

GERGELY BUZÁS, JÓZSEF LASZLOVSZKY AND ORSOLYA MÉSZÁROS (eds) The Medieval Royal Town at Visegrád – Royal Centre, Urban Settlement, Churches

ZSOMBOR JÉKELY

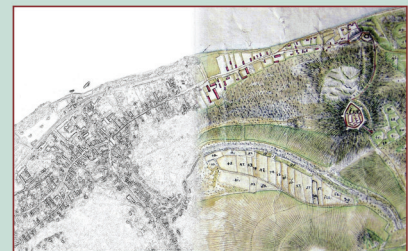
This book on the medieval town of Visegrád is the second part of a series published by Archaeolingua. Visegrád had been one of the most important towns of medieval Hungary, yet until recent times, relatively little information has been available on the history and topography of the settlement itself. This is partly due to the large-scale destruction of the medieval town, but also to the fact that in scholarly literature, the town has always been overshadowed by the royal residences located there, especially the magnificent royal palace. Yet, for extended periods during the 14th century, Visegrád served as the capital city of the Kingdom of Hungary, and thus is worthy of our attention. The neglect of previous decades has been redressed by extensive archaeological research during recent years and now by the very important publication which is the subject of the present review.

The first volume in the series of books on medieval Visegrád was dedicated to the most important monument in town, the medieval royal palace and the neighbouring Franciscan monastery.¹ While a lot has been published on the royal palace in Hungarian, that volume was the first extensive treatment of the subject in English – aside from a publication of more limited release dating from 1995² – (see the review of Pál Lővei in [Hungarian Archaeology 2014 Spring](#)). Precious little was available in English (or in Hungarian, for that matter) about the medieval town of Visegrád itself before the publication of the present volume. One should mention the volume edited by László Gerevich, titled *Towns in Medieval Hungary* (1990), where Gerevich himself briefly considered Visegrád in the framework of a general study.³ The other book to be mentioned – titled *Medium Regni* – dealt with Hungarian royal centres in the middle of the Kingdom, and here Gergely Buzás provided an overview of Visegrád, focusing on the royal residences.⁴

The present volume relies on the results of new excavations and the research of one of the authors, Orsolya Mészáros. Apart from a number of studies, her findings were already published in a Hungarian

THE MEDIEVAL ROYAL TOWN AT VISEGRÁD

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Edited by
GERGELY BUZÁS, JÓZSEF LASZLOVSZKY
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¹ Buzás, Gergely and Laszlovszky, József (eds): *The Medieval Royal Palace at Visegrád* (Medieval Visegrád. Archaeology, Art History of a Medieval Royal Centre, Volume 1) (Budapest: Archaeolingua, 2013).

² Laszlovszky, József (ed.): *Medieval Visegrád. Royal Castle, Palace, Town and Franciscan Friary* (Dissertationes Pannonicae III.4.) (Budapest: ELTE, Institute of Archaeology, 1995).

³ Gerevich, László: The Rise of Hungarian Towns along the Danube. In: *Towns in Medieval Hungary*, ed. Gerevich, László (Boulder, Colo.: Social Science Monographs, 1990), 28–35.

⁴ Buzás, Gergely: Visegrád. In: *Medium Regni. Medieval Hungarian Royal Seats* (Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 1999), 115–161.

language monograph dedicated to the medieval history and topography of the town.⁵ The book was based on her doctoral dissertation (2008), and represented her long-standing interest in the town. Dr. Mészáros works at the Institute of Archaeology of Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. In the present volume she is joined by a number of well-known expert of medieval archaeology and history: including the two other editors of the volume, Gergely Buzás and József Laszlovszky. Both have dedicated a considerable number of publications to Visegrád before, and Buzás has worked at the King Matthias Museum of Visegrád for a long time, serving as its director since 2011. The fourth author is Katalin Szende, a noted historian working on late medieval Hungarian towns.

