



## Forty Men

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**Pursuant to the location privilege granted to the City in June 1257 the most important person in the City was the Voit. He was the representative of the duke's power in the City, and the link between the duke and the Kraków population. He had broad judiciary competences, and the received economic privileges posed him high above all citizens.**

But before **1264** the city council emerged as the body of the then municipal self-government. Its privileges and position were rather insignificant at first. Starting from the 14th century the council's role was systematically growing. The historians generally agree that the process of strengthening the city council at the cost of the Voit's position resulted from the so-called Voit Albert's Rebellion against the authority of King **Władysław the Elbow-high (1311)**. The King noticed in time that the power of the Kraków Voit might threaten even his reign and started to reduce his competences. The city council which in Kraków consisted mainly of the representatives of rich merchants skilfully took advantage of these circumstances. Under its guidance the City gained a number of valuable privileges in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. At the same time the council gained the leading position within the city organism preserving its loyalty to the King.

But there is more. The council willingly aided the king in his financial troubles, and they were many. High loans from the city were granted to Władysław Jagiełło and Casimir Jagiellon. In return the councillors counted on the "gracious memory" and usually they were not disappointed. The chief token of this memory was their appointment for subsequent terms at the council, and such appointment guaranteed high income and influence on the course of events in the city and even the state. No wonder that in a short period of time the city council became an oligarchic body staffed with several families of the circle of rich patricians of Kraków. The councillor's post became, in fact, a lifelong appointment, which was officially confirmed by **Sigismund II Augustus**. It was frowned upon by the common people forming the majority of the city's population that is - by today's terminology - the middle class. Disputes in these matters had occurred before, but in 1418 the conflict heated up. The guilds jointly opposed the city council which imposed excessive tax burden on craftsmen and petty merchants. In order to mitigate the conflict **Władysław Jagiełło** established a new body of city authority, *the council of sixteen men*, which was to control the city finances. But in practice the body did not stand to the test. In 1438 the atmosphere in the city became so hot that the councillors had to take shelter at Wawel Castle to flee from the wrath of the common people. Only in **1521** King **Sigismund the Old** turned the *council of sixteen men* into the *council of thirty-two men* comprised of 12 merchants and 20 craftsmen. The new representation of the common people was much wiser, politically speaking. Instead of fighting over the raised turmoil and expose themselves to the king, the council of thirty-two men applied a much more effective manner of fighting the oligarchic city council that involved the boycott of taxes. This happened in 1524. It was a serious and well-aimed blow. In 1548 the common people achieved considerable success by expanding the council from thirty-two to forty men. The competences of this *qudragintavirat* were greatly enlarged in **1578** by King **Stefan Batory**. The city council had to think of something more sensible or, rather, more economically acceptable. The process of placating the dangerous had *qudragintavirat* begun. Upon this occasion a now forgotten custom was born to form an important part of the then life.



Several times a year the city council received a delegation of the common people – the above-mentioned *forty men* – at the town hall. There was no fixed date for this. Usually the delegation of the common people was summoned before general assemblies in which Kraków had the right to participate to prepare a joint line of action. These meetings provided the opportunity for the *qudragintavirat* to execute reports from the council's activities. The council made such a report and a banquet was held that was largely characterised by lots of courtesy. In such circumstances the *qudragintavirat* granted the council with the vote of acceptance much more easily. Finally, it needs to be added in relation to this tradition that many members of the *qudragintavirat* soon understood that the well-disposed and kind attitude towards *councillor lords* might result in their appointment to some lucrative office in the city, which was often the case.

*Pecunia non olet*, 'money does not smell', as insiders say; but what of the fact that it does not give happiness? Well ...

*text: Michał Niezabitowski*