

Building identity

Town halls of small Polish towns as a symbol and a sign of urban character and identity (14th–16th century)

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In popular imagination a mediaeval town is a densely built up, stonewalled, crowded and busy settlement with sky scraping spires of churches and town halls. In reality, in case of many small chartered towns, there was little difference between them and villages, except legal status. With scarce budgets, they struggled with municipal projects. However, a number of them invested great amounts of resources and effort to build town halls. Analysing evidence from the small towns (less than 2000 inhabitants) of the Kingdom of Poland, I explore in this paper a role played by their municipal buildings in constructing urban identity and manifesting their urban character.

Allgemeinhin denkt man, dass eine mittelalterliche Stadt eine dicht bebaute, von Mauern umgebene Siedlung mit großen Türmen, Kirchen und Rathäusern ist. Jedoch sahen viele kleine mittelalterliche Lokationsstädte eher wie größere Dörfer aus. Ihr rechtlicher Status (als Stadt) war der einzige Unterschied. Aufgrund der knappen finanziellen Ressourcen hatten sie eine schlecht entwickelte Kommunalwirtschaft. Trotz der wirtschaftlichen Schwierigkeiten bauten viele dieser Kleinstädte jedoch ein Rathaus. In diesem Artikel werden Kleinstädte (kleiner als 2000 Einwohner) des Königreichs Polen und die Rolle ihrer Rathäuser bei der Konstruktion urbaner Identität sowie bei der Ausgestaltung ihres urbanen Charakters untersucht.

1. Introduction

Since town halls were established as emblems of urban settlements in the Middle Ages, they have remained the immanent element of urban character to the present day. This notion is so strong that some scholars even mistakenly assume that a medieval chartered town could not function without a town hall. Although most knowledge about medieval municipal buildings is based predominantly on the evidence from large urban centres, it has often been assumed to be universal for towns of all sizes, leading to various misconceptions.

1. 1. Research questions and hypotheses

The aim of this paper is to explore the symbolic functions of town halls in small towns. The main research questions are: 1) what was the symbolic meaning of the town halls of small urban centres; 2) how were they built; 3) which ac-



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Featured Image

Deatil of the map of Poland by Wacław Grodecki, printed in Ortelius's Theatrum orbis terrarum (Antwerp 1573); Public domain. From the copy of the State Library of New South Wales.

tors used town halls to construct and express urban identity; and 4) for whose benefit was it done? Based on the analysed material,¹ the following hypotheses were made: 1) in settlements having the legal status of a town but characterised by a low level of urbanisation and urban material culture, the need to manifest urban character could be the principal motivation for building a town hall; 2) in small towns, a town hall was more an egalitarian and universal symbol of a whole urban community rather than a tool and emblem of the power and authority of a town council and its governing elite.

1. 2. Chronological and geographical scope

The study investigates towns of Greater Poland, Lesser Poland, and Masovia² – three provinces of the Kingdom of Poland – the urbanization of which had comparable chronologies and dynamics, and which took place in similar socio-economic and political conditions.³ The chartering of new towns as well as the reorganising of older settlements according to the so called ‘German law’ (*ius Theuthonicum*) began in those lands in the 13th century (although it was noticeably delayed in Masovia). This process intensified in the mid-14th century, with subsequent waves observed in the 15th and 16th century, when the majority of small towns were established, predominately by nobles (private owners).⁴ Since town halls were quite rare in the 13th century even in the largest urban centres, and as the 17th century brought new baroque cultural (and architectural) models and ideas, our focus will concentrate on the period from the 14th to the 16th century.⁵

1. 3. Small towns

Finding a universal definition of a small town for the studied period (as in fact for any period) is as impossible as finding a universal definition for a town. In the Polish historiography, the traditional typology dividing towns into four tax categories based on 15th and 16th century tax registers is often used.⁶ These tax categories did not, however, directly resemble the size of urban settlements and often did not even indicate their real economic position.⁷ The amount of tax paid by specific towns (and so the tax category) could vary significantly depending on time. Moreover, the tax registers contain no complete lists of towns and their respective categories for any given time (because of, for instance, temporary tax exemptions). Therefore, it was impractical to use this system for the purpose of the present study. Instead, an imperfect

1 This paper is the result of an ongoing research project on town halls of small(er) Polish towns up to the end of the 16th century.

2 The voivodships of Poznań, Kalisz, Kraków, Lublin, Sandomierz, Płock, Rawa, and Masovia in their borders in 1569 (before the Union of Lublin). See Stoń (ed.) 2014; Chłapowski/Stoń (ed.) 2017. The material for the urban settlements of Cuyavia (Kujawy) and the voivodships of Łęczyca and Sieradz (belonging to the province of Greater Poland) have not been analysed yet.

