

Bebek became *magister tavarnicorum*, and Ladislaus Újlaki, one of the ringleaders in 1403, was appointed ban of Mačva. Archbishop Kanizsai was appeased by his appointment to the head of the imperial chancellery. From this time on the former rebels or their sons were once again given access to the *aula*. In 1422 even the exiled Bishop Ludányi was restored to Eger. All this, however, was no more than a compromise made for the sake of internal stability, for political power remained firmly in the hands of the king's former supporters.

The two buttresses of the regime were Nicholas Garai and Hermann of Cilli, both of whom were Sigismund's relatives and his intimate advisers until their deaths. Garai held the office of palatine for 31 years (1402-33), his unwavering fidelity receiving its due reward in the form of lavish grants. At the time of his death he possessed 13 castles and several other estates, stretching from the Austrian border to the county of Timiş, among them Kőszeg, Pápa, Csesznek and Siklós. Count Hermann, his father-in-law, rarely held any office – he was ban of Slavonia from 1406 to 1408 and then again from 1423 to 1435; but his informal influence on matters of politics was nevertheless considerable. Just like his father, Garai was a convinced champion of resolute royal power, and Hermann seems to have been his staunch ally in all his efforts to strengthen central authority. This is why in Hungarian historiography, based as it has been upon the traditions of the nobility, these men have until recently had an evil reputation. The 'Garai-Cillei league', so the old story ran, manipulated the helpless king like a mere puppet, using him as an instrument in the service of their own selfish aims. This interpretation, whilst being naive in the light of the facts, went back to a legend that was widely known in the fifteenth century. The fullest version of it has been preserved in John Thuróczy's chronicle. According to him, the captive Sigismund was entrusted to the Garai brothers by the king's enemies, who knew 'the implacable hatred that these nurtured towards the king because of the murder of their father'. However, taking pity on the young ruler, who wept miserably in his prison, the mother of the Garai dissuaded her sons from taking vengeance. On hearing this, Sigismund 'immediately threw himself at her feet', adopted her as his mother and promised to love her sons as his own brothers.<sup>1</sup> Now it is evident that these events never took place. What the chronicle has preserved would appear to be one of those stories with which nobles in out of the way manor houses passed the time while waiting for Sigismund's demise.

#### FOREIGNERS AND PARVENUS

The king's other chief advisers were all foreigners. Stibor, a Pole, administered the estates of the archbishopric of Esztergom and the

bishopric of Eger after the revolt, and died as voivode of Transylvania in 1414. Pipo of Ozora, an Italian, became count of Timiş in 1404 and governed seven south-eastern counties until his death in 1426, while his kinsmen occupied the sees of Kalocsa and Oradea. At the same time Pipo retained his office as count of the chamber of salt, and from 1415 even extended his influence over the entire financial administration. Eberhard, a German, became Kanizsai's successor as arch-chancellor in 1404, and when he died in 1419 his office passed, together with the bishopric of Zagreb, to his nephew, John of Alben, who had been the queen's chancellor since 1406. In 1423 Alben was appointed imperial chancellor and head of the Hungarian secret chancellery, which meant that he had exclusive control of all of Sigismund's seals until his death in 1433. In the last years of the reign it was Matko of Talovac, the descendant of a merchant family from Dubrovnik, who gathered extensive powers in his hands. He began his career in 1429 as castellan of Belgrade, became ban of Slavonia in 1435 and then ban of Croatia one year later, while his brother Franko functioned as ban of Severin. At the time of Sigismund's death, they and their two younger brothers were governing the possessions of the archbishopric of Kalocsa, and those of the bishoprics of Cenad and Zagreb and the priory of Vrana. They were also organising the defence of the frontier from Turnu Severin to the Adriatic Sea. According to a contemporary list they were in command of no fewer than 52 castles.

Besides these foreigners, several others were given offices in the kingdom of more or less importance. Among them were Sigismund's sister, Marguerite, and her brother-in-law, Frederick of Hohenzollern, who governed several counties for years by means of their German followers; lords from Bohemia and Moravia who had joined Sigismund as a result of his lieutenancy in Bohemia; Stibor's kinsmen and retainers from Poland who guarded his castles; Florentines from Pipo's family; Styrians in the households of Hermann of Cilli and the queen; and also Dalmatians who had fled to Hungary after the arrival of Ladislaus of Naples. After Sigismund ascended the imperial throne in 1411 the number of foreigners further increased. From 1419 to 1423 the archbishopric of Esztergom was governed by Georg von Hohenlohe, bishop of Passau and imperial chancellor. The county of Trenčín was mortgaged to Louis, duke of Brzeg in Silesia, until 1421. The dukes of Masovia, Garai's brothers-in-law, administered the bishopric of Veszprém in 1412. In this year eight out of the 14 bishoprics were in the hands of foreigners, and 23 counties were governed by counts who had not been born in Hungary. Although the role of foreigners had been something of a raw nerve since the time of Saint Stephen, there had never been a period in Hungarian history when their influence was as great as it was during the last 30 years of Sigismund's reign. The

completeness of the king's victory in 1403 is perfectly shown by the extent to which he was able thereafter to disregard public opinion.

