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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTORY PAPERS

PAPERS ABOUT HUNGARIAN PIPE HISTORY

ARCHAEOLOGICAL PAPERS FROM NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

An interesting monument to the memory of Debrecen pipe-making: the pipe-pot

by Emőke P. Szalay

For centuries, the Debrecen pipe was sought after throughout the historic area of Hungary that filled the Carpathian Basin, and even beyond its borders, in Western Europe. It was the potters who made the pipes.

In Hungary, the earliest potters' guild was formed at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The beginnings of the history of the Debrecen potters' guild can be traced back to the mid-sixteenth century; their charter of 1574 has survived in the records of the town's magistracy (Archiv of Hajdú-Bihar County IV. 1011/3. 1574. 30th of Nov. 634-637). In the charter, in the list of clay work that the master potters were permitted to engage in, only the manufacture of pots and stoves are mentioned.

The mention of pipe-making in Debrecen is found for the first time at the end of the seventeenth century. As it was far easier to master than pottery, the town council turned a blind eye when elderly potters and widows pursued this activity (Ecsedi 1932, 8).

In 1703 the town's magistracy, at the request of the potters' guild, gave official permission to widows to make pipes:

> A Fazekas céh inställ, hogy a pipacsinálást a szegény Eözvegyeknek engedgye meg a N. Tanács. Meg is engedtetik olyan conditioval, hogy itt a városban edgyet se adgyanak el, hanem öszveséggel külsőbb adják el (Ecsedi 1932, 8).
>
> The Potters' Guild requests that the Honourable Council allows poor Widows to engage in pipe-making. It does so, on the condition that they do not sell so much as one within the town, but sell all of them outside the town.

In the course of the eighteenth century the better part of the potters turned from pottery to pipe-making. This is supported by statistical work from the end of the century which, in providing information about Debrecen, mentions that pipes of excellent quality are fired in the town. The number of master craftsmen engaged in this work is so significant that it is recorded that the pipe-makers had formed their own guild (Ecsedi 1932, 9). But the public records show that this is an error, and that the pipe-makers never had an independent guild.

In the eighteenth century, and especially at the end of the century, the guild of Debrecen potters had one of the greatest memberships in the country. The guild documents and tax records, *Classificatio opificorum*, give the names of around 100 masters each year.

One source deserves attention which gives a qualification to this large number by clarifying the difference between the potters and the pipe-makers. In 1785, in a register of craftsmen and their products prepared by royal command, the potters' guild appears in two places. The first goes under the title of *Fazekas céh revizidje a hivatal folytatása szerént* (A revision of the potters' guild according to the authorised pursuit of their trade), and lists 103 masters with 286 persons working in their workshops. Fortunately, the source does not end with the list of names, but also turns to their products, including pipes. In the last rubric of the register the total number of pipes produced at the time of the census is given, according to which 2,394,000 pipes were made in the workshops in 1785.

The second list goes under the title *A fazekas céh mesterei* (Masters of the potters' guild). Here only 50 names are listed, alongside them the apprentices and boys, of which there were 17 and 52 respectively. What is interesting about the two registers is that the names listed in the latter also appear in the first list, showing that the pot-making potters also made pipes (P. Szalay 1986, 36-38). From this it would appear that out of the large number of master craftsmen listed in the potters' guild, only a half were listed as potters. At the same time it is worth noting that even these masters made pipes as well as pottery, while the other half of the guild's membership were only pipe-makers (P. Szalay 1986, 4).

The next statistical source, *Die Statistik des Königreichs Ungarn*, coming hardly a decade-and-a-half later (Schwartner 1798), deals with Debrecen pipe-making at some length. One must accord special attention - he writes - to Debrecen's native industry, their famous pipe-firing. Here, 138 master craftsmen, together with their wives, children, assistants and apprentices fire more than 10,000,000 red-clay pipes every year. There was also a great demand for the mouthpiece accessories, of which 100,000 were made in a year (Ecsedi 1932, 9).

The popularity of the Debrecen pipe carried on into the nineteenth century. In 1818 the fame of the Debrecen Makra pipe is recorded.

An 1847 entry states that 10,000,000 pipes were made. These were black. The mouthpiece-makers turned 200,000 mouthpieces. This gigantic turnover, in addition to satisfying the home demand, was transported abroad to France, England and the USA, to be purchased by sailors (P. Szalay 2000, 35).

The making and firing of pipes

The Debrecen pipe was made out of the red clay found at the town's western limit. The master formed a small stick out of the prepared clay: this was the rolling process. He placed the upper peg into the rolled piece, now bent in half, and then pressed it into a mould. He put the end peg into the smaller part. So he prepared the model and then it was followed by the forming of the neck.

Figures 1 & 2: *Déri Museum pipe-pot. 1. (left) profile of the pot; 2. (right) detail of the base.*

After drying came embellishment or refinement, in the course of which the pipe-maker carved the form according to necessity and then decorated the sides and neck by impressing patterns made out of wood, bone or later iron. After being thoroughly dried the pipe was polished with beeswax after which it was fired. The dried-out pipes were placed into a pipe pot. This so-called canvas pot was an unglazed container which really was shaped like a pot. In shape it widened out upwards and was pot-bellied; depending upon its size it could hold 80, 100 or 120 pipes. Between 50 and 60 of these pots full of pipes were placed into the kiln for firing. The tops of the pots were covered with tiles and sealed with a thin layer of clay. This required some skill, for if the clay layer closed too firmly, then the pipes did not fire properly and became bluish or, as they said, suffocated. In the centre of the inside of the kiln there was a pillar around which the pipe pots were placed in circles on stones. Heating, for which short pieces of wood were used, took three hours. After this, larger pieces of wood were used, in the course of which the fire enveloped the containers. The carbon was drawn out after 28-32 billets had been burnt. 'When the pot was nice and white and the pipe was shining like silver, they ended the firing' (Ecsedi 1932, 24).

If the person doing the firing didn't understand their job the operation failed, the pipes stuck together and became useless and had to be thrown out. 100-120 kg of wood was used in the firing process, producing 3,500-4,000 pipes. The day after the firing the pipes were poured out of the pots onto a piece of cloth or sacking.

One of the curiosities of the Déri Museum is its pipe-pot (Museum Accession Number V. 77. 87. 1. Height: 20.5cm. Lower diameter: 19cm), Figures 1 to 4. There is no information about its accurate provenance, because it was saved as a leftover residual from the old storage

Figure 3: *Déri Museum pipe-pot showing the pipes inside the pot.*

Figure 4: *Detail of pipes inside the Déri Museum pipe-pot.*

inventory. It became a museum piece around the turn of the nineteenth- twentieth century. On the basis of the earth colour ornamentation on the surface of the one-handled container, this simple 'canvas pot', made out of heat-proof material, was probably made in Rév in the county of Bihar. Its neck is broken, making it possible to place the pipes inside (Figs. 3-4). There are traces of plastering on its exterior. There are fired pipes inside the container.

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