3 Janeczek 2001, p. 163.

4 Janeczek 2001, pp. 161–163.

5 Although, the new cultural ideas of humanism and the Renaissance became widespread in 16th century Poland, urban culture and urban society, especially in small towns, were in essence still late medieval.

6 Bogucka/Samsonowicz 1986, pp. 114–118; Kulejewska-Topolska 1956, pp. 262–263.

7 See e.g. Stoń 2016, pp. 99–104; see also Wiesiołowski 1980.

but practical criterion of a population of less than 2000 in the second half of the 16th century – based on estimates from the *Atlas Historyczny Polski. Mapy szczegółowe XVI wieku* [Historical Atlas of Poland in the Second Half of the 16th Century] – was chosen.⁸ For the end of the 16th century, 482 towns (settlements with the urban law *Lokationsstädte*) were identified in the studied lands, of which 442 (92%) had less than 2000 inhabitants. More than two-thirds of the urban settlements were inhabited by less than 1000 people, while a population of almost a half did not exceed 500.

	Royal		Ecclesiastical		Private (noble)		Total
Greater Poland	27	18%	24,5	16%	100,5	66%	152
Lesser Poland	61	30%	39	19%	104	51%	204
Masovia	31	36%	13	15%	42	49%	86
Total	119	27%	77	17%	247	56%	442

Table 1 The structure of ownership of the small towns in Greater Poland, Lesser Poland and Masovia (the second half of the 16th century).

Most of the analysed small towns were chartered and owned by private noble owners (**Table 1**), who had a decisive say in matters of their administration, development, and finances, leaving no space for an autonomous local urban government, especially in the 16th century. The situation was similar in towns belonging to various ecclesiastical institutions. In theory, urban centres which were a part of royal domain (often the oldest and the largest of the studied settlements) had the highest level of autonomy. However, a majority of them were leased (with hereditary rights) to noblemen, who commonly treated those towns as private property and dominated their governance.⁹ Therefore, it is non-urban actors who often decided on the possibilities and ways of manifesting urban character, and who must also be included in this study.

1. 4. Methods and sources

The symbolic meaning of town halls as signs of urban autonomy, the power of urban authorities, and as expressions of communal pride and unity, is traditionally reconstructed through analyses of architectural features, iconographic programmes, and the furnishings of existing municipal buildings.¹⁰ This methodological approach was, however, impossible to adopt in the case of the medieval town halls of small Polish towns as no such structures survive today. Instead, various written sources and archaeological evidence were examined to gather information on the buildings' construction, architectural form, location in urban space, and how they were perceived. Nevertheless, in most

8 Dunin-Wąsowiczowa 1993, pp. 78–83; Gieysztorowa 1973, pp. 78, 83–85; Suproniuk 2008, pp. 72–75; Suproniuk 2017, pp. 212–221; Wojciechowski 1966, pp. 30–32; an English edition of several volumes of the atlas is Chłapowski/Słoń (ed.) 2017. As a criterion to distinguish between small and middle-sized (and large) towns, a population of 2000 inhabitants at the end of 16th century has been used before, e.g., Janeczka 2001, p. 166.

9 Janeczka 2001, pp. 159–161.

10 See e.g. Albrecht 2004; Bogucka 1997 (esp. pp. 85–89); Eysymontt 2014; Jakimowicz 1997; Jiřová 2014; Zlat 1997.

cases, it was only possible to determine if a particular town's council seat was constructed during the studied period. Yet, the very fact that a town hall was built at all in settlements with a low level of urbanisation and urban material culture, is significant. Consequently, the first step was to establish the number of towns in which such a municipal building was built (or its construction was intended or planned). In the next stage, the gathered data was compared with the material culture model of a medieval town hall, which was constructed based on the evidence from middle-sized and large cities, to explore if the studied buildings replicated its basic elements (and so their symbolic meaning). Finally, the organisational aspects of constructing and maintaining town halls were analysed in order to identify attitudes towards them shown by different urban and non-urban 'actors' and 'spectators'.

Among the various types of written sources, urban records were the most important for the purpose of the current study. Especially useful were accounts and summaries of town finances, which in several cases provided some detailed information about the architecture of the town halls and their features (towers, clocks, bells, etc.). However, such urban registers survived for less than half of the studied towns (commonly lacking for the smallest, private urban settlements), and they date mostly from the second half of the 16th century. Town charters and ordinances granted by owners were useful in analysing motivations behind the decision to found a council seat in these towns. Some evidence was also provided by surveys of royal and ecclesiastical estates. A few archaeological reports allowed for a reconstruction of the general shape of a small number of the investigated buildings. No relevant pictorial sources were found.