It must be added, however, that few of the foreigners settled permanently in Hungary. Most did not acquire hereditary possessions and so did not become, to use a later term, *indigenae*. There were, of course, some exceptions: the sons of Onofrio Bardi, Pipo's financial deputy, became lords of Bojnice, and some of the captains of Stibor and Cilli found a place among the provincial nobility. But it seems that Cilli generally rewarded his men by means other than land grants. The Czechs and Moravians returned home with Sigismund when he was crowned king of Bohemia in 1420, while the Italians, coming from a civic milieu, were not really attracted by the noble way of life. On the other hand, it was purely accidental that the composition of the aristocracy was to be hardly affected by a period of foreign influence that lasted several decades. For Pipo died without heirs, the Stibor died out in 1434, the Wolfurt from Swabia disappeared in 1438 and the Cilli in 1456. The descendants of the Talovac were impoverished, while the last of the Alben, who no longer enjoyed the king's favour, moved back to Germany in 1436.

However great the number of foreigners might have been, most of Sigismund's supporters were Hungarians. The leading elite was largely transformed during the course of his reign. At the time of his death half of the 40 or so greatest landowners could be regarded as *homines novi*, and only five of them were foreigners. Nine of the founding members of the Order of the Dragon should be seen as belonging to this group of new barons, among them the secret chancellor, Emeric Perényi; the later judge royal, Peter Perényi; the ban of Mačva, John Maróti; the voivode, James Lack; Peter Lévai, called 'the Czech', the son of Ladislaus Sárói; and Nicholas Csáki. They, together with the Marcali, Jakcs, Rozgonyi, Pálóci, Bátori and Ország constituted the new political elite. They were all descendants of ancient noble families, they had belonged to the household, and were chosen by Sigismund to hold important offices and given suitable possessions. Each of them could trace his origins back through at least four or five generations, and some of their ancestors had already been in royal service under the Angevins. Now, when new men were needed to fill the governing elite, their advantageous position served as a launching pad for a series of brilliant careers. Matthew Pálóci, for example, who had been a simple squire of the household at the time of the revolt, became castellan of Diósgyőr in 1410 and then royal counsellor. He functioned as secret chancellor from 1419, as judge royal from 1425, and finally as palatine from 1435 until his death in December 1436. The important ecclesiastical benefices were also destined for the new barons' brothers or sons. George Pálóci, a brother of Matthew, became

bishop of Transylvania in 1419 and archbishop of Esztergom in 1423, while two of the Rozgonyi were bishops simultaneously from 1428.

## THE GOVERNMENT

After 1410 the royal council developed towards a higher degree of proficiency. It began to include members who were not drawn from among the barons and who were consequently entitled 'special counselors' (*consiliarius specialis*). Besides one or two royal captains, we mainly find among them men with special expertise: lawyers like Benedict Makrai and Stephen Aranyi; financial experts like Leonhard Noffri, an Italian, and Marcus of Nuremberg, a German; and administrators like the vice-chancellor, Ladislaus Csapi. Mark of Nuremberg was the initiator of the urban reforms of 1405, while Aranyi worked out the conception underlying the military reforms of 1432. In several respects their role recalls the activities of those who had elaborated the reform plan of the 1370s. But, whereas the latter had all been barons, Sigismund's experts may be called civil servants. They did not benefit from the income of an honour, nor were their services normally rewarded by grants of land, so they probably received a regular salary.

After 1403 Sigismund relied upon his barons and the household, and governed with the same unrestricted power as Charles or Louis had before him. No diets were summoned until 1435, and decisions continued to be made at court. The royal council and the household retained their exclusive grip on leadership. Nor was the ideology modified. Sigismund continued to refer to his 'plenitude of power' as his Angevin predecessors had done, and he used it in the same way. He was prepared to strike down even the greatest barons if he judged it necessary. In 1424 Nicholas 'of Salgó', who was a great-grandson of Thomas Szécsényi and whose father was a member of the Order of the Dragon, was condemned for counterfeiting coins. In spectacular fashion, the king razed his castle to the ground and confiscated the whole of his patrimony. In 1435 the son of James Lack, the voivode, met a similar disaster. The extent of royal authority is perfectly shown by the fact that in 1427, when the only son of Palatine Jolsvai died without heirs, it was sufficient for the court to send a squire to take over his immense heritage.

Nor did the king's frequent absences endanger internal stability. After Sigismund had become 'king of the Romans' in 1410 he spent nearly half of his time abroad. Not counting stays that lasted less than half a year, he spent altogether fourteen years away from Hungary. His longest absence was caused by the war against Venice and the council of Constance (December 1412 - February 1419), while the others were made necessary by the Hussite wars (December 1419 - April 1421,

