

# The Problem of the Financial Balance in the Foreign Trade of Late Medieval Hungary

## A Century-Long Historiographical Debate

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*Hungary in the period of Matthias Corvinus was closely connected to the international economic exchanges.*

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**T**HERE HAS been an enduring scholarly debate on the role of Hungary in the commercial system of mid-15<sup>th</sup> Central Europe, and certain new arguments and scholarly contributions over the last century have affected our understanding of this question. The discussion was initiated in 1902 with the publication of a book by Ferenc Kováts (1873–1956) on the circulation of commercial goods in western Hungary in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Kováts based his reconstruction on the registers of the thirtieth customs (*tricesima*) of Bratislava (Pressburg) (the thirtieth customs being a duty of one thirtieth the value of trade goods, paid mainly after they were exported from or imported into the country).<sup>2</sup> From 1440 the town of Pressburg had the right and responsibility to collect this income. The main commercial route towards the west followed the line of the Danube. But if the merchants used the route on the right side of the river they could bypass the Pressburg thirtieth customs office,

thus causing severe financial loss to the town. The intention of Pressburg was of course to maximise its income and make the payment of the customs as difficult to avoid as possible. Therefore from 1450 Pressburg paid the king for the right to collect the customs income of Rusovce on the right side of the Danube as well.<sup>3</sup> Thus it might be supposed that the customs registers of Pressburg give an authentic image of the westward commercial activity from that time onwards. In fact only one account book has survived, covering the year between April 1457 and April 1458. Matthias Corvinus was elected as king of Hungary in January 1458, so this source gives allows us to reconstruct the foreign trade of the country at the very beginning of Matthias' reign.

This account book reveals a very striking imbalance in foreign trade. The import of commercial goods made up 90% of the traffic, and exports only 10%.<sup>4</sup>

TABLE 1. THE BALANCE OF FOREIGN TRADE  
ACCORDING TO THE PRESSBURG THIRTIETH CUSTOMS REGISTERS (1457–1458)

	Golden Forints	%
Import	166,564	89.4
Export	19,784	10.6
TOTAL	186,348	100

The structure of the commercial exchange is also unbalanced. Imports were heavily dominated by industrial products, mainly different types of textiles and metal products, as the following figures show.

TABLE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF IMPORTED GOODS (%)  
ACCORDING TO THE PRESSBURG THIRTIETH CUSTOMS REGISTERS (1457–1458)<sup>5</sup>

Primary products (%)	Spices	2.6
	Other primary products	1.4
Industrial products (%)	Quality cloth	59.9
	Linen products	6.4
	Other textile products	4.6
	Clothes, dresses, hats	7.9
	Metal products	12.7
	Others	4.5
TOTAL		100

Thus textile products represented 79%, and industrial products altogether more than 90% of the total imports, the proportion of all other types of merchandise being almost insignificant. The composition of the exports likewise reveals a skewed distribution.

TABLE 3. DISTRIBUTION OF EXPORTED GOODS (%)  
 ACCORDING TO THE PRESSBURG THIRTIETH CUSTOMS REGISTERS (1457–1458)<sup>6</sup>

Cattle	21.0
Sheep	20.8
Horses	12.3
Other animals	0.5
Animal products	6.4
Wine	23.3
Fish	10.8
Industrial and mining products	4.4
Other primary products	0.5
TOTAL	100

These statistics prove that agricultural and primary products, predominantly live animals and animal products, dominated in exports. The data in the Pressburg registers present the most reliable statistics for the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century foreign trade of Hungary, and the calculations of Kováts are still widely accepted in scholarly literature. The question remains, however: Do these customs registers accurately reflect the overall structure of the country's foreign trade at the time?

