracy and the owners of large estates at the top, the lesser nobility turning into civil servants in the middle, and the peasantry at the bottom). Alongside this, the new bourgeois-capitalist pyramid was built partly by immigrant foreigners (Germans, Jews, etc.) and partly by elements who lived outside the former feudal order (on top: the elite of capitalist entrepreneurs; then the petty bourgeoisie; and finally at the bottom: industrial workers and the proletariat). Thus, the new strata were not emerging within the old stratification system. The two (feudal and capitalist) “wings” of society existed side by side without forming an organic unity. On the same “floors” (levels) of the society, for a long time there had been barriers between the feudal and the bourgeois elite, between petty nobles and petty bourgeois', between the rural and urban common people. In other words, Hungarian society was divided not only by class differences but also by the historical differences between these status groups (cf. Hanák 1972: 366–378).

What was the position of the agro-towns within this structure? The old free “real” towns of the Plain, like Debrecen and Kécskémét, in the 18th–19th century lost a great deal of their former autonomy and broad commercial and cultural contacts; they became increasingly agrarian and adjusted themselves to the feudal pyramid. When the modern industrial, bourgeois urban development began, they watched it with aversion, dislike and a lack of comprehension. Inhabitants of the smaller agro-towns tried to imitate the example of the larger ones, and their social and cultural aspirations remained within the feudal “pyramid”.

In other words, in the 19th century the agro-towns of the Plain became incorporated by two

kinds of urbanization. Two social "pyramids" evolved within them as well. The old elite of the agro-towns – the landowner farmers, the office-bearers and the immigrant noblemen – tried to preserve the old order, though gradually an increasing number of them joined the other camp. People on the "feudal" side tried to imitate the behaviour of the nobility, not taking into consideration that the nobility in turn slowly adjusted itself to cosmopolitan bourgeois fashions. Thus, the inhabitants of the agro-towns (as well as rural peasants) adopted cultural features which were just then being given up by the nobility (e.g. the braided garment made of dark broad-cloth worn with top-boots and knee-breeches). When we read that around the turn of the century the wealthy *civis*' of Debrecen and other agro-towns took pride in their teams of five or seven good horses, in the fine harnesses decorated with silver studding, and held lavish weddings and name-days, we might be reminded of similar customs and similar ways of representation among the noblemen in former periods of time.

In 1837 a lawyer, the descendant of an old bookseller and bookbinder family of Debrecen, published an article on the inhabitants of that town. According to him they could be divided into two groups. One of these was a small group consisting of educated merchants and members of the professions who used to travel, to read books and journals and who adjusted themselves to the current fashion. These people resembled the inhabitants of other (non-agrarian) towns; thus they were representatives of the new bourgeoisie. The overwhelmingly large second group preserved the tradition of their ancestors: its members were grave and even sombre, the urban ease or the "flexibility of city-dwellers" was entirely missing among them, although they were hospitable and lavish as hosts (Telegi Kovách 1837/1985). According to the author's view with the passage of time the entire population would shift to the first group, a view which was passionately criticized. Yet the prophecy has materialised. During the next hundred years, the traditional agrarian majority called *civis* was pressed back as new institutions were established in Debrecen and a new population

migrated to the town. The *civis* population gradually lost its positions in the town leadership, it lost its grasp of new social and cultural developments, and ultimately it had become a reserved, self-contained, anachronistic peasant group within the bourgeois town (cf. Balogh 1947, 1973).

In smaller agro-towns, the transformation set in at a later date and proceeded more slowly. Among the agro-towns mentioned in this paper – Hajduböszörmény and Hódmezővásárhely – the towns of the former Jász and Kun Districts preserved their basically agrarian character until the 1960's.

Cultural affiliation (to the "agro-town" style or to the new "bourgeois" style) was expressed by dresses, through subtle signs. At the end of the century the artisans of Orosháza, for example, wore dark cloth suits and shoes. The members of the board of the craftsmen's association wore stiff collars and cuffs and neckties at their meetings. The knee-breeches and boots were looked down upon by them as peasant-like and backward. On the other hand, members of the Lutheran presbytery wore just this peasant-like broad-cloth garment and boots, as they were the representatives of the agrarian majority. The craftsmen and the *gazda*'s (farmers) organized their dances separately: from the former ones the "men-in-boots" were scorned off; from the latter ones the same happened to the "men-in-shoes". The garment of *tanya*-dwellers was more old-fashioned than that of townsmen, the rim of the males' hat was broader and women bound their kerchief more tightly. The farmhands serving on the *tanya*'s wore white linen trousers even at a time when for decades nobody wore them in the town. Certain age groups provided exceptions: at marriageable age, for instance, even the daughters of farmers dressed for a few years according to the latest city fashion only to revert later on to the more simple and neutral (neither rural, nor urban) fashion of the "agro-town". Farmhands could also be recognized by their garments: in summer they wore dresses made of cheap grey cotton, in winter yellowish broad-cloth. The lasting survival of the agro-town tradition is indicated by the fact that in the early 1960s about 30 per cent of the men