2. 'Rurality' of the urban environment of small towns

In the popular imagination medieval towns are densely built-up, walled, crowded and busy spaces with sky scraping spires of churches and town halls. Such an image is reinforced by pop-culture, with filmmakers and videogame creators commonly using it to represent any urban settlement located in various fantasy realms inspired by medieval Europe – see, for instance, depictions of Wyzima, Oxenfurt, or the Free City of Novigrad in the *Witcher* game series (produced by CD Projekt) and King's Landing in the *Game of Thrones* television series (produced by HBO). The use of this image is, however, by no means a new phenomenon as towns have been described and pictured in that way since the Middle Ages (**Fig. 1**), making it a principal research problem of a separate discipline that combines art history and urban studies.¹¹ Ideograms used on early maps to mark locations of towns and cities were often a simplified version of the described image, consisting of a few lines and shapes resembling towered buildings and walls. In Ortelius's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (as on many other maps from that period), such pictograms were universally used to represent towns regardless of their size, location, and cultural region (**Fig. 2**). Therefore, when people in the second half of the 16th century looked at the map of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by Wacław Grodecki

11 See e.g., Kleinschmidt 1999; Simane 1999. The number of studies concerning the image of a medieval town is vast. For recent comprehensive list of the most important works see Lichert et al. 2014, fn. 1.



Fig. 1 View of Nysa (Silesia), from the Nuremberg Chronicle (Schedelsche Weltchronik), 1493. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 2 Details of the maps from Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (Antwerp 1573); from the left: Saxony, Arabia, Japan. Public domain. From the copy of the State Library of New South Wales.



Fig. 3 Detail of the map of Poland by Waclaw Grodecki, printed in Ortelius's *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (Antwerp 1573); Public domain. From the copy of the State Library of New South Wales.

(from Ortelius's atlas) they found no visual distinction between major urban centres with more than 10,000 inhabitants (e.g., Lviv, Poznań, Toruń) and tiny towns like Mińsk (Mazovia), Wągrowiec (Greater Poland), or Żelechów (Lesser Poland) (Fig. 3). Although all those municipalities had the same legal status of a chartered town (*Lokationstadt*), in terms of their material culture and urban landscape they were completely different. Polish small towns often resembled

rural settlements more than urbanised space.¹² In many cases, the only feature they shared with cities and larger towns was the urban grid layout, albeit in a reduced form, consisting of only a central square and adjoining building blocks. Otherwise, they were loosely built up with mainly timber (or timber-framed), one-storey buildings and encircled with palisades, earthworks, and frequently just simple wooden fences rather than stone walls. Their landscape was dominated by farms, gardens, pastures, and fields, as agriculture was the principal activity of a substantial part, if not the overall majority, of the inhabitants.¹³

3. Town halls in the small towns

The built environment of the small towns was also influenced by the municipal economy, or rather the lack of it. Even large and middle-sized medieval and early modern urban centres of the Kingdom of Poland had limited annual budgets: understood as funds needed for administrative expenses, providing necessary services, utilities (security, waste disposal, water supply, etc.), and public facilities.¹⁴ For the lesser towns, struggling with everyday expenditures, constructing any public building or structure was a major and difficult endeavour. Nonetheless, in many of those settlements, town halls were erected with a great financial effort.¹⁵ Because of the limited funds, such building projects tended to take years, even if a particular town hall was a modest wooden or timber-framed structure. Moreover, finished buildings needed constant repairs, making them an ongoing burden on the urban budget.¹⁶ In Kraśnik (Lesser Poland), which was one of the larger and more prosperous of the studied settlements (it was even encircled with masonry walls), a town hall was built in the second half of the 16th century.¹⁷ The construction of the main timber building and the timber tower took seven years (1571–1577), with additional works continuing for another decade. During the first stage, the annual costs of the building project exceeded 60% of the yearly expenditure of the town. Even before the work was finished, the town hall's structure needed repairs; the first such expenses were recorded in 1575 and afterwards were regularly listed in the financial registers.¹⁸ Furthermore, there is evidence that the Kraśnik councillors started gathering funds for the building project as early as 1557, which means they prepared for it for almost 15 years.¹⁹

Contrary to popular belief, sometimes also presented by scholars,²⁰ town halls were not a requisite for the proper functioning of a chartered town or a

¹² Important observations on the phenomenon are described by Samsonowicz 2002.

¹³ However, even in large cities of medieval and early modern Europe, there were extensive green, undeveloped and abandoned spaces; see Cembrzyński/Radomski 2022.