**T**HE ANALYSIS of the 1457–58 customs registers and the assessment of their significance initiated a long debate in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Hungarian historiography. In his first monograph (published in 1955), Jenő Szűcs (1928–1988) argued that the negative balance of trade of that period was a main cause of the decline of urban development in late medieval Hungary. Szűcs based his conclusions on his studies, especially on the history of Sopron and Pressburg in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. According to him, the substantial outflow of precious metals, particularly gold, from the country attracted the attention of foreign merchants who shipped industrial goods to Hungary. The consequent competition and concurrence from imported Western industrial products suppressed the emerging handicraft industries of the towns of Western Hungary.<sup>7</sup>

Oszkár Paulinyi (1899–1982), a leading expert in mining history, in his influential and often cited article published in 1972 characterized the economic situation of late medieval Hungary under the rubric: rich land, poor country (“Gazdag föld—szegény ország”).<sup>8</sup> According to him the state of affairs reflected by the 1457–58 customs registers had very severe consequences. On the one hand, it led to the gradual decline of local manufacturing in the urban centres of Hungary, and on the other it caused the outflow of the production of

the gold and silver mines of Hungary from the country. Paulinyi also argued that the commercial connections of Hungary were dominated not by local but by foreign merchants, and so the profits of commerce were exported and did not remain in the country.<sup>9</sup>

However, since very few 15<sup>th</sup> century customs registers survive which may enlighten us on the commercial balance of late medieval Hungary, later comparative sources should have been taken into account as well.

Győző Ember (1909–1993), published an analysis of his own research on other, later thirtieth customs registers, beginning from 1542. On the basis of this he challenged the traditionally accepted interpretation. Ember argued that one cannot reconstruct the real structure of mid-15<sup>th</sup> century foreign trade exclusively on the basis of one surviving set of customs registers. Pressburg was certainly one of the most important customs posts where commercial goods underwent the customs procedure. But the traffic at the Buda and Székesfehérvár customs office should have been taken into account—had the corresponding records survived. Certainly, a part of the commercial goods which arrived from the west or left the county in the same direction were customed there. Ember also noted that, according to the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century customs registers, in fact only about 10% of the western exports at that time went through the customs procedure at Pressburg, while the overwhelming majority of the traffic was registered at nearby customs offices on the northwestern border of the country. Thus, on the basis of the evidence from the later registers, Ember assumes that the ratio of exports was most likely higher in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century than the Pressburg registers indicate, but since the records of the other custom places at this earlier period have been lost, we do not have enough documentary evidence to give a full and accurate picture of contemporary commercial activity.

The registers of the western thirtieth customs offices in 1542 also show a quite different state of the trade balance as compared to the 1457–58 records. In the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century imports make up only about 30% of the traffic and exports almost 70%. Thus exports were strongly in the majority and exports played a less significant role. This data shows a quite different situation concerning the trade balance, which also weakens the arguments on the strong deficit of exportation in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. It is hardly credible that in the space of a century the percentage of exports within the entire foreign trade increased from 10% to 70%.<sup>10</sup>

The cattle trade has a special significance from the point of view of foreign trade. Cattle went through the customs procedure at special places, so it was not always registered in the same way and at the same place as other goods,

and also its proportion in the whole trade is striking.<sup>11</sup> In 1542 the cattle trade accounted for almost 60% of the whole traffic and for 93% of the exports (27,529 head of cattle).<sup>12</sup> In that year the majority of the cattle trade going towards the West was registered not at the Pressburg toll station, but at nearby customs places like Senec or Trnava. This could be an explanation for the uneven character of the 1457–58 customs register as well, as in that year also, the export of cattle was significantly higher than the figures in the registers suggest, and thus the structure of trade was more balanced. A recent study by Zsolt Simon clarifies in some respects the trade towards the south by analysing the traffic of the trading posts of Kulpin (Kölpény) and Barics (close to Progar, west of Belgrade).<sup>13</sup> Mária Pakucs-Willcocks in her book published in 2007 examined the oriental trade of Sibiu (Hermannstadt). This town in southern Transylvania controlled a significant part of the foreign trade towards the south-east.<sup>14</sup>

Elemér Mályusz (1898–1989) in his studies published in the 1980s argued that the intensity of the cattle export was higher than earlier supposed and also that the outflow of precious metals was less significant than previously thought.<sup>15</sup>