walking in the streets of Orosháza still wore boots (Fél-Varga 1965).

Despite the social stratification and the simultaneous existence of different life-styles in the agro-towns, these big settlements had from the start a strong local self-consciousness and local patriotism. Regional dialects in Hungary were usually markers of rural people, nowadays even the local elite of the villages does not speak dialect but rather the common literary language. The mobile persons, who wanted to leave the peasantry made conscious efforts to change their speech from dialect into the standard language. In the towns of the Plain, however, usage of the local dialect was a common practice embracing the whole society.

In contrast to the orally transmitted historical legends of the villages, in the agro-towns the memory of the local past, and the myths and legends about the origins of the population, acquired literary elaboration at an early stage, and were included in the curricula of the local schools (cf. Kósa 1985). In contrast to those of villages, the inhabitants of agro-towns were characterized by strong awareness of the historic past; individual families kept in evidence their ancestors sometimes for five, six or more generations. Historical myths of local groups were embodied in festive rituals held in both communal as well as private contexts. An example of the second case: as late as the 1930's, it was customary to perform a soldiers' recruiting dance at wedding feasts in agro-towns of the Kun Free Peasant District. For the participants, it was a reminder of the District's historic past when its privileged inhabitants used to maintain a regiment of hussars for the King. Then young men were attracted to military service by the virtuosly performed recruiting dance (cf. Tálasi 1977: 304–309). (This dance was used for military recruitment for the last time in 1864, when volunteers were enlisted for Maximilian, Emperor of Mexico).

Nowadays, local historical and ethnographic monographs can be regarded as manifestations of the sense of community in agro-towns of the Plain. From the 1960's onwards, the agro-towns one after another had their own history and ethnography published. These books represent significant intellectual and financial

efforts on behalf of the local populations; e.g. the monograph of Orosháza, published in 1965, comprises two volumes of about 1800 pages. Former series of local monographs were published around the turn of the century and later, between the two world wars. The volume of the recent production of monographs in the agro-towns, however, is unparalleled in other regions of Hungary.

Some conclusions

In 1954, Fred Eggan surveyed the British and American attitudes toward comparative studies and argued for the method of controlled comparison (Eggan 1954). In his paper control means "control over the frame of comparison" (i.e. utilization of regions of relatively homogeneous culture, work within social and cultural types) and further, "the controlled situation", "control over the ecology and the historical factors so far as it is possible to do so". Such a comparison on a limited scale might "sharpen hypotheses" and contribute to the better understanding of particular social types.

This paper has a similar aim: it wants to contribute to the understanding of agro-towns, a peculiar type of large agrarian settlement and to "sharpen hypotheses" on their historic background and social effects. The author's "control" over the ecology and historical factors is very incomplete, especially concerning the Mediterranean towns. In spite of that some descriptive generalizations and hypotheses about agro-towns might be delineated.

On the Hungarian Plain the agro-town system replaced a network of small medieval villages. It seems that similar processes occurred in the Mediterranean agro-town regions, too. In the pre-agro-town period – in the Middle Ages, in Southern Italy before the Punic wars – the landscapes were dotted with villages and hamlets placed among the towns (Monheim 1969:16, Niemeier 1935: 53–57, Delano-Smith 1979: 286). The agro-town system came into being through a secondary development, through the disappearance of the small agrarian settlements and through the agglomera-

tion of land and people in and around the towns. Everywhere around the agro-towns, fields and sites of deserted villages can be identified, like the *despoblado*'s in Andalusia, *locationi* in Apulia, *pusztas* in Hungary (Delano Smith 1979).