October 1421 – April 1422), the council of Basle and the imperial coronation (June 1430 – October 1434) and the taking over of the reins of power in Bohemia (May 1436 – December 1437). Thus, for the first time in Hungarian history, the kingdom was left for years without its ruler. Nevertheless, internal order remained stable and government was never impaired. On 6 January 1414, after the proclamation of the council of Constance, Sigismund, then at Cremona, appointed Garai and Kanizsai, the imperial arch-chancellor, as his lieutenants (*vicarius*) for the time of his absence, conferring upon them the right of coinage and of granting pardons in his name. However, Garai remained in his entourage until 1418, and effective government in Hungary was led by Kanizsai, under the control of the arch-chancellor Eberhard and other barons who had stayed at home. The situation was similar between 1430 and 1434, during the king's second long absence from the kingdom. This time he was replaced by a council, the members of which bore the title of 'lieutenant general' (*vicarius generalis*). The council was led by the arch-chancellor, Archbishop George Pálóci who was assisted by the bishop of Eger, Peter Rozgonyi, Palatine Garai, the judge royal, Pálóci, the chief treasurer, John Rozgonyi, and by the *magister tavarnicorum* Peter Berzevici (until his death in 1433).

Since Sigismund took his secret seal on all of his journeys, his presence was felt even during his absences. He was always accompanied by part of the household and by several barons and their retinues, and they were often rewarded by grants and privileges. He also regularly received visitors from Hungary, who kept him informed of events at home. He would then take action if it seemed to him necessary. When Stibor died Sigismund sent a letter of condolence to his widow from Cremona. In 1431 he dispatched a message from Nuremberg to the ban of Mačva prohibiting him from contracting a marriage for his daughter that was not to the king's liking. In 1433 it was from Mantua that he forbade Ladislaus Szécsényi to mortgage one of his castles to his proscribed cousin, Nicholas 'of Salgó'.

Sigismund's exceptional authority was based not upon the royal honours, as had been the case under the Angevins, but upon his own prestige and the support of his barons. By the 1390s, the granting away of royal castles had undermined the foundations of the old regime. There was almost nothing left with which to endow the office-holding barons. The honour that had formerly been held by the judge royal had ceased to exist by 1392, after its centre, the castle of Bystrica (Považský hrad), had passed into private hands. In 1409 the few remaining castles in Slavonia were allotted for the maintenance of Queen Barbara and granted away permanently after 1419. What had been left of the honour of the ban of Mačva was given by hereditary grant to the prince of Serbia in 1411. The most important of the transformations came



after the king's captivity, with the suppression of the palatine's honour in 1402. Detricus Bebek, who was removed from office at that time, was the last palatine to hold royal castles as part of his office. His successor, Garai, received none. The royal castles were henceforth usually governed not by barons but by castellans appointed from the household. From the 1410s onwards they were often given the title of 'captain' (*capitaneus*), which seems to show that the nature of their commission had changed. Initially most of them were foreigners, but later Hungarian nobles came to form the majority within the group. Considerable power was enjoyed by some of them, like the two Stephen Rozgonyi, who governed 13 castles in the 1430s, including ones as important as Pressburg, Komárno, Tata or Timișoara. These castellans and captains, however extensive their commissions might be, were no longer powerful barons but simple agents of the royal will. Even if they happened to hold their office as an honour, their duty involved no more than the execution of royal orders. They played no part in the direction of affairs of state. The system of royal honours, which had been the very basis of government since the time of the Árpadians, ceased to exist and what had hitherto been the rule now became an exception. Only the voivode of Transylvania, the ban of Croatia and the counts of the Székely, of Timiș and of Pressburg were allowed the exceptional privilege of holding castles and estates by office. Indeed, the very fact that royal honours had once existed fell into oblivion, to such an extent that, until recently, nothing of their existence had been known.

## THE ROYAL DOMAIN

Sigismund tried to conserve – and even build upon – what remained of the royal domain with all possible means. He took possession of escheated properties with the same determination as his predecessors. His methods are well illustrated by the example of the castle of Turna, which he twice confiscated on the pretext of it having no legal heirs. In 1406 he extorted it from the collateral heirs by means of threats, then in 1436 he took it from the new owners by an unlawful verdict that, even today, seems astonishing. Between 1397 and 1437 a total of 62 castles and many other seigneuries (as in 1404 that of Debrecen and in 1420 the possessions of the last branch of the Lackfi) devolved upon the king through escheat or confiscation. Twenty-three cases out of the 62 directly followed the revolts of 1397 and 1403. The heritage of Sűbor junior, who died in 1434, was undoubtedly the best catch, for it comprised 11 great seigneuries in Hungary and several others in Moravia. When cousins from Poland appeared and laid claim to it, Palatine Pálóci obediently adjudged the whole of it to the Crown.

While the royal domain was gradually swelling through escheats and confiscations, from 1392 grants became smaller in size. With the exception of Garai, Cilli and Stibor, the king's supporters, both old and new, were much more moderately rewarded than the members of the league had once been. Sigismund can even be said to have become stingy as he grew old. The Talovac had been serving him for eight years before he finally deigned to bestow upon them the greater part of the Alsáni heritage. The Pálóci were given the escheated estate of Sárospatak as late as in 1429, while the Rozgonyi had to content themselves with a couple of villages. But even this level of economy was not sufficient to allow the royal domain to regain, or even to come close to regaining, the material importance that had been its chief characteristic in Louis's reign. Its further dissolution had nevertheless been arrested. According to a list of 1437, 52 castles were still in royal hands, not counting the border castles held by the Talovac on the Danube, in Bosnia and Croatia, to which the five castles of the voivode of Transylvania and the four of the count of the Székely should be added. This was somewhat more than had been at the ruler's disposal in about 1396.

