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House Owners – Tenants – Lodgers : The Topographical, Economic and Social Issues of Tenement Houses in Medieval Prague

ANNOTATION

Based on the written sources preserved from the 14th and 15th centuries, the presented study attempts to research housing tenancy with an interdisciplinary perspective and the prism of five selected topics: 1. tenancy contracts; 2. town house and its layout through the eyes of history and building history; 3. analysis of the Old Town municipal tax books from the years 1427–1429; 4. analysis of the town tax and the method of its collection in the Old Town of Prague; 5. social rise of lodgers. Two other topics are supplemented: 6. housing tenancy and its influence on the religious and power-administrative organization of the city; 7. social structure of the inhabitants of Prague houses on the specific example of three persons: the owner, the tenant-conventor and the lodger. The Prague conurbation as the centre of the country and the seat of the monarch turns out to have been such an exclusive urban agglomeration that only members of the upper and middle classes of the urban population reached their own property here. Small craftsmen and merchants had to be satisfied only with the tenancy of production and accommodation premises. During the 14th century, the dynamically developing Luxembourg metropolis went through a construction boom. The house plot was densely filled; dozens of new houses were being built not for the owner's stay, but for commercial rent. It is clear that this development significantly affected the architectural appearance and organism of the medieval city.

SUMMARY

It is obvious that in the first decades of the 15th century, relatively wealthy people appeared in the Old Town of Prague who, for various reasons, did not want or could not get their own housing. Although they completely accepted the municipal law, they remained as lodgers at wealthy Old Town house owners, undoubtedly due to high prices of the local properties. Occupants who would be considered middle or upper class in other towns simply did not have enough capital to buy their own house in Prague. This concerned without exception both Christians and Jews, to whom both Christians and Jews rented houses to live inside the Jewish quarter. Among the poorest of the Prague city were included not only the poor, but also little or less wealthy craftsmen. In addition to these inhabitants, journeymen (though not unconditionally), beggars, servants, prostitutes and gamblers (joculatores) lived without their own households. In other Czech and Moravian royal towns, these people lived in huts on the outskirts of the town or in the suburbs.

During the 14th century, the dynamically developing Old Town of Prague probably did not offer much opportunity for accommodation to this urban class. The fierce competition for the lack of vacant housing seems to have forced these people to live either with the burghers, who let them spend the nights with them for a fee, "for God's sake", or to move to the outskirts of Prague's New Town or in the suburbs. Although we lack definite documents, the construction boom recognised by archaeology and building history in Prague's Old Town in almost the entire 14th century reflects the reaction of some enterprising burghers to the influx of new inhabitants into the city. This process was also accelerated by natural disasters, whether fires or devastating floods, which the city had to face almost every year on a regular basis. Inside the city, new residential houses were gradually growing, urban development was densifying, originally large city plots were shrinking with newly built houses, which were not intended only for the residence of the owner and his family, but exclusively for commercial rental purposes. Along with this trend, the structure of the plot and its development also changed. An ideal example of this transformation is the house No. 102/I in the Old Town of Prague and the tenements built here by Křišťan Helm, or the house No. 309/I Na Perštýně. This business fundamentally changes the character and internal layout of the plots, and thus the original Přemyslid buildings and architecture disappear. This long-term trend formed the new appearance of the city, and significantly shaped the urban organism and the layout of the inner space. Already in the Middle Ages, building new tenement houses was a very lucrative business, to which, as it is today, the old one had to give way, and which brought considerable profit to house owners.

In contrast to previous studies, it turns out that the Prague conurbation developed dynamically during the 14th and in

the first half of the 15th centuries and thus influenced the lives of its inhabitants. Analysis of the Old Town municipal tax books from 1427 and 1429 showed that the housing tenancy was not interrupted even by the outbreak of the Hussite revolution (1419–1434). On the contrary. Also in the Hussite city, with large property transfers, housing tenancy was sought by both tenants-conventores and lodgers-inquilini. Even the Hussite revolution failed to disrupt the basic economic principles of the urban society functioning. Medieval man had the same feelings and needs as we have today. The life strategies of particular individuals were different. Also during the 14th and 15th centuries, a large number of new immigrants came to Prague, looking for better living conditions, or the residents moved within the city quarters for the same reasons. By accepting this human individuality, we can better understand not only the social world of the rich, but also of other less affluent inhabitants of the city. These, due to their large numbers, had the same influence on the development of the medieval urban community, if not larger.

Fig. 1. Registration of a tenancy agreement in which the New Town burgher Mařík rented his house located on Charles Square in Prague's New Town to two out-of-town tradesmen who wanted to take part in the display of the saint relics in the Corpus Christi Chapel. Greater Manual of the Councillors (1387–1399), Prague City Archives, Collection of Manuscripts, sign. 2072, fol. 83r.

Fig. 2. Corpus Christi Chapel on Charles Square (formerly the Cattle Market) in Prague. Philip van den Bossche / Johannes Wechter, "Prospectus of the City of Prague by Aegidius Sadeler," 1606, Prague City Archive, Vedute collection, sign. G 18.

Fig. 3. An overview of the rental prices in Prague at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries. Based on the data of Municipal Books and records by Bedřich Mendel (MENDL 1917, 359–360), compiled by the author.

Fig. 4. Prague-Old Town. Northern front of houses in Havelská Street. Houses Nos. 504–510/I, Langweil's Model of Prague, 1826–1837, © The City of Prague Museum, KITdigital, 2007.

Fig. 5. Prague-Old Town, northeast front of the house No. 234/I (today No. 235/I) at the confluence of Jilská and Jalovcová Streets, Antonín Alexander, 1936, Prague City Archives, Collection of photographs, sign. I 9164.

Fig. 6. Old Town of Prague 1427–1429: population structure. The graph compares the number of persons: owners, tenants-conventores and lodgers-inquilini (author, 2019).

Fig. 7. Old Town of Prague 1427–1429: structure of the inhabitants of burgher houses (compiled by the author, 2019).

Fig. 8. Old Town of Prague 1427–1429: structure of the inhabitants of burgher houses. The graph comparing the ratio of tenants-conventores and lodgers-inquilini to the Old Town houses recorded in the tax books from 1427 and 1429, and the number of tenants-conventores and lodgers-inquilini, who lived in the Old town houses according to set price categories (**x-axis**) (compiled by the author, 2019).

Fig. 9. An overview of the tax price paid by lodgers-inquilini, which is related to the set price categories of houses (**x-axis**); (compiled by the author 2019).

Fig. 10. Old Town of Prague 1427–1429: tax paid by the tenants-conventores; (compiled by the author, 2019).

Fig. 11. List of lodgers who have accepted municipal law and are later listed in the city as house owners; (compiled by the author, 2019).

Fig. 12. Population structure in ages 1427 and 1429. Týn Quarter (Týnská čtvrť) – **upper left**, Saint Gall Quarter (Svatohavelská čtvrť) – **upper right**, St. Leonard Quarter (Linhartská čtvrť) – **bottom left**, St. Nicholas Quarter (Mikulášská čtvrť) – **bottom right** (compiled by the author, 2019).

Fig. 13. Population structure of burgher houses by price categories in ages 1427 and 1429 (compiled by the author, 2019).

Fig. 14. Graph of the population structure of burgher houses by price categories in ages 1427 and 1429 (compiled by the author, 2019).

Fig. 15. An overview of the tax paid by lodgers-inquilini, related to the set price categories of houses (compiled by the author, 2019). Týn Quarter; Saint Gall Quarter; St. Leonard Quarter; St. Nicholas Quarter.

Translation by Linda Foster