The gradual destruction of the old settlement network was usually connected with long periods of war, in Andalusia with the *Reconquista*, in Sicily with the expulsion of the Moslems and the wars between the Catalan and Latin barons following it, in Hungary with the advance of the Ottoman Turks. Some Hungarian historians attribute great significance to the Mongolian invasion of 1241–1242 as a factor furthering the expansion of village desertions on the Plain. However, the desertion of the villages was only one aspect of the change. It was equally important that the would-be agro-towns, the surviving huge agrarian settlements, were interested in the acquisition and utilization of the territories of the depopulated villages. The *pusztas* and *despoblado*'s were not abandoned, they became integrated into the long-range agricultural production systems of the agro-towns. In Andalusia, in Apulia and in the Hungarian Plain huge territories were utilized by cattle-ranching and large-scale grazing of sheep. According to the opinion of Jane and Peter Schneider, the pastoral economy had an important role in the transformation of the settlement pattern of Sicily, too (Schneider and Schneider 1976: 27–36, cf. Bhisko 1952, 1969, Hofer 1985). Wilhelm Abel pointed out in another context that large scale cereal production is also a long-range operation and its preponderance can cause a concentration of former small agrarian settlements (Abel 1961).

Ranching and large-scale, market-oriented grain production are all characteristic of the periphery. A frontier situation contributed to their development in Andalusia (cf. Bhisko 1969) as well as in Hungary (cf. den Hollander 1980, Hofer 1985). The frontier by itself means the periphery of the system. By pointing out the subordinate, economically dependent situation of the agro-town regions I refer to the "European economic world system" and the continental division of labour developing from

the early Modern Age (cf. Wallerstein 1974). I think, however, that we might follow back the formation of agro-town regions deeper into the past. A regional specialization appears in European agriculture as early as the 13th century (Duby 1972). The outer regions of the continent lived in this age in 'peripheral feudalisms' which combined barbarian and 'Asiatic' traits (in the sense of the 'Asiatic mode of production') with the feudal models of the central regions (cf. Berend and Ránki 1982: 18). It seems that the evolution of the agro-towns started just under these specific conditions.

Later, the same outer regions were characterized by the long survival and return of feudal-type bonds. In East Central Europe, the early modern age brings back the 'second serfdom' and the latifundia grow and get strengthened. In Southern Europe, as a parallel process, the trend of 'seigneurialization' goes on (de Maddalena 1979, Delano Smith 1976: 94–95). It seems that the long continuity of the agro-town system and the survival of their 'agrarian urbanity' were closely related to the long-lasting feudal characteristics of the respective regional societies.

How can we interpret the "urban ethos" of the Mediterranean agro-towns and the apparent "ruralness" of their Hungarian counterparts? Agro-towns are everywhere superior to villages, because of their more diversified social life and institutions, broader provision of services etc. Agro-town dwellers can easily find justification to look down upon villagers or *tanya*-people. As Blok and Driessen describe, inhabitants of Mediterranean agro-towns are proud of being more civilized and more urban than rural people. For a Hungarian observer, however, it is even more astonishing that urbanites and villagers express their identities in a common urban architectural and cultural idiom. "Physically even the smallest villages in southern Europe are cities writ small", says Boissevain, and Mediterranean Europe is "essentially urban in its overall orientation" (Kenny and Ketzer 1983: VII). The interpretation of the general "ruralness" of the Hungarian Plain (and of other East Central European regions) in contrast to Mediterranean urbanity would need a separate study (which would re-

veal that the relative peripherality might cover very different historic processes and cultural contents). Here, I would like to emphasize the fact that the structural relationship "agro-town: village" not only existed in "urban Mediterranean" but also in "rural East Central European" variants and so it is possible to differentiate between an abstract agro-town model and the traits related to individual regions.

All agro-town regions are backward within their own national societies. We might pose the question what was the role of the agro-town system in the gradual lagging-behind of these areas. Were the agro-towns instrumental in creating backwardness or are they only symptoms of a general disadvantageous situation? Without analysing these complex problems, I offer some observations from the Hungarian Plain. In the 19th century, in the basically agrarian Hungary, the population of the Plain developed faster than the population of the surrounding regions. These people lived mostly in agro-towns and in the *tanya*'s around them. The population of the Plain reached its relatively highest point around 1870. Out of the 20 most populous towns of the country (within the present-day territory), 13 were towns of the Plain (In 1970, only 7 towns of the Plain were among the 20 largest). Since 1870, with incipient large-scale industrialization, the relative position of the Alföld is increasingly deteriorating and even the efforts of a recent settlement-policy could not stop this process. As Enyedi states, the Plain, the core region of the country must be regarded as being backward with regard to the level of production, of per capita income, and of standard of living and urbanization. "It is only a terminological tradition in the language of public administration that agro-towns are still called towns", he says, since these large settlements have nearly no central function and their infrastructure and service sectors are at a low level (Enyedi 1983: 370-396, Lettrich 1965, Vági 1982).