The wealth of the queen had been greatly increased since Louis's reign. Although the two Elizabeths were far from poor, the extent of their possessions was not comparable to that of the royal domain. At the time of Sigismund's death, Barbara of Cilli was richer than her predecessors had ever been. As a result of the continuous growth of her property, in 1437 half of the 52 royal castles were owned by her, the core of her possessions being Óbuda and its appurtenances on the Great Plain, among them the town of Kecskemét with the authority over one part of the Cumans, called the 'Cumans of the Queen'. In 1409 she was given the former estates of the ban of Slavonia. When in 1419 a rumour arose that she had had a love affair with a German knight during her husband's stay at Constance, Sigismund deprived her of her possessions, dissolved her court and exiled her to Oradea. However, a couple of years later, he pardoned her, perhaps out of regard for Count Cilli, and in 1424 lavishly recompensed her for the loss of her former estates. She was now given, besides other estates, the counties of Trenčín and Zvolen and the revenues of the chamber of Kremnica. Later on several important estates of the northern region were mortgaged to her: Diósgyőr in 1427, the county of Liptov in 1430 and one part of the Stibor heritage in 1434. In 1427 she was permitted, once more, to have a household of her own, although its composition was somewhat more modest than that of her previous entourage. Whereas formerly its highest offices had been held by illustrious barons, as in the time of the Angevins and Mary, now they were filled by simple knights who were in no sense regarded as barons.

The number of royal castles having diminished to a dangerous level, their role was partly assumed by fortified towns. During the Angevin period there had been no recognition that such towns might one day play a role in the consolidation of royal authority. They had been considered merely as a source of revenue. However, during the course of successive revolts, it suddenly became apparent that they could also be a force to be reckoned with in the field of politics, as natural allies of the ruler in his struggle against the nobility. On the one hand, the leading elite in the towns was mostly of German and (to a lesser extent) Italian ethnic origin, which meant that they existed outside the world of noble solidarity. On the other hand, in the event of the weakening of central authority, they had every reason to fear the loss of their privileged position and that they would fall under lay or ecclesiastical lordship.

As early as 1402 Sigismund conferred staple right upon some of the towns for the very reason that they had remained faithful to him in the time of his 'necessity', that is, his captivity.<sup>2</sup> After 1403, Pressburg, Košice and Sopron – the most important towns – were entrusted to foreign captains, Buda together with its newly built castle being in the hands of the Nassis brothers from Dalmatia. Later on the king tried to increase the political weight of the towns. He urged, for instance, Prešov, Bardejov, Kežmarok, Spišská Nová Ves and Cluj to enclose themselves with a circuit of walls and even provided financial support for this costly undertaking. In 1405, for the first time in Hungarian history, Sigismund held an assembly for the envoys of the towns, in the course of which he enacted laws with obvious political implications, such as the one by which he conferred upon each of the fortified towns the right to execute criminals. Several of the other royal towns were now promised that they would obtain the privileges enjoyed by the free royal cities if they too built circuits of walls. It was not Sigismund's fault that most of these efforts ultimately came to nothing, partly through lack of resources, partly because of the indifference of those concerned. The walls of Debrecen, for example, were never erected, and the town itself was granted away to Prince Stephen of Serbia in 1411. The political importance of the towns had nevertheless been considerably increased, and they were to play a significant role in the internal struggles of the 1440s.

### THE COUNTIES

Sigismund also tried to win the support of the provincial nobility. His chances were less than promising, however, since the old hostility between court and province had if anything been intensified rather



than appeased. Nevertheless, since the 1390s Sigismund's chief enemies had been the baronial league and the old aristocracy, who were ever willing to revolt. Confronted as he was by such animosity, the counties could even be considered as potential allies. That is why he took several measures during his long reign that considerably enlarged the authority of the counties in the fields of policing and of civil and military administration. Hitherto the counties had not possessed such extensive powers. They had had the right to execute criminals, to proclaim royal ordinances and, at least since the time of Charles I, to carry out inquiries upon royal orders. Since the 1350s they had also been able to convoke 'proclaimed assemblies' (*proclamata congregatio*) with a view to making official inquiries into local affairs. Apart from these functions, however, they had remained essentially an organ of the local nobility. It was only under Sigismund that the long process began, in the course of which the counties, assuming ever more responsibilities, were slowly transformed into the local organs of central administration.

As early as 1397 the decree of Timișoara authorised the deputy counts and the noble magistrates to proceed in cases involving 'violent trespasses' (*actus potentiarum*), that is, acts of aggression committed by one landowner against another. In essence, this particular group of crimes involved the seizure of someone else's property, the shedding of blood and the unlawful occupation of another's possessions. The county, whose responsibility had hitherto been restricted to the process of inquiry, was henceforth obliged to provide an 'immediate' remedy for the complaint. Only in the event of an appeal was the case handed over to the great judges of the kingdom. With regard to such cases, it was of crucial importance that the law annulled all those former exemptions that were liable to infringe upon the county's competence. From 1409, the procedural mechanism was the 'proclaimed assembly', which was to be attended by the entire political community of the county in order to act as witnesses in some of the most serious cases.

