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Faculty of Humanities

Doctoral School of History

Auxiliary Sciences of History Doctoral Program

Thesis of PhD Dissertation

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Mining tokens and their historical background in Hungary from the middle of the 16th till the end of 18th century

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Budapest 2013

1. Importance of the project

Mining tokens with their modest appearance have never belonged to the widely known museum collections. The reason for this is that they were not made from precious metals, like the currency and they are also much scarcer, thus hardly available even for collectors. Their patterns usually consisted of only a few characters making them hard to interpret even for the researchers. Though mining tokens are very notable from the view of numismatics, mining and economic history. They help in getting some knowledge about the functioning of mines in the past. At those times mines took more important part in the economy of the country than in any other period of the history.

In the 16th century, as the consequence of the conquest of the Ottoman Empire, the Kingdom of Hungary lost lots of lands used in agriculture before. In the remained lands which were mostly not suitable for agriculture there were some important mining areas. The significance of mining became greater and according to financial statements from the late 16th century 1/4th of the country's estimated income was from mining.

2. Antecedents, historiographical review

Hungarian mining tokens are important not only in the history of mining but played a great role in monetary history as well. Réthy László intended to deal with them in a separate volume in his standard work, the *Corpus Nummorum Hungariae*, first published in 1889.¹ Several volumes on the currency were published, but this volume was never finished. Scientific research was founded in 1920, when Ödön Gohl published his paper 'Hungarian mining tokens' in the *Numizmatikai Közlöny*. According to our open-minded researcher not

¹ Réthy L.: *Corpus Nummorum Hungariae*. Magyar Egyetemes Éremtár I. Buda-pest, 1899. p. 6.

really familiar mining tokens: “these coins belong to the most interesting and illuminating group of Hungarian tokens”.² Unfortunately after his pioneer work there was nobody for half a century to be engaged in this field. Since the 1970’s some articles have been published about the up-to-date mining tokens and not only in our country but in Czechoslovakia as well. I personally started to work in this field for the encouragement of Dr. István Gedai. My own articles have been published since 1992. We made the fully comprehensive catalogue of Hungarian mining tokens in 2008.

3. Resources of the research, methods of processing

In contrast to the catalogued and well processed theme of currency the collection of the tokens and their cataloguing has special significance. This sort of museological material is among those special ones where new pieces or even new types can be found in the future.

Before 1920 mainly short, German language descriptions existed, but certain definitions, classifications, country or mine names and locations had already evolved in the literature. Though their explanations are missing – according to the traditions of the old descriptions – these sources can and must be used as starting point. Namely they were made by professionals who were supposed to justify their data. Beside of this fact their age is closer to the subject about what they were writing. Naturally proper critique of the descriptions is essential.

The older numismatic literature were summarised well in the catalogue written by Gohl in 1920, but the amount of collected material naturally became greater in the last almost one hundred years.

But what is more important fortunately I was able to specify the uncertain and incorrect classifications and assessments. The background of the use of mining tokens needs to have a complex approach including the inspection of the objects, the knowledge of the mining history and the available data of archives. Certain parts of economy, management and political history have importance as well. Personally I tried to give a very complex presentation from the view of inspection during the analysis. I considered mining tokens taking part strongly in the function of mines, their role of the mining economy. I also used the available, unfortunately not too numerous sources of archives.

Mining tokens can be connected to only a part of mining regions and settlements. But their incidence and existence is contingent. They were not definitely used at places we would expect, or sometimes the coins or the data on them are lost. However it is possible to work with existing coins or with ones known from archive files.

4. Results

The collection and classification of numismatic material of mining tokens

² Gohl Ödön: A magyar bányapénzek. Numizmatikai Közlöny, 18–19 (1919–20) 1. p.

Collecting and cataloguing the currently known fully comprehensive numismatic material of mining tokens was the first step. This gave the principles to research their historical background. The presentation of the studied numismatic material is part of the work, as well as the description of the main types according to mining regions and mining places; and also a short summary of the local mining for each mining resort, description of the characteristic numismatic material and making conclusions.

The determination of mining tokens and the clarification of their function

The earlier literature handled vaguely the determination and the clarification of the real function of mining tokens. Almost all of the copper coins from the 16–17th century were reckoned among the mining tokens. Very few concrete and accurate determination of function regarding early copper coins was found so I considered it to one of my main tasks. So I was able to differentiate copper small change, emergency coins, and siege coins, a subtype of the latter from the real mining tokens.

