The new book by Maxim Mordovin addresses an important lacuna in the secondary literature. The focus of the monograph is lead seals (used as trademarks), which is an interesting topic in part simply because very few historians have dealt with it. This is not entirely surprising, given that lead seals are among the findings which remain the most concealed in the course of excavations (like coins). Thus, it should not come as a surprise that research on this subject is only now beginning to take off, at a time when metal detectors are popular not only among “treasure-hunting” amateurs, but also (quite understandably) among archeologists. Mordovin was inspired to pursue research on this less trodden path a few years ago, when in the course of the excavation of the main square of the city of Pápa in western Hungary a surprising number of textile permits were found, in part with the use of metal detectors.

Mordovin focuses first and foremost on lead seals, though inevitably he often must touch on issues related to the textile industry which made use of them, since at the time textile permits functioned a bit like brand names do today. They modestly accompanied textiles which were once splendid or less splendid. For this reason, the European textile industry of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era constitutes a particular focus of the book, which sometimes is a bit uneven in the attention devoted to a particular period, though this is due to the nature of the sources, i.e. the unevenness of the information available to Mordovin and the simple question of how many such seals actually survived from a given period. Mordovin was bold with his choice of temporal framework. He does not use 1526, which is commonly regarded as the end of the Middle Ages in Hungary (because of the defeat of the Hungarian army by the Ottoman Turks at the Battle of Mohács), as the end of the period in question for his inquiry. Rather, he uses sources dating from as late as the second half of the sixteenth century. This decision was wise, since the subject which is the focus of his study should be examined independently of political-historical periods. The theme, after all, should be studied from a European perspective, and indeed it offers a European perspective. One odd irony of the research on which Mordovin embarked is simply that, given the lacunae in the secondary literature, the scholar must
embark on journeys as extensive as the journeys once taken by textile merchants. However, the curious traveler is rewarded with a multitude of diverse lead seals, which clearly constitute only a tiny slice of the actual seals once in use. Objects in state collections and private collections which are often almost inaccessible can be invaluable as sources, as indeed can items sold in online actions. Mordovin has clearly exerted a considerable amount of effort to explore these kinds of repositories, motivated perhaps by the pleasure of the hunt.

Mordovin relies on archaeological, historical, and visual sources concerning material culture, as clearly one would expect of a scholar of Medieval and (Early) Modern archeology, though in differing amounts depending, of course, on the available sources. True, he makes particularly strong use of archaeological sources. In the first chapter, he subjects the contentions in the secondary literature concerning lead seals found both in the Kingdom of Hungary and beyond its borders to intense scrutiny. As he shows, with the exception of a few early Italian reports, the first works to be published in Western Europe on the subject appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the textile industry which had flourished before the industrial revolution still subsisted as a memory at the very least. In contrast, by the advent of the Modern Era, lead seals in the Kingdom of Hungary, which for the most part had been a market for the textile industry, had essentially been forgotten and only became familiar again in the course of excavations. After having introduced the historical frameworks of the scholarship, Mordovin familiarizes his reader with the practical areas in which lead seals were used, for the most part on the basis of Western European examples, beginning with a discussion of the evolution of the designation and its further development. It might have been worthwhile to have provided some discussion of the basic principles of the use of lead seals, which served as a clear, visible way of designating a product of high quality (and not just textiles, but also other wares), even if there is already a fairly substantial body of secondary literature on the subject. The short third chapter, in which Mordovin discusses forgery as a means of circumventing legal restrictions, offers a picture based for the most part on written sources. It is worth noting that Mordovin has included in his book not simply the “basic materials” on the subject of forgeries, but also additional archeological data (pp.231–51). In the fourth chapter, he divides the seals into groups on the basis of their formal features and then deals with them from the perspective of the functions.

These four chapters comprise roughly 20 percent of the first section of the book. They offer a general overview of the subject, and the aforementioned
contingencies have little influence on what Mordovin writes. This is not true, however, of the fifth chapter (roughly the remaining 80 percent of the book) or the collection of data in the appendix, to which additions will undoubtedly be made in light of later findings and which, indeed, may well undergo a shift of emphasis because of one or two exceptional sites. One should note, however, that these “dangers” are always present in the case of a groundbreaking study which deals with data from primary sources. As far as the fifth chapter is concerned, in which Mordovin examines regions and cities in which textiles were produced (arranged geographically), in my assessment it would have been preferable to have used the names of the political-geographical units that were in use at the time instead of the names in use today (the contemporary names are used in the collection of data in the appendix), though of course I concede that the terms in use today may make it easier for the reader to orient him or herself. The subchapters, which are divided up on the basis of regions, contain a wealth of maps as well as several charts in which Mordovin has organized the specimens known in larger numbers from the same city. Alongside the archeological information, in order to offer the reader some sense of context, Mordovin draws heavily on the secondary literature in the discipline of history. One finds, in the sea of data, a few striking gems. For instance, Mordovin makes a fascinating suggestion concerning the seal of the city of Szeged, which was redesigned in the eighteenth century (p. 148). People had already noticed the strong resemblance between the Nuremberg coat of arms and the Szeged coat of arms, and scholars have also known that the seal on which the new Szeged coat of arms was based allegedly was fished out of the Tisza River. Mordovin, however, contends that the Szeged coat of arms cannot have been based on a classical tiparium. Rather, it must have been based on a lead seal found in the waters of the river, and indeed he gives examples of this.

And yet the most significant contribution Mordovin has made with his study lies not in this finding or his similar insights, but rather in the fact that he has stumbled, upon the archeological remains of an area in southeastern Hungary (Békéscsaba, Gyula, Orosháza) in which, until the late sixteenth century, the textile industry flourished or at least was active, an area to which historians have already called attention (pp.231–51). This area, furthermore, did not market its products under its own “brand name” domestically, to the soldiers in the border fortresses, but rather used the Tudor rose lead seals of English textiles or imitations of these seals to mark its wares.

The book concludes with a collection of data, a bibliography, and indexes, all of which are indispensable given the subject. In the collection of data, the
production sites of the textiles belonging to a given seal are listed in alphabetical order with separate sections on each individual seal illustrated with high-quality black-and-white photographs.

Given the strengths of Mordovin’s monograph, it would be worth publishing in good English translation. As the first few pages of the book make clear, both the subject and, more narrowly, this inquiry would be met with considerable attention in international scholarly circles. It is regrettable that until a longer summary is published in translation, historians potentially interested in the subject but unable to read Hungarian will have to make do with this review, as there is not even an abstract of the book available in English translation.

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