The county's role in the field of military administration had also been increasing since it had been given the responsibility of preparing the registers that were necessary for the mobilisation of the *militia portalis*. But in this respect the decisive moment was to come only in the 1430s, when in the face of the threats presented by the Ottomans and the Hussites, Sigismund attempted to reorganise the army. During his stay at Siena in 1432 he commissioned a comprehensive military reform project, the aim of which was to establish a relatively well-equipped army instead of the hitherto regularly summoned but almost useless general levy of the nobility. 'What benefit would arise from a general levy of the gentlemen of the realm for the defence and preservation of the kingdom,' he asked, 'if many of them, hindered by

poverty, age, or other weaknesses, appear on crutches rather than with arms.<sup>3</sup> The king, therefore, suggested that, instead of summoning everyone in person, the poorest nobles should be given an exemption, with the ensuing loss in effectives being retrieved by means of the *militia portalis*. He demanded the equipment of three archers from each group of one hundred tenants, promising in return that neither his own nor his barons' possessions would be exempted from this obligation. He also suggested that campaigns, which had traditionally lasted for only fifteen days, should be prolonged for 'as long as it may seem necessary to the lord king.'<sup>4</sup> Finally, he wanted to know whether Serbia, Bulgaria and the other 'realms' of the Hungarian crown were to be regarded as parts of Hungary, within which the levy could be summoned.

Sigismund was evidently appealing to the vanity of the whole nobility and to their respect for tradition when, turning to the chronicles to buttress his arguments, he proposed that the warriors of each county 'should take the field under the leadership of the count of their own county, as was the ancient custom';<sup>5</sup> but he seems also to have wanted to carry through his reforms with the support of the lesser nobility. Not only did he insist that his proposals should be sent to all counties in a written form and be discussed by them in their assemblies, he also wanted that every nobleman, 'one by one, should give his opinion freely according to his feelings without fear.'<sup>6</sup> He did not fail to emphasise that his reforms were conceived 'in order to alleviate the burdens of the poor nobles'.

The future of the proposed reform was to be decided by the diet that, after 38 years of non-parliamentary government, was summoned by the king to meet in Pressburg in March 1435. Of all the king's proposals, however, only the one concerning the *militia portalis* was agreed to. In all other respects, the burden of the kingdom's defence was shifted onto the king and the barons. Demagoguery, which had entered Hungarian history for the first time as a political weapon, had not yet produced the desired effect. The consequences of the decision – the fatal weakening of the kingdom's armed forces after Sigismund's death – were, however, not difficult to foresee.

### THE REFORM OF JUSTICE

Considerably more success was achieved by the king in his reform of the administration of justice, a project discussed by the same diet and equally intended to strengthen the position of the counties within the regime. The two most important issues were the modernisation of the court of the 'special presence' and the abolition of the universally hated institution that was referred to as the king's 'personal presence'.

Since Louis's reign the central courts of justice had been holding their sessions at the royal court, first at Visegrád, then from 1406–8 at Buda, Sigismund's new residence. We may remember that, since the reforms of the 1370s, there had existed four such courts, including those of the palatine, the judge royal, the *magister tavarnicorum* and the 'special presence of the lord king' under the nominal direction of the arch-chancellor. These were regarded as the 'ordinary judges' of the kingdom. The court of the 'special presence' grew in importance during Sigismund's reign, when it was led, in the name of the arch-chancellor, by a certain 'Master' James, who bore the title of *prototonarius* or *diffinitor causarum*. Having perhaps been inspired by the reforms of the 1370s, he handled the court's cases with an almost absolute independence from 1395 to 1428, frequently going as far as to annul the decisions of other high courts. Although he was one of the kingdom's most powerful office-holders, not even his full name has come down to us, since he seems to have been a burgher and never acquired an estate. Yet the court of the 'special presence' became attached to his person to such an extent that it ceased to exist upon his death in 1428.

All these courts administered justice on the basis of noble customary law, and no serious objections were ever expressed concerning their activity. What seemed really injurious to the nobility was the king's personal judgement, and more exactly the way it was administered, which had been introduced by Sigismund himself and which, since the establishment of the 'special presence', had been referred to as his 'personal presence' (*personalis praesentia*). In fact, this was not a law court in the real sense of the word, but rather the ruler's personal decision, made in his capacity as supreme judge and with the participation of his barons and prelates. Nor was it located in one single place, but could be assembled anywhere within the realm's boundaries, which meant that the parties concerned were normally summoned to the place where the king, 'guided by God, happened to stay at the moment.' While this practice in itself was sufficient to make this institution seem odious, it was impossible to overlook that it was above all used as a means of power. Sigismund adopted the practice of deciding in person all those cases that in some way concerned his own interests. In such cases he might without hesitation annul the verdicts pronounced by the ordinary courts of law, and by his 'special grace' make decisions, not surprisingly on behalf of his supporters, that were not compatible with approved custom. This manner of judgement was much criticised and finally suppressed when Sigismund embarked on one of his lengthy absences from Hungary in 1430. 'Personal presence' was henceforth the name of the royal court headed by the arch-chancellor, and it was ranged definitively among the ordinary courts by the diet of 1435.