¹⁴ See e.g., Starzyński 2010; Goliński 2010; Sowina 2010; Noga 2010. Although the need for studies on municipal finances and the municipal economy of Polish medieval towns was expressed almost 20 years ago by Halina Manikowska (Manikowska 2001, pp. 109–110), these topics have not yet been extensively studied using modern methodological approaches. The few works published on the subject (the examples cited in this footnote) concern only the largest urban centres of the Kingdom of Poland and Silesia (Cracow, Wrocław, Gdańsk, etc.).

¹⁵ Bartoszewicz 2014.

¹⁶ A town hall could also be a source of income, if it housed facilities like weights or shops.

¹⁷ AP Lublin, AM Kraśnik, sign. 1, fols. 35v–89v (council register, on the cited folios' financial records for 1570–1600).

¹⁸ AP Lublin, AM Kraśnik, sign. 1, fols. 43v–44r.

¹⁹ AP Lublin, AM Kraśnik, sign. 1, fol. 6v.

²⁰ See e.g., Kuśnierz-Krupa 2012, p. 83; Kuśnierz-Krupa 2013, pp. 93–95; Mrocza 2015, pp. 28–29; Wyrobisz 1970, pp. 588–589.

town council. For the most part of the studied period, the majority of urban centres in the Kingdom of Poland did not have a permanent seat for town officials, as even in the largest cities, town halls were constructed decades (and sometimes more than 100 years) after their chartering (*Lokation*).²¹ Moreover, municipal buildings were often destroyed in frequently occurring urban fires, especially in small towns as they were commonly built of timber. Councillors, aldermen and judges often met and held court in their private houses.²² Municipal facilities (such as weights, a cloth-cropping house) could be located in separate, sometimes private, buildings, while an urban archive (registers, charters, seals, etc.) were stored in churches or kept by town officials. In Urzędów, a royal town located near the aforementioned Kraśnik, a separate weighing house and market stalls stood on the central square. There was no typical town hall, instead, in the second half of the 16th century, councillors and aldermen fulfilled their official duties in rooms on the upper floor of one of the town gates, while documents and urban funds were safely deposited in the parish church.²³ The town hall of Old Liw (Masovia), which completely burnt down in 1589, had still not been rebuilt by the mid-17th century, to the frustration of the local noblemen who had used it for their terrestrial court sessions. They repeatedly petitioned the king and the Parliament (*Sejm*) to force the reluctant Liw burghers and the town council to reconstruct the building, but with no success.²⁴

	Royal			Ecclesiastical			Private (nobles)			Total		
	All	With a townhall	%	All	With a townhall	%	All	With a townhall	%	All	With a townhall	%
Greater Poland	27	8	30%	24,5	5	20%	100,5	9	9%	152	22	14%
Lesser Poland	61	32	52%	39	12	31%	104	26	25%	204	70	34%
Masovia	31	13	42%	13	2	15%	42	2	5%	86	17	20%
Total	119	53	45%	77	19	25%	247	37	15%	442	109	25%

Table 2 Small towns with a town hall by the end of the 16th century.

However, in a quarter of small urban settlements a town hall was constructed and functioned before the end of the 16th century, that is its presence sometime during the period has been confirmed either in the written sources or in the archaeological material (**Table 2**). The actual number of towns with a municipal building – a permanent seat of urban officials – was probably much greater in every province and in every ownership category. The data is the least accurate for Masovia and the Sandomierz voivodeship (the part of Lesser Poland with the greatest number of towns), as the overall majority of the urban records from these lands were destroyed when the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw were burnt down during the Warsaw Uprising in August 1944.²⁵ Also, the calculation for private towns, which were the most numerous, is an underestimate because the written evidence for them is the

21 Bartoszewicz 2014, pp. 162–163.

22 AN Kraków, VCV, sign. 100, fols. 145v, 147–148v, 150; AP Lublin, AM Baranów, sign. 1, p. 147; Jawor et al. 2001, nos. 62, 80, 92, 100, 104, 105, 114; Bartoszewicz 2014, pp. 163–165.

23 AP Lublin, AM Urzędów, sign. 2/1, fol. 5v; Godlewska 1963, p. 68.

24 Moniuszko 2013, p. 48.

25 Wolff 1957.

least extensive. As private property, they were not surveyed by royal officials and their records formed a part of the private archives of noble families and were often not preserved. The high percentage of royal towns with a town hall is a result of relatively well kept and diversified written records and the fact they tended to be older, larger, and richer urban centres. Moreover, municipal buildings in the settlements belonging to the royal domain, were frequently used by non-urban officials, e.g. for terrestrial court sessions, local assemblies of noblemen (*dietine*, *sejmik*), and state tribunals. As a result, their construction and maintenance were often financed directly from the royal purse or by taxes and monopolies granted to towns by a royal privilege, such as in Czersk (Masovia),²⁶ Rogoźno,²⁷ and Koło²⁸ (Greater Poland).