In the last decades András Kubinyi (1929–2007) published a number of studies devoted to the economic history of medieval Hungary, in which he also discussed in detail the problem of the 15<sup>th</sup>-century balance of foreign trade.<sup>16</sup> Kubinyi challenged the picture of a too serious negative balance of the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century foreign trade and argued for a revision of former claims. According to his analysis the export of cattle was higher than other historians calculated. He also insisted that large-scale cattle breeding had a positive side effect on the regions where the cattle came from. The prosperity of many late medieval market-towns (*oppida*) was a consequence of the increase in cattle breeding and the cattle trade. Towns like Szeged and Pest made a good profit out of cattle, and on a smaller scale from horse breeding and trading.

Besides these factors, mining, especially the mining of precious metals, had a positive effect as well on the increase in Hungarian exports. This activity generated financial prosperity and led to a significant concentration of purchasing power in the mining regions and mining towns. Imports were usually paid for with money minted from precious metals. Thus, in the course of the dynamic progress in trade relations, these regions attracted long-distance trade and also made the local merchants economically stronger.<sup>17</sup>

Thus one may suppose that the restoration of the foreign trade balance had started already in the mid 1400s. The commercial capital available in the south German merchant towns had the most significant impact on the development of Hungarian economy. According to Kubinyi it was only the local textile in-

dustries, and not urban industries and handicrafts in general, that were negatively affected by the inflow of foreign industrial products.

Hungary in the period of Matthias Corvinus was closely connected to the international economic exchanges, its role was mainly relevant from the point of view of economics and economic history because of its production of precious metals and also because of its cattle exports. Hungary was a convenient market for textile products, especially cloth, and metal wares, and in this respect the role of Hungary was similar to other central European countries. □

## Notes

1. Ferenc Kováts, *Nyugatmagyarország áruforgalma a XV. században a pozsonyi harmincadkönyv alapján* (Budapest, 1902).
2. See Sándor Domanovszky, "A harmincadvám eredete," in id., *Gazdaság és társadalom a középkorban*, ed. Ferenc Glatz (Budapest, 1979), 51–99 (originally published as "A harmincadvám eredete" in Budapest in 1916). The following works are also relevant to the subject: Pál Zsigmond Pach, *A harmincadvám eredete* (Budapest, 1990) (Pach, a student of Domanovszky, intentionally gave his book the same title as his former professor's); id., "Hogyan lett a harmincadvám huszad? (1436–1457)," *Történelmi Szemle* (Budapest) 37, 3–4 (1995): 257–276; id., "A harmincadvám Erdélyben és Havasalföldön a 15. század első felében," *Történelmi Szemle* 40, 1–2 (1998): 33–41; id., "A harmincadvám az Anjou-korban és a 14–15. század fordulóján," *Történelmi Szemle* 41, 3–4 (1999): 231–277; Mária Pakucs-Willcocks, *Sibiu—Hermannstadt: Oriental Trade in Sixteenth Century Transylvania* (Cologne–Weimar–Vienna, 2007), 16–20; Zsolt Simon, "A baricsi és kölpényi harmincadok a 16. század elején," *Századok* (Budapest) 140, 5 (2006): 815–882 (especially 815–823).
3. F Kováts, "A magyar arany világtörténeti jelentősége és kereskedelmi összeköttetésünk a nyugattal a középkorban," *Történelmi Szemle* 11, 1 (1922): 104–143 (especially 120).
4. Kováts (139, 196) calculated the total value of the goods exported at 166,564 forints and the total value of imports at 19,784 forints.
5. Ibid., 119, 139.
6. Ibid., 196–197.
7. Jenő Szűcs, *Városok és kézművesség a XV. századi Magyarországon* (Budapest, 1955), 182.
8. Oszkár Paulinyi, "Nemesfémtermelésünk és országos gazdaságunk általános alakulása a bontakozó és a kifejtett feudalizmus korszakában (1000–1526): Gazdag föld—szegény ország," *Századok* 16, 4 (1972): 561–602. A more recent edition is: Oszkár Paulinyi, *Gazdag föld—szegény ország*, eds. János Búza and István Draskóczy (Budapest–Miskolc, 2005), 183–227.