Several articles of the 'greater law book' (*decretum maius*) of 1435 were intended to protect 'those below' from the powerful, that is, the lesser nobility from baronial aggression. One of their primary objectives was to check the acts of tyranny that had become all too frequent. The county had been accorded powers to proceed in such cases in 1397 and these were now confirmed. Although its competence was in several respects limited, the comital court henceforth functioned with royal authorisation. The deputy count and the noble magistrates were counted among the 'ordinary judges' of the kingdom, and as such had to swear an oath when they entered office. In order to restore the declining prestige of the noble magistrates it was ordained that they should be chosen from among the wealthier nobles of the county. Those who refused to accept the office would be liable to pay a fine. However, this measure failed to bring about the desired result, for the magistrates continued to be chosen from among the poorest nobles, those who had no tenants.

The growing political weight of the county modified its very identity. Hitherto the 'county' had been that ancient territorial unit, partly dating back to the eleventh century, within which the count exercised the *ius gladii*. Where possible, it was bounded by natural frontiers, such as rivers or streams, which might divide a village in two. (As late as the nineteenth century there were villages whose two halves belonged to different counties.) However, the competence of the county court was profoundly altered in 1405, when it was declared to be a court of appeal for every noble, 'whatever status and dignity he may belong to'.<sup>7</sup> Thereafter, the 'county' was to mean a certain number of estates rather than a territory in the former sense. The old, natural frontiers of a county were now replaced by those of the estates that were subjected to the county court. The question of which county a particular estate belonged to – in other words, to which court it was submitted – thus became of great importance for landowners. With increasing frequency from 1411 landowners sought from the king the official attachment of individual estates to another county, generally a neighbouring one, where conditions seemed to them more favourable, and where in most cases the bulk of their other possessions lay. As a result, by the start of the modern period, the ancient county boundaries had been considerably modified.

#### FINANCES

Taking into account all the difficulties confronting Sigismund during the course of the consolidation of his authority, there was but one that he was definitely unable to cope with. This was the constant shortage of

money. As far as we know, he was the first Hungarian ruler to face a serious and constant problem in this regard. Although not uncommon elsewhere, in Hungary it was unprecedented that the entire reign of a king should be overshadowed by the anxiety caused by his never ending financial difficulties. And it seems all the more surprising, given the circumstances of the rule of Louis the Great, who appears to have avoided such problems till the very end of his reign. It has not been by chance, therefore, that in Hungarian historiography Sigismund has long been presented as the incarnation of prodigality, hastiness and financial irresponsibility.

Royal finances continued to be administered by Italian (mainly Florentine) merchants, but after 1390 financiers from Nuremberg also had a growing influence. The increasing political role of money is well illustrated by the exceptional influence that some of these experts acquired. It was now, for the first time, that someone primarily engaged in financial matters, like Pipo of Ozora, managed to join the ranks of the barons. When, in the 1410s, Sigismund attempted to centralise royal finance, he put Pipo at the head of all of the chambers and designated Buda as the centre of financial administration. After Pipo's death in 1426 financial administration was decentralised for some time, but in the 1430s it was once again concentrated, this time in the hands of the Talovac and the sons of Onofrio Bardi of Florence.

The process of devaluation that had begun in the last years of Louis's reign continued at an accelerating rate. One florin was equivalent to 192d in 1385, to 240d in 1386 and to 300d in 1389. Evidently the 'collapse' of the Hungarian penny was not unrelated to the internal troubles. In 1390 Sigismund succeeded temporarily in restoring stability. While leaving in circulation the 'small' pennies of 1387, he ordered the issue of a 'new money' (*nova moneta*), which was greater in size than any of Louis's pennies and worth three 'small' pennies. For 13 years one hundred pieces of the 'new money' were taken as equivalent to one florin, and the process of stabilisation seemed to be successful. But the troubles of the year 1403 decisively undermined the financial balance, and the treasury had again to proceed to a debasement. The price of the florin in terms of the 'new' pennies rose from 100 to 132 in 1403, and reached 160 in 1407, 200 in 1421, 225 in 1423, and 320 in 1426, while the minting of 'small' pennies ceased in 1410. The fall in value of the silver currency seriously affected both royal and seigniorial revenues, and prompted the king to attempt another monetary reform in 1427. From that time to 1437 two types of pennies were in circulation: the 'new greater money', made of silver, one hundred of which equalled one florin, and a small coin, called a ducat and, from 1430 onwards, a *quarting* (or *fyrting*), which was originally worth a quarter of a new penny. Whereas the greater penny maintained its



value until Sigismund's death, the smaller one soon fell victim to the manipulations of the treasury. Its fineness decreased at such a rate that soon it contained almost nothing but copper. The result was economic anarchy. Trust in these silver coins was irreparably damaged, and, although the government officially devalued the *quarting* several times, its market value fell even more drastically. In the last years of Sigismund's reign, 6,000 to 8,000 *quartings* were equivalent to one florin instead of the original 400. In 1437 another attempt at stabilisation followed, this time with tragic consequences. The bishop of Transylvania, who had long been reluctant to collect the tithe because of the poor quality of the coins, now demanded that the arrears be paid in the new, good money. The response to this ill-considered step was a peasant revolt about which more will be said in a later chapter.