As town halls could be viewed, in a sense, as an expensive commodity, not being indispensable for towns to prosper, the construction of such buildings in at least a quarter of small urban settlements is significant. It seems that their utilitarian function – as a seat of urban officials – for which cheaper and available substitutes could be easily (and in fact were) found, was not the principal, and certainly not the only reason, for building them. Instead, their desirability derived from their symbolic meaning and the fact they were a distinctive sign of urban character, as they acted as a visual, material link between the largest cities and small towns.

4. The material culture model of a medieval town hall, its symbolic meaning and its reception in small towns

The universality of the architectural forms of medieval European town halls, whose roots can be traced to the architecture of public buildings of the Roman Empire through Carolingian and Ottonian imperial palaces, has been repeatedly discussed in scholarly works. For the purpose of this study, the papers of Krasnowolski, Zlat, and Eysymontt, who analysed the evidence from the Kingdom of Poland and neighbouring countries, were the most relevant and allowed a reconstruction of the material culture model (and the symbolic meaning) of a medieval town hall present in large and middle sized urban centres.²⁹ In the Kingdom of Poland, municipal buildings were typically located somewhere in the middle of a central square,³⁰ a sign of the central role of self-government in the functioning of an urban community. Commonly, they were rectangular oblong (rarely square) structures.³¹ Their dominant feature was a soaring tower, which housed municipal bells and clocks, and was distinctly visible in an urban landscape.³² (Figs. 4, 5, 6) In the late Middle Ages, oriels, battlements, and crow-step gables were added, making town halls' facades look like those of castles and palaces (Fig. 7).³³ Indeed, the deliberate reflec-

26 Kozłowski 1858, pp. 576–577 (here the edition of the royal privilege).

27 Gąsiorowski/Jasiński 1990, no. 1128.

28 AGAD, MK 17, fol. 301r.

29 Krasnowolski 2014; Zlat 1997; Eysymontt 2014 (esp. pp. 57–61, 71–74). They also give an extensive list of further literature on European town halls and their symbolic meaning.

30 Krasnowolski 2014, p. 82. Only incidentally was a town hall located in one of the building blocks adjacent to a central square (or a main street): Krasnowolski 2014, pp. 80–82, Eysymontt 2014, pp. 71–74 (Silesian towns).

31 Zlat 1997, pp. 11–19; Krasnowolski 2014, pp. 84–85, Komorowski 2014, pp. 247–248.

32 Zlat 1997, pp. 20–24, Krasnowolski 2014, pp. 83–85, 87–89, 93; Manikowska 2014, p. 33.

33 Zlat 1997, pp. 24–27; Krasnowolski 2014, p. 90.



Fig. 4 Town hall in Biecz (Lesser Poland), the 16th c. tower. Photo by Henryk Bielamowicz, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 5 Town hall in Lwówek Śląski (Silesia), the 15th c. tower. CC BY-SA 4.0. Photo by Enamo, CC BY-SA 3.0 PL, via Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 6 Town hall in Namysłów (Silesia), the 14th c. tower. CC BY-SA 4.0. Photo by Efka de, CC BY-SA 2.5, via Wikimedia Commons

tion of the architectural forms of an early medieval *palas* and later castles and palaces – buildings connected with exercising sovereign power and authority – made a town hall a symbol of urban autonomy.³⁴ With towers, oriels, and battlements – characteristic features of military architecture – the *Rathäuser* also imitated the castles of knights, thus expressing the burghers' intention to take an equal place in medieval society to that of noblemen.³⁵ A town hall's tower was especially viewed in this way, making it an object of pride for a whole urban community.³⁶ It was such a strong symbol of a town that towers

34 Zlat 1997, p. 31.

35 Krasnowolski 2014, p. 85.

36 Zlat 1997, p. 20. Krasnowolski 2014, pp. 85, 90.



Fig. 7 Town hall in Wrocław (Silesia). CC BY-SA 4.0. Photo by Jacek Halicki, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Fig. 8 Town hall tower in Cracow. The rest of the building was demolished in the 19th c. CC BY-SA 4.0. Photo by Mach240390, CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

are often the only element of medieval town halls surviving to the present day (Fig. 8). However, imposing and luxurious municipal buildings were also a sign and a tool used by urban officials to show their dominant position in a town's society and to exercise control over burghers and other town inhabitants through symbolic violence.³⁷ These include, according to Pierre Bourdieu, various means (architecture, attributes, ceremonies, customs, etc.) employed (sometimes unconsciously) by the ruling classes to cement their social status and power and to subordinate the lower orders without resorting to physical violence.³⁸ For instance, councillors proclaimed their ordinances from oriels and balconies standing high above townsmen gathered on a square. With bells and clocks, they regulated the pace of everyday life of a whole community, indicating the time for work and rest.