9. Paulinyi, "Nemesfémtermelésünk," 597–598.
10. Győző Ember, "Magyarország XVI. századi külkereskedelmének történetéhez," *Századok* 95, 1 (1961): 1–46; id.; "Aktív vagy passzív? Külkereskedelmünk a 15. században," *História* (Budapest) 4 (1983): 15.
11. Győző Ember, "Ungarns Außenhandel mit dem Westen um die Mitte des XVI. Jahrhunderts," in *Der Aussenhandel Ostmitteleuropas 1450–1650: die ostmitteleuropäischen Volkswirtschaften in ihren Beziehungen zu Mitteleuropa*, ed. Ingomar Bog (Cologne–Vienna, 1971), 86–104.
12. Győző Ember, *Magyarország nyugati külkereskedelme a XVI. század közepén* (Budapest, 1988), 82, 95–100.
13. Simon, 815–882.
14. Pakucs-Willcocks, *passim*.
15. Elemér Mályusz, "Állatkiviteli tilalmak Magyarországon a XIV–XV. század fordulóján," *Agrártörténeti Szemle* (Budapest) 25, 2 (1983): 319–326; id., "Bajorországi állatkivitelünk a XIV–XV. században," *Agrártörténeti Szemle* 28, 1–2 (1986): 1–33; id., "Der ungarische Goldgulden in Mitteleuropa zu Beginn des 15. Jahrhunderts," *Études historiques hongroises* (Budapest) [7], 1 (1985): 21–35.
16. András Kubinyi, "Wirtschaftsgeschichtliche Probleme in den Beziehungen Ungarns zum Westen am Ende des Mittelalters," in *Westmitteleuropa, Ostmitteleuropa. Vergleiche und Beziehungen: Festschrift für Ferdinand Seibt zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. Winfried Eberhard, Hans Lemberg, Heinz-Dieter Heimann, and Robert Luft (Munich, 1992), 165–174; id., "A későközépkori magyar-nyugati kereskedelmi kapcsolatok kérdése," in *R. Várkonyi Ágnes emlékkönyv születésének 70. évfordulója ünnepére*, ed. Péter Tusor (Budapest, 1998), 109–117.
17. B. Nagy, "Transcontinental Trade from East-Central Europe to Western Europe (Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries)," in ... *The Man of Many Devices, Who Wandered Full Many Ways... Festschrift in Honor of János M. Bak*, eds. B. Nagy and Marcell Sebők (Budapest, 1999), 347–356.

## Abstract

The Problem of the Financial Balance in the Foreign Trade of Late Medieval Hungary: A Century-Long Historiographical Debate

The study explores the commercial interactions of Hungary and the adjoining regions in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century on the basis of custom registers and other sources. The late medieval commercial balance of Hungary was the object of intense controversy in the historiography of the last decades. In 1902, Ferenc Kováts published the thirtieth customs registers (1457–1458) of Bratislava (Pressburg, Pozsony). As the surviving customs registers and the other sources on these matters are few in number, reconstructing these foreign commercial connections is mainly a question of hypotheses. Different authors acknowledge variable characteristics of trade relations. One of these points is that the balance of foreign trade was negative, demonstrating a very definite surplus of imported goods (89%) in contrast to the export values (11%). It is also commonly accepted that most of the imported merchandise was manufactured goods, mainly textiles, especially cloth

and metal wares, while the export was dominated by animals and not by manufactured primary products. Still, though the surviving customs registers are among the most important sources of commercial history, one should consider the fact that the trade balance is not the only characteristic of medieval foreign trade. In this respect, the thirtieth customs registers of 1542 can modify our knowledge of the composition of foreign trade.

**Keywords**

Matthias Corvinus, East-Central European trade, thirtieth customs registers, medieval Hungary