### ORDINARY REVENUES

It is from the last period of Sigismund's reign that the first scraps of evidence concerning the royal budget are available. One third of the income, that is, some 100,000 florins, came from the salt monopoly. Its importance can be measured by the simple fact that Pipo handled it himself until his death in 1426. In 1427 the king took the administration of the salt chambers into his own hands and, somewhat unusually, entrusted them to persons sent out from his household. It was at that time that the centre of salt mining shifted from Transylvania to Maramureş. From 1435 until the end of the Middle Ages the count of the salt chamber of Maramureş was responsible for everything that concerned the commerce of salt. Its production and use were characterised, both then and later, by a good deal of waste. Salt was put into circulation in cubes of different size but of equal price, while salt rubble, a necessary by-product of the mining, was simply thrown away. In 1454 it was estimated that a rationalisation would bring a 20 to 25 per cent increase of the annual income. Sigismund explained to the Estates in his reform project that 'salt is sold by weight in the whole world',<sup>8</sup> but neither he nor his successors were able to break the ancient 'custom' in this matter.

The second most important of the ordinary revenues seems to have been the 'chamber's profit' (*lucrum camerae*). It will be recalled that this was an annual tax of the peasantry, introduced in 1336 by Charles I with the aim of replacing the regular renewal of money. It was paid by the entire free peasant population of the kingdom and also by the king's people, with the exception of the ancient villages of *udvornici*. Although there were some lords whose tenants had been exempted from it by means of a special royal privilege, the overall number of

these exemptions was not significant. The basis of the imposition had always been the *porta*, that is, the gate of a peasant yard, 'through which a cart loaded with hay or crops can enter'.<sup>9</sup> The *porta* was, therefore, originally identical to the peasant household. By the fifteenth century one *porta* was generally inhabited by more than one family, so the word took on the meaning of a tax unit. The tax itself was not heavy. During Sigismund's reign it amounted to only one fifth of a florin per year, and could be discharged in pennies. The 'chamber's profit' was nevertheless one of the most important items among the royal revenues, since at the end of Sigismund's reign there were some 400,000 taxable *portae* in the kingdom, representing an annual income of about 80,000 florins.

Originally it was the counts farming the chambers who collected this tax, proceeding village by village within each county. Their chief instrument was a small wooden rod, or tally, called a *dica*, with notches showing the number of *portae*. When the tax was paid one half of the tally was left with the landowner as a sort of receipt. This type of taxing was itself called *dica* and for many centuries its collectors were referred to as *dicators*. In 1427 the king entrusted this source of revenue, just as he had the salt income, to his own tax-collectors. It was probably they who, for the first time, drew up written lists of taxpayers and part of this work, listing the tax receipts of five counties, has survived until the present day. It seems that, from this point on, such registers were regularly made, but with few exceptions those of the medieval period have been lost. Since the collection of the tax was carried out under the supervision of the noble magistrates, each county was divided into two or four districts according to the number of its magistrates. In 1427 when we first meet these districts they were called *reambulatio*. Their later name was *processus*, and from the sixteenth century until recent times they served as the basic framework of administration within a county.

In view of the almost complete lack of evidence, the income derived from the mining of precious metals can only be estimated tentatively. Nevertheless, it seems to have slipped back to third place among the various categories of income received by the treasury. We may infer a sharp decline in the production of gold from the fact that it tended to be replaced by salt as a means of paying the army. In 1454 the total income from the precious metals was put at no more than 24,000 florins, half of which came from the chamber of Kremnica, a quarter from that of Baia Mare, the rest being shared by the chamber of Sibiu and the mints of Buda and Košice. It is beyond doubt that in Sigismund's time they all had yielded much more. In 1427 (the year when it was granted by the king to his wife) the chamber of Kremnica alone was expected to produce some 28,000 florins per year. If the

output of the other chambers had been proportionally greater in 1427 than in 1454, then we may put Sigismund's total annual revenue from the monopoly of gold and silver at about 55,000 to 60,000 florins. In 1429, in an effort to win the support of the Teutonic knights for the defence of the southern frontiers, Sigismund promised them 150,000 florins from the yield of the mints of Sibiu and Braşov alone, but this sum is so high that it cannot be taken seriously.

The revenues stemming from the so-called 'thirtieth' (*tricesima*) were also far from negligible. This was a tax imposed on both domestic and foreign trade, consisting, from the time of Mary and Sigismund onwards, of one thirtieth of the value of the merchandise to be sold. It was collected by special 'counts' and their *tricesimatores*. Whereas in 1427 its yield amounted to some 20,000 florins, in 1454 the corresponding figure was hardly half this amount.