As mentioned above, it was possible to recreate the architectural form of a few of the town halls built in small towns. In most cases, only a few details and features were discovered. The most frequent was information about the town halls' location in the urban space. All municipal buildings but two stood in the middle of a central square: in Wieliczka (Lesser Poland), a town hall was constructed in a building block flanking the market square,³⁹ while the upper floors of a town gate were used for the seat



³⁷ Krasnowolski 2014, pp. 29–33.

³⁸ Bourdieu 2016, pp. 792–793.

³⁹ Krasnowolski 2014, p. 81.

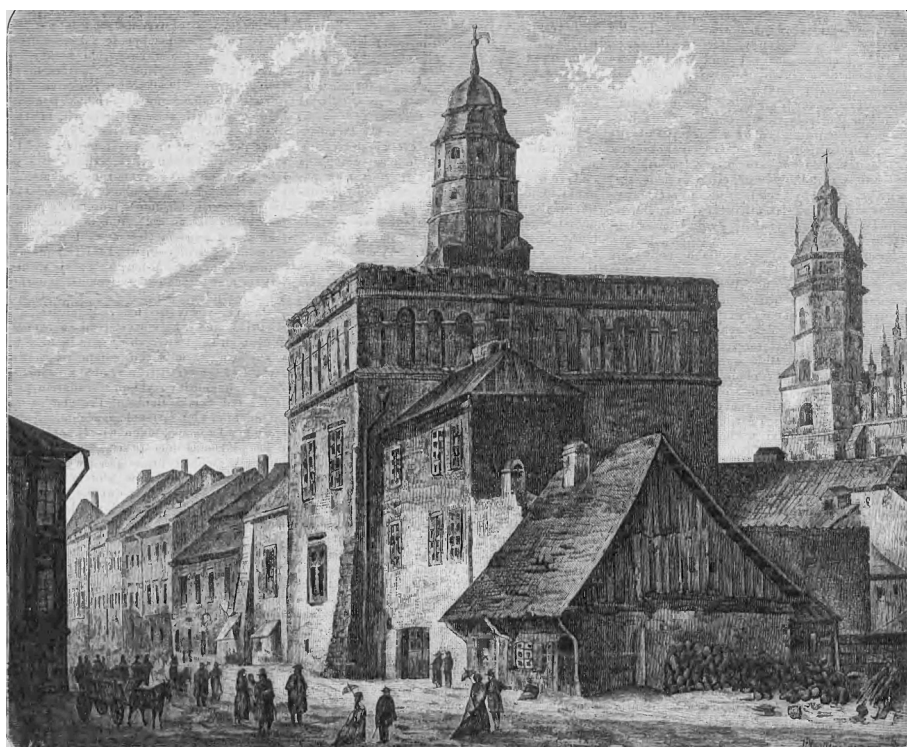


Fig. 9 Town hall in Kazimierz (near Cracow) before the renovation in the second half of the 19th c. Woodcut by A. Kühlewein, based on a water-colour by A.K. Gryglewski, after: *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 1878 (V/136). Public domain.

of councillors and aldermen in the town of Urzędów.⁴⁰ Towers were the element of the town halls' structure whose presence was most often confirmed in the existing evidence. A tower of the town hall in Kraśnik was at least three storeys high, and like the rest of the structure it was built of timber and clad with wooden shingles. There was a painted ball on its top, which formed a base for a metal weather vane. It also housed town bells and a clock.⁴¹ Clocks and bells were also mounted on town hall towers in Bochnia,⁴² Czychów,⁴³ Kazimierz,⁴⁴ Pilzno,⁴⁵ Urzędów,⁴⁶ and Wojnicz⁴⁷ (Lesser Poland), for example. Remains of 16th-century town halls were found during archaeological excavations in Kielce and Iłża (Lesser Poland).⁴⁸ The municipal building of the latter town is quite well known from a survey conducted before its demolition in the 1820s. It was a masonry, rectangular, three-storey building (approx. 16.5 x 9 m) with a six-storey tower adjacent to one of its longer sides.⁴⁹ Archaeologists argue that Kielce town hall was very similar (but larger) than the one in Iłża, as they were built in the same period, their foundations had the same layout, and both towns belonged to the bishops of Cracow.⁵⁰ All the other *Rathäuser* whose archaeological remains were explored had similar rectangular plan and dimensions: the ratio of their sides' length was 3:1; 2:1; 3:2.⁵¹ Nothing is known about particular elements of the facades of small town municipal buildings. Only in the case of Kraśnik is there some evidence that the building had crow-

