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Issues of the Revitalization of Historic Centres in Small Towns in Warmia

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Abstract

Warmia is a historical region in north-eastern Poland, which – together with the neighbouring region of Mazury – is called the Land of a Thousand Lakes. The conquest of this territory by the Teutonic Order, which took place in the 13th century, gave rise to the foundation of 12 towns in Warmia. The towns were planned in line with the medieval urban patterns, featuring chessboard-like layout of a grid of streets, a central marketplace with a town hall in the middle, and compact blocks of townhouses.

The problems related to the revitalization of small towns in Warmia are mostly associated with their historic centres, which manifest their identity. The complexity of elements of which such historic urban centres are composed (spatial factors, such as urbanistic and architectural ones, related to the conservation of historic buildings and structures, economic and social aspects) necessitates such transformations that will lead to a better exposure and functional revitalization of the old town in comparison to other parts of a city. The aim of our study has been to find out how the image and functions performed of old towns can be improved. The changes involve certain urbanistic and architectural transformations as well as economic and social revitalization. The key to success is to develop revitalization programmes for individual historic districts in the towns of Warmia.

The research has enabled us to draw conclusions in regard to including numerous aspects and connections between spatial factors and functions of old towns. Revitalization efforts should focus on the elimination of sources of threat, improvement of the technical condition and aesthetic values of the space (urbanistic patterns and layouts, architecture of urban complexes) and the betterment of living standards and conditions for local residents. Having achieved this, we will re-focus on the status of historic town centres, on their essential role in the contemporary life of towns, and on the need to preserve the heritage of whole Warmia.

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1. Introduction

Warmia is a region in north-eastern Poland, whose history of settlement dates back to the earliest time of the Polish statehood. Together with the neighbouring region of Mazury, this area is known as the Land of a Thousand Lakes. The conquest of this territory, at that time occupied by Baltic Prussian tribes, completed by the order of Teutonic Knights in the 13th century gave rise to the foundation of twelve Warmian towns. For centuries, most of them have been small towns. The policy of the Teutonic Order aimed at setting up towns (all were created within the span of a century) in a way that combined military and topographic factors (fortified walls surrounding towns located in hardly accessible places) with the medieval principles of urbanistic composition (a chessboard-like layout of a grid of streets, a central marketplace with a town hall in the middle, compact blocks of townhouses). The military origin of the Warmian towns (each town lay at the foot of a castle) distinguishes these urban centres from ones located elsewhere in Poland [1]. The history of these towns as well as their more contemporary development are a consequence of their similar location, functions and, above all, spatial characteristics.

The current spatial structure of small towns in Warmia, including their historic centres, results from more recent, dramatic historical events, especially the ones which occurred at the end of World War Two, when the Soviet Army began a purposeful and systematic destruction of historic buildings in East Prussia. Another contributor was the post-war reconstruction of damaged towns, which was subordinated to the then political system of Poland. As a result, many historic town centres lost their identity. The consequences can be seen in many towns across the whole region. Frequently, historic patterns of urban complexes were violated and the buildings replacing the ruined ones were over scaled or designed paying little respect to the traditional architecture. These observations justify all efforts to create revitalization programmes for Warmian towns, which represent the material heritage of the regional culture.

2. The spatial structure of historic centres in Warmian towns

Small towns in Warmia represent regular urban structures arranged in chessboard-like patterns, characteristic for the Middle Ages. The medieval concepts dictated the layout of streets, the size and proportions of market squares and the location of public facilities and buildings in what is now known as the Old Town in each Warmian urban settlements. These historic centres, in most cases, are still a dominant element in composition patterns and in broader town centres (Fig. 1.).

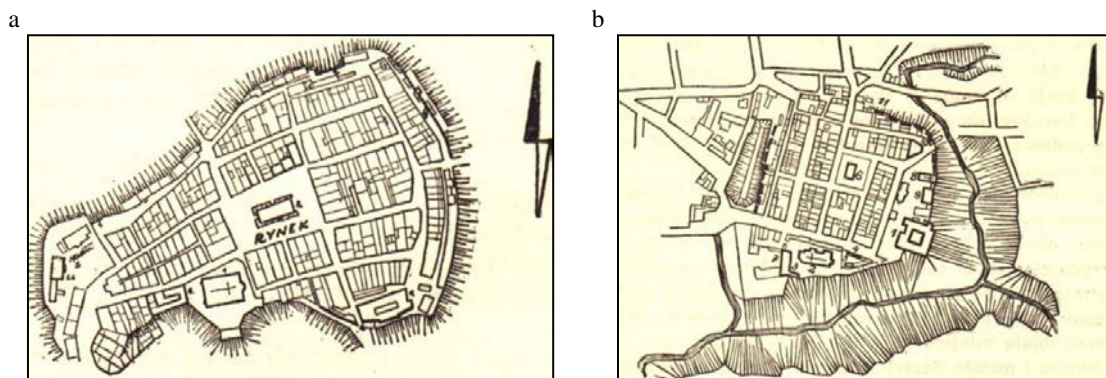


Fig. 1. (a) Street plan of Old Town in Orneta; (b) Street plan of Old Town in Reszel [2].

The current state of preservation of these historic town districts is rather varied across the whole region. The two main reasons are the war damage and post-war reconstruction. The latter was often completely detached from the

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