The tenants of Slavonia and Požega did not pay the 'chamber's profit' but rather a special tax called 'marten's fur' (*marturina*). Although the number of exemptions was far greater here than elsewhere in the kingdom, the government derived some 8,000 florins from this tax in 1427. The Romanians of Transylvania paid the 'fiftieth' (*quingagesima*), a tax of their own that in 1454 was expected to yield '2,000 florins at the least'.<sup>10</sup> As for the Jász and the Cumans, they were not yet regarded as tenants and paid a special tax in both kind and money, the latter amounting to 10,000 florins in the middle of the century. The royal towns were exempted from the 'chamber's profit' along with the Saxons who enjoyed similar privileges. The Saxons of Transylvania collectively paid the value of 13,000 florins in silver, while the 11 Saxon 'towns' (they were in fact large villages) of Spis together paid 700 florins. As their ordinary tax (*census*), the royal towns paid a fixed sum: Buda and Pest together paid 4,600, Košice 2,000, Szeged 1,000, Székesfehérvár 600, Esztergom and Timişoara 400 each. The annual revenue obtained from the tax of the Saxons and the royal towns can be estimated at some 30,000 florins, to which should be added the tax paid by the Jewish communities, which amounted to 4,000 florins in 1454.

In 1454, when the kingdom had long been in a state of complete disorganisation, the ordinary revenues of the chamber were still expected to yield 218,000 florins. The fragmentary evidence that we have seems to attest that Sigismund was able to squeeze twice as much as his successors from at least some of the resources. This, of course, was the consequence of the strength of royal authority and the relative stability of internal order in Hungary. On the whole, Sigismund's annual ordinary revenues can be put at some 300,000 gold florins, a sum that was probably surpassed in unexpectedly good years.

Sigismund could dispose of another source of money which, though intended to be extraordinary, had in fact become ordinary. This was the heavy tax that he imposed upon the Church in 1397 in order to meet the expenses of the Ottoman war. Henceforth half of the annual income of all ecclesiastical benefices had to be delivered to the treasury, and Sigismund did his utmost to exploit this new source of revenue to the full. The exact amount raised is not known, but an estimate of some 100,000 florins a year would surely not be far from the truth. The Premonstratensian provost of Leles is known to have paid 215 florins, while the income of the archbishop of Esztergom, Hungary's richest prelate, amounted to 23,500 gold florins in 1419. Moreover, the king had the habit of leaving bishoprics unfilled for a while, collecting their revenues during the vacancy. At the time of his death four important benefices were vacant and governed by lay 'governors' (*gubernator*) who had, of course, been appointed by Sigismund.

Some 400,000 gold florins were delivered to the treasury every year, but they were not sufficient to prevent Sigismund from experiencing recurrent financial shortages, which obliged him to resort to occasional resources. From the very beginning he had recourse to the imposition of extraordinary taxes (*collecta*). As early as 1387 he demanded a property tax called the 'seventh' from peasants and townsmen alike in order to meet the costs of his war against the Horváti. The imposition of 1397, assessed (for some unknown reason) at 1 florin and 21 pennies per peasant holding, must have yielded some 500,000 florins in all. In 1435 the king collected the tax called the 'fiftieth', which had been ordered by the council of Basle to finance the war against the Ottomans. For his Turkish and Hussite wars he frequently required 'occasional' sums from the royal towns, in addition to their ordinary payments, and they were obviously not in a position to evade his demands.

A good many of the king's financial manoeuvres involved mortgaging operations. The sum that he was able to collect in return for mortgaged estates during the five decades of his reign in Hungary could be put at some 500,000 florins. From the 1420s he devised various new methods of raising more money from a single estate. Before giving the castle of Šintava to the Pálóci by hereditary right, he mortgaged it to them in 1426 for 10,060 florins. He also adopted the practice of forcing the mortgagees to lend him further sums by threatening to confer the mortgage upon someone offering more. When he recovered Šintava from the Pálóci by exchange he gave it to the Rozgonyi in return for a loan of 7,403 florins. He later charged it with a further sum of 3,482 florins. If he showed so little consideration for his most faithful men, others are unlikely to have been treated less harshly.

There was no financial resource that Sigismund did not try to exploit. As has already been mentioned, in 1388 he mortgaged Brandenburg for 565,000 florins. In 1402 Neumark was sold to the Teutonic Order for 63,200 florins. On one occasion he went as far as to detach a portion of his own kingdom. In 1412 Sigismund borrowed 37,000 *schocks* of silver groats of Prague, equalling 100,000 florins, from Wladislas II of Poland for the war against Venice, in return for which he mortgaged to him one part of Spis, including the seignery of L'ubovňa, the towns Podolinec and Hniezdne, and 13 Saxon towns, among them Spišská Nová Ves. The area thus conceded was only restored to Hungary by Queen Maria Theresa in 1772.

As for Sigismund's expenditures, they must have greatly increased in the later part of his reign. The defence against the Ottomans consumed more and more money, but costlier still was the king's western policy, especially his long sojourns abroad and his wars against the Hussites. All these expenses had to be met from his Hungarian revenues, for the Empire played hardly any role as a source of money. Only the imperial cities and the Jews paid a regular tax; but, combined, this is unlikely to have amounted to more than 20,000 gold florins a year and was consequently insignificant in comparison with Sigismund's revenues from Hungary.