40 Godlewska 1963, p. 68.

41 AP Lublin, AM Kraśnik, sign. 1, fol. 45r.

42 Kuraś/Sułkowska-Kurasiowa (ed.) 1969–1974, vol. 6, no. 1845.

43 AN Kraków, AM Czychów, sign. 29, fol. 33r.

44 Chmiel (ed.) 1932, p. 1.

45 Ossolineum, sign. 2083 II, fol. 1r.

46 Wyczański (ed.) 1959, p. 96.

47 Szymański (ed.) 1994, nos. 22, 34.

48 Gliński/Glińska 2011, pp. 96–106; Gliński/Glińska 2012, pp. 29–30.

49 Nowakowski 2012, p. 70; Kupisz 2014, p. 47.

50 Gliński/Glińska 2011, pp. 96–97.

51 Komorowski 2002, pp. 247–248; Komorowski 2012, p. 32.



Fig. 10 The 18th c. town hall in Sulmierzyce (Greater Poland). CC BY-SA 4.0. Photo by Dawid Galus, CC BY-SA 3.0 PL.

step gables, which were repeatedly destroyed by storms.⁵² Their constant repairs, recorded in the town's expenditures, could be a sign of great determination by the town councillors, who wanted to replicate this architectural feature typically seen in the masonry of gothic architecture in their timber town hall. It is difficult to illustrate the architecture of the studied buildings as, unfortunately, of all the town halls of small towns, only the one in Kazimierz (near Cracow) has survived to the present day (**Fig. 9**). However, it was rebuilt after fires in the 17th century and in the 19th century, so its original medieval and renaissance features are not visible. Some clues as to the appearance of the timber examples (the majority of the small urban settlements' town halls) are provided by later structures, like the 18th century one in Sulmierzyce (Greater Poland) (**Fig. 10**).

Despite the scarce evidence, it seems that the town halls of small towns were consistent with the described material culture model of a medieval town hall. Moreover, its features which were most commonly replicated were those most clearly representing urbanity and the urban community: the central position in the urban space and the tower with bells and a clock.⁵³ Therefore, by erecting municipal buildings in this particular form, small towns displayed and confirmed their urban character and authority.

5. The town halls as signs and tools: actors and spectators

In large urban centres, the building of a town hall was in most cases an initiative by the urban authorities, notably town councils. Sometimes it was a powerful statement in a struggle for autonomy against a feudal lord, like in Worms where the town hall was built by the community without the bishop's consent and had to be demolished in 1180.⁵⁴ However, urban communes commonly

⁵² AP Lublin, AM Kraśnik, sign. 1, fols. 66v, 78v.

⁵³ Manikowska 2014, p. 33.

⁵⁴ Zlat 1997, p. 33.

sought the assent of their sovereigns.⁵⁵ For councillors, town halls were a useful tool of 'symbolic violence' employed to exercise their authority over townsmen. So, it was they who petitioned kings and dukes for the necessary privileges to build such a structure and laboured to gather sufficient funds for its construction. The practice was similar in the small towns belonging to the royal domain. Royal privileges are often the first (and sometimes the only) trace of a town hall's existence.⁵⁶ However, in the case of small urban settlements, there is evidence that the construction and maintenance of a town hall was often not the sole endeavour of municipal authorities. In *Książ Wielki* (Lesser Poland), a special chest with three locks was made for keeping the money gathered for the construction of a municipal building. The keys to the chest were held by the town council, by the royal official, and the representatives of the burghers (*seniores communitatis*) who contributed the funds.⁵⁷ The burghers (*communitas*) of Wojnicz decided to buy a clock for the town hall's tower, and after its construction frequently demanded that the councillors should keep it in a good condition.⁵⁸ In private and ecclesiastical towns, a construction of a town hall was commonly an initiative of non-urban actors. The municipal buildings of Kilece, Iłża, and Bodzentyn were financed by the bishops of Cracow,⁵⁹ while the erection of the one in Skierniewice (Masovia) was ordered and paid for by the Archbishop of Gniezno.⁶⁰ Abbots or abbesses gave assets for the town halls in Kostrzyn (Greater Poland), Jędrzejów, and Skawina (Lesser Poland).⁶¹ Private town owners frequently specified upon a town's foundation (in urban charters and ordinances) that a *Rathaus* should be constructed, and they provided the necessary materials and funds for it, e.g. in Czempin and Kórnik (Greater Poland); and Kurów, Odrzywół, Strzyżów, Głogów, Janowiec, and Oleśnica (Lesser Poland).⁶² In the case of private towns, only the construction of Kraśnik town hall was on the initiative of the local councillors, who sought the town owner's assent in 1557.⁶³ Therefore, it seems that the town halls of small urban settlements were more egalitarian (i.e. used and cared for by a whole community) and more diverse (i.e. used by urban and non-urban actors) as symbolic tools, than those municipal buildings in the large cities.