From the early ages one of the hardships of the mining production was that the mines were generally found far from the populated areas and it was difficult to approach them. Those lands were barren and the miners had not much time to work in the fields beside of their work. So the operator of the mine covered their daily food supply by his own store. His interest was to sell the food at low price because it was important to keep the salary at low level. This view of economy and strategy was recognisable not only at the private sector but at the state mines, too.

The real mining tokens satisfied all of the needs which were important in the life of a small community in contrast to the money used in general. They did not function as a good and universal currency and to treasure up them was impossible as well: the strict standard requirement satisfying content of precious metal – to keep their value – was missing. The coins were used at the arbitrary rate guaranteed by the operator, owner or lodger. In spite all of this, mining tokens were currency and among their users it fitted as a measure of value, useful money in everyday-life and was eligible to be treasured up.

The function of mining tokens in the mines

Beside of relieving the supply of the workers they had an important role in the support of the profit-earning, as the owner of the mine had the right to supply his workers, usually through his own products. Thus mining tokens were used to pay for the allotments of agriculture. The owner sometimes got into a monopolistic position which could have been easily abused. Mining tokens enabled the full wage not to be paid through expensive silver coins and to bind the workers to the specific mines through economic pressure. Mining tokens were not accepted by others so the financial situation of the workers was not good enough to let them move. Especially it was true for miners having family. There was no need for emergency to issue mining tokens. Whereas shortage of coins, difficulties of workers' supply is the usually claim in the justification of owners. In the reality it was proposed to provide a margin at both retail and wholesale and to guarantee manpower. For the miner it was essential to buy food

and drink every day. To do this he needed the smallest denominations in circulation. Ensure on this the nominal value of mining tokens acted on the smallest denomination.

Highly inspected series of mining tokens

The detailed review of the circumstances of highlighted mining locations and use of mining tokens can be done through complex interpretation of resources. Such mining locations are Úrvölgy-Besztercebánya in the mining region of Lower-Hungary; Szomolnok, Dobsina, Főnixszhuta, and Szalánk in the mining region of Upper-Hungary; Nagybánya and Felsőbánya in the mining region of Szatmár.

Structure and changes of structure of mining management

The possibilities of the use of mining tokens were strongly influenced by the structural change of mining management. The most important series of mining tokens are from the large mines handled or given into rent by the treasury according to the catalogued mining token material.

Revealing the history of copper polturák from Selmecebánya and Kassa

This group of coins were treated vaguely by the earlier literature, but later they were categorised to the group of mining tokens. Though the copper polturák connect strongly to the Hungarian mining history, as the matter of fact, they had a completely different role and became important nationwide through the problems originating from their use. Their function can be clarified through the complex investigation of the historical data which prove originally they were intended to be the first copper change. Their eight-years-long use has to be called an attempt only, because the parliament did not give consent to their minting. After they failed their use was stopped for a while. The reason of their depreciation was the neglecting of quantity control given by theoreticians. Disappointment originating from their failure became one of the reasons to start the Rákóczi war of independence.

Stylistic characteristics of the copper polturák derive from the mining tokens issued by the treasury. Later the effect of these marks is recognisable in the image of the emergency coins.

In the future there is a chance for international cooperation regarding mining tokens and their related history with Slovakian researchers more and more interested in the history of mining.

4. Earlier publication written in the topic of my dissertation

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Szemán Attila: Közöletlen selmecebányai bányapénzek a Központi Bányászati Múzeum gyűjteményében Numizmatikai Közlöny 90-91(1991-1992) p.159-163. VII. tábla

Szemán Attila: Bányapénzeink funkciója a bányagazdaságban BKL Bányászat 129(1996) millecentenáriumi múzeumi szám p.483-487.

Szemán Attila: Szomolnoki bányapénzeink egy csoportja Numizmatikai Közlöny 94-95(1995-1996) p.63-73. t.1.

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Szemán, Attila – Kiss, Gábor Bergwerksmünzen Ungarn und Siebenbürgen (1548-1947) Szerzői magánkiadás 2008. 504.p.

Szemán Attila: A szatmári bányászat bányüzemeltetési- és birtokviszonyai a bányapénzek tükrében a kora-újkorban 322-335.p. in: Tanulmányok *Buza János* 70. születésnapjára szerk.: Bessenyei József - Draskóczy István Budapest-Miskolc, 2009.

Szemán Attila: Úrvölgyi bányapénzeink in: Bányászattörténeti Közlemények. Rudabánya, 6(2011) 1.sz. 15-45.p.