It is conspicuous that in the period of rapid industrialization around the turn of the century, the populous towns of the Plain were not able to attract even the processing of their own agricultural products. The centres of the mill- and food industries were located at the rim

of the Plain, practically outside of the Plain. In Western Hungary, on the so-called Little Hungarian Plain, in an equally agrarian region without mineral resources, the development took another direction. In the hierarchical settlement network around the Northern Danube, on the Plain, we could witness the emergence of several smaller and larger industrial centres. We might assume, that besides the more advantageous transport situation, the settlement network also favoured the initiation of modern industrial city-development.

A very detailed analysis of market relations and market-areas in the Hungary of 1828 (Bácskai & Nagy 1984) revealed that on the Plain nearly no clear-cut market-areas were to be found. The agro-towns to a high degree were self-contained and there were nearly no traditional hierarchical ties of subordination among them. Perhaps this lack of a differentiation contributed to the perpetuation of backwardness. In regions with smaller and bigger villages, country towns and real towns, this hierarchical scale was upwards open-ended, and dynamically developing settlements were able to organize a hinterland around themselves.

On the Plain, however, the agro-towns were more or less self-contained and their growth was based on the intensified utilization of their own territories. When the local agricultural resources were exhausted, the development came to a still-stand. It seems that the more or less equal agro-towns mutually hindered each other in acquiring dynamic central functions and by doing so kept back the development of the whole region. The well-elaborated urban or rural local mythologies and the high self-esteem of the agro-town dwellers came to an ever sharper contradiction to the deteriorating, backward position of the agro-town regions inside their national societies.

Finally, I wish to comment on the frame of the comparison applied in this paper. The case of the agro-towns points to the possibility of comparing genetically and historically unrelated, distant, geographically restricted cultural processes on the basis of their (by and large) analogous position in the European continental economic system. As another example, I quote the emergence of cattle ranching as

a large-scale, market oriented agricultural production system in distant regions. Recent research indicates that ranching appeared in late medieval Andalusia and Allentejo, the Great Hungarian Plain, Podolia and according to a recent hypothesis, in the western British Isles, with strikingly similar equipment and organizational forms (Bhisko 1952, 1969, Hofer 1985, Westermann 1979: 124–136, Otto & Anderson 1986: 678–679). By detecting and analysing such analogous developments, European ethnology might contribute to a better understanding of Europe as a historically changing cultural system.

Notes

The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of professor Brian Juan O'Neill, Lisboa, in retouching a number of linguistic and stylistic points within the final English version of this article.

1. Hungarian literature on agro-towns is variegated and vast, for instance Pölöskei and Szabad (1980), focusing on the isolated homesteads around the agro-towns, quote over 700 books and articles. The references of this paper point at sources of some statements and data but cannot offer a proportionate image of this "agro-town scholarship".
2. Geographically the Plain (Alföld) is a filled-up former sea-bed, its extent is about 100 000 sq kilometres. (As a comparison: the territory of Sicily is 26 000 sq kilometres). Half of this territory is within Hungarian jurisdiction, this paper deals with this part of the Plain. (Southern and Eastern parts of the Plain got under Yugoslavian and Rumanian rule in 1921). From the point of view of economic geography, the Plain is delimited in a slightly different way (Enyedi 1983: 370).
3. According to Erdei, in 1943 33 further "giant villages" or "small agro-towns" were at the threshold of becoming real agro-towns. At this time, 1 150 000 people lived in the 31 agro-towns and in the dispersed homesteads in their fields (Erdei 1943: 66–67).
4. The author got access to Henk Driessen's excellent book "Agro-Town and Urban Ethos in Andalusia" (Nijmegen, 1981) only when this paper was already set. The book discusses in depth several questions touched upon in this paper, like the general urbanity of Andalusia and the Mediterranean, the perception of various degrees of urbanity and the relationship between agro-towns and 'real' cities and metropolitan centres, the secondary moving out of agro-town dwellers into the fields of their home-town etc.

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