The more varied character of the group of actors involved also strongly suggests that the symbolic meaning of a town hall was somewhat different in the case of the small towns. As town halls were erected by the orders of town owners (both private and ecclesiastical) they could not symbolise urban self-government and autonomy, in fact most of the small towns had no autonomy. Similarly, they were not viewed as a manifestation of the power of a town council because they were treated as a common good by a whole community of burghers. Instead, the *Rathäuser* became symbols of urban character – material signs of the legal status of a town – and objects of communal

55 Zlat 1997, pp. 31–33.

56 See e.g. AGAD, MK 17, fols. 301r–302r; Becker 1930, pp. 283–284; Górski et al. (ed.) 1994, p. 332.

57 AN Kraków, VCV, sygn. 99, p. 24.

58 Szymański (ed.) 1994, nos. 22, 34.

59 Gliński 2014, p. 21.

60 Ulanowski (ed.) 1920, p. 135.

61 Ney 1843, p. 81; Piekosiński 1905, no. 1348; Kuśnierz-Krupa 2012, p. 84.

62 See e.g. Ruszczyński 1929, p. 23; AP Poznań, AM Kórnik, sign. 1; Kuraś/Sułkowska-Kurasio-wa (ed.) 1969–1974, vol. 3, no. 593, vol. 5, no. 1279; Wyrozumski 1980, pp. 138–142; Kowalczyk 2012, p. 40; Wyrobisz 1999, pp. 30–53; AGAD, AKRSW, sign. 2165c, fols. 146–147.

63 AP Lublin, AM Kraśnik, fol. 6v.

pride showing wealth and prosperity. They were often described in that way in urban records. In 1521, the councillors of Czychów ordered the movement of a town clock from the tower of the parish church to the newly built town hall for the “adornment of the town”.⁶⁴ Similarly, the burghers of Wojnicz demanded that the town councillors should take good care of a town hall’s clock, naming it their “greatest treasure”.⁶⁵ Therefore, town halls also acted as tools for creating a sense of urban unity among burghers, especially if their construction was a joint venture by a whole community (of both burghers and municipal authorities).

As a display of urbanity, the symbolic statement of a town hall was intended primarily for outside spectators: noblemen, clergy and peasants, as well as citizens of other towns who were coming to a market or just passing through the town. It seems that such symbolic meaning and function was widely understood in the society of the period. Provisions for the construction of a town hall frequently made in town charters and urban ordinances granted by non-urban issuers, show the widespread belief that a town should have a town hall. Nowhere is it more clearly stated than in the 1480 ordinance of Strzyżów – a tiny town in Lesser Poland – in which the town owners “give the aforementioned burghers of Strzyżów a town hall, commonly known as ‘wietnica’ [...] as it is the custom in other towns [...]”.⁶⁶

6. Conclusions

The common adoption of the established material culture model of a town hall indicates that the symbolic meaning of a municipal building was an important reason for its construction in small urban settlements. However, this symbolic function seems to be limited to it being a material sign of urbanity. By manifesting the legal status of a town, a town hall became an object of pride and care for a whole community, as it visualised the rights of burghers as freemen. In that sense it was much more of an egalitarian symbol than the *Rathaus* of a larger city, which apart from being a municipal emblem, acted as a tool of ‘symbolic violence’ for exercising the councillors’ authority over townsmen. Another change in meaning – the effective abolition of a town hall’s significance as a mark of urban autonomy and self-government – was necessary for it to be used by non-urban actors, that is ecclesiastical and private town owners. The commonplace founding of town halls by noblemen and ecclesiastical institutions was, in fact, both the source and an outcome of this conceptual shift, something especially characteristic of the 16th century. It could be argued that the change was also a symptom of the general crisis in urban centres and the advancing restrictions on urban autonomy in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 16th–17th century.

⁶⁴ “propter decorem civitatis”: Bartoszewicz 2014, p. 168.

⁶⁵ “Zegar, który mamy jako największy skarb”: Szymański 1994, no. 34.

⁶⁶ “Item damus et ascribimus praedictis civibus Strzezow praetorium vulgariter ‘wietnica’ [...] prout mos est in aliis civitatibus [...]”: Wyrozumski 1980, pp. 139–140.

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AN Kraków, AM Czchów = Archiwum Narodowe w Krakowie [National Archives in Cracow], Akta Miasta Czchowa [Records of Czchów], sign. 1 (council register).

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AP Lublin, AM Baranów = Archiwum Państwowe w Lublinie [State Archives in Lublin], Akta Miasta Baranowa [Records of Baranów], sign. 1 (register of councillors and aldermen).

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Building identity. Town halls of small Polish towns as a symbol and a sign of urban character and identity (14th–16th century)

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