Mapping the historical topography of a Transylvanian city in the Modern Age: Sibiu/Hermannstadt in the 18th and 19th centuries

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The city of Sibiu (German Hermannstadt, Hungarian Nagyszeben) was founded in the 12th century and was one of the most important urban centers in the eastern part of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary and later in the Principality of Transylvania. At the end of the 17th century, the Principality became part of the Habsburg Empire, which was rapidly expanding in Southeastern Europe after the Ottoman failure to capture Vienna in 1683.

Sibiu was the European Capital of Culture in 2007 (together with Luxembourg) and was historically shaped by the presence of the Transylvanian Saxons, the German-speaking descendants of the colonists settled in southern Transylvania by King Géza II of Hungary. The colonization of this strategic area, near the southeastern border of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary, with groups mostly coming from Flanders, the Lower Rhineland and the greater Luxembourg region was promoted for military and economic reasons (Wagner 2009).

As part of a current research project, completed between 2020 and 2022, historical plans for six major cities in southern Transylvania (Brașov, Sibiu, Mediaș, Sighișoara, Sebeș, Orăștie and Făgăraș), alongside general maps of the province were identified and processed.

The paper will describe the creation of the historical GIS/HGIS (Gregory and Ell, 2007) database dedicated to the city of Sibiu and the analysis of the urban structure as reflected on the cartographic sources. In order to examine the urban topography of Sibiu in the 18th and 19th centuries we have selected four of the most representative cartographic documents depicting the city. They were created in 1749, 1751, 1845 and 1875 (Czekelius and Fabini 2007). The processing of the documents (georeferencing) was assisted by the use of GPS-determined control points.

The GIS vector files created after the digitization of the cartographic documents were grouped in several layers, featuring built-up areas, fortifications, gardens, cemeteries, water bodies, street names, bridges, fountains, mills and brickyards. The 18th century HGIS data was mostly extracted from the plan created by the Austrian officer Jakob Ludwig Sulli, with some additions taken from a 1751 military representation of the city. The main source for the 19th century vector layers was a map published in 1875 by Franz J. Dimitrowits, based on local cadastral works. The scale of the

document is 1:2.880 and it depicts all the individual buildings and parcels in the city center and the suburbs for the first time.

The generated vector data was later used to create two interactive webmaps using the Leaflet application (see Muehlenhaus 2014). The differences in the urban topography of the 18th century and that of the 19th century are noticeable on the interactive maps. In the mid-18th century, a large area covered by ponds and marshes (with gardens and isolated cottages spread amongst them) was occupying the area between the city centre and the three existing suburbs. These marshes and ponds played an important defensive role since the Middle Ages and were only drained in the second half of the 18th century.

The defensive system comprised five bastions built in the 16th and early 17th centuries, 39 towers and two roundels. The most important buildings in the city marked on the city plans from 1749 and 1751 are the arsenal (Ger. Zeughaus) in the west and the six churches: the Lutheran Parish Church, the Jesuit Church, the smaller Hospital and St. Elisabeth Lutheran churches and the Roman-Catholic churches of the Franciscan and Ursuline convents. At this time, there were no ecclesiastical structures existing in the suburbs.

Until the mid-19th century the city experienced an important growth, the population rising from approximately 10 000 in 1750 to 12 765 in 1850 and further to 18 998 in 1869. Likewise, the former marshes and ponds were completely drained and transformed into residential plots or gardens by 1845.

A second major change was the gradual removal of most of the fortifications surrounding the city centre. The 1845 city plan already documents the disappearance of one of the main gates (Cisnădiei Gate/Heltauer Thor) and its corresponding bastion. By 1875, only two bastions, six towers and some wall sections were still standing, a situation largely corresponding to the contemporary one.

Although the Transylvanian Saxons remained by far the dominant ethnic group and virtually controlled the entire local administration up until the early 20th century (Roth 2007), the Romanian and Hungarian presence was more noticeable now. The Romanian community already had four churches in the suburbs by 1875, while the Hungarians had a Reformed Church in the city center since 1785.

Several new landmarks are noticeable on the 1845 and 1875 city plans: the Roman-Catholic Theresianum orphanage in the Ocnei Gate suburb, the railway station (opened in 1872), the Francis Joseph general hospital, the military hospital in the Josephine suburb and the Psychiatric Hospital, the first establishment of this kind in Transylvania (inaugurated in 1862). Lastly, the infantry barracks near the former Cisnădiei Gate (Ger. Heltauer Thor) was completed in 1807. All of these structures are still standing today, with the exception of the barracks, demolished in 1987, and some sections of the former Theresianum orphanage complex.

The HGIS datasets will offer a solid starting point for conducting spatial research and designing a historical atlas. A major opportunity will be to add information to the 18th and 19th century parcel/houses or residential blocks derived from archival statistical sources. The historical population distribution in the city of Sibiu could be then viewed spatially and compared with the situation encountered in the later 19th century and the early 20th century.

Fig. 1. Map of Sibiu in the mid-18th century

Funding

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