The book begins with a detailed study by Laszlovszky and Szende about urban development in Hungary. The aim of this study is to situate Visegrád in the context of Hungary and Central Europe, but it reads more like a general introduction about royal residences and urban settlements near them. Drawing heavily on recent results of *Residenzforschung*, the introduction gives a thorough overview of urban development in medieval Hungary, with special attention to towns developing near residences – whether royal or other (for example episcopal). Visegrád provides a very good case study in this respect, because it never really developed into a very strong urban presence – except during the periods when the court was also present. The town was established around the middle of the 13th century, after the Mongol invasion – following the construction of a new royal castle on top of hill above. The new settlement below the castle hill shows no continuity with the earlier village of Visegrád located on Sibrik-hill, near the 11th century fortress. The new town of Visegrád, along with Maros (now Nagymaros) located on the other side of the Danube, was first mentioned in 1285, but developed more extensively during the 14th century. King Charles Robert established Visegrád as the seat of government in 1323, and the court had stayed here until 1347, after which it moved to Buda. However, King Louis the Great moved the court back here in 1355, and it was only during the reign of King Sigismund, around 1405, that Buda finally prevailed as the permanent seat of the royal court. After this, Visegrád was only a temporary residence of the kings, especially in the time of King Matthias. The history of the town – and the changes in its relative importance – are directly connected to these changes in the location of the court: it was a typical residence town or a royal seat, not an independent and economically powerful urban settlement.

In the next section, the authors – Buzás, Laszlovszky and Mészáros – provide a detailed overview of the medieval history of the town, focusing especially on civic institutions. At least from the middle of the 14th century, Visegrád was controlled by a council headed by a judge, and a group of jurors representing the German and Hungarian quarters of the town. These two parts of the town were only mentioned during the first half of the 14th century, and it can only be supposed that the German town was located in the area between the Lower Castle and the later royal palace. Later, the division between parts of the town disappeared, and the area of the former German town lost its significance as the royal palace was built into the large palace complex of the late 14th century. The Hungarian town was located more to the south, in the area roughly where the centre of the present-day town is situated – the administrative and religious centre of the town was located here. The town was unified – as indicated by the common parish church and the use of one seal (the imprint of an earlier, a great seal survives from the middle of the 14th century; after 1381 a small seal was used.)

A detailed analysis of the churches of the town follows. Apart from an early monastery located on a hill just outside the town (the St. Andrew Monastery), several ecclesiastical institutions were connected to the royal residences situated in the town. The palace had its own chapel, dedicated to the Virgin Mary and already finished by 1366. Right next to the palace stood a large Franciscan monastery, founded by King Sigismund in 1424–25. The most important church of the town was the parish church of the Virgin Mary, first mentioned in 1327. Located in the Hungarian town, only the foundations of the building can be identified today. Another ecclesiastical institution, the St. Ladislaus monastery of the Augustinians is only

⁵ Mészáros, Orsolya: *A későközépkori Visegrád város története és helyrajza* (History and topography of late medieval Visegrád) (Visegrád: MNM Mátyás Király Múzeum, 2009).

known from documents (and can be tentatively identified with the remains of another church excavated in the town). The book lists all the documentary evidence about these churches, as well as the results of archaeological excavations of the two churches located in town – with proposals of their identifications.

Orsolya Mészáros, who already published a lot on the town, attempts a full topographical reconstruction of the medieval town, listing all the buildings known from written sources, and attempting to identify them with archaeological data. A similar reconstruction of the medieval town of Buda was carried out by András Végh – there modern researchers are in a better position, as many of the buildings still stand and the medieval streets can easily be identified even today, at least in the castle area.⁶ The medieval topography of Visegrád is much less known, as the town became uninhabited during the period of Ottoman rule in Hungary. Very little remained of the medieval settlement, when the town was rebuilt in the 18th century. Sources are available for only about 90 buildings from the Middle Ages – the number of buildings whose location can be established is even smaller. One characteristic of the town – due to the presence of the court during the 14th century – was the high ratio of property owned by nobles, among them high ranking officials. These turn up most often in records dealing with property issues (in these cases, nobles were regarded as burghers from the legal perspective). However, research shed light on some of the more typical urban dwellings as well: we know the houses of apothecaries from the sources, and one of the most important buildings known from excavations included a workshop of glass production (5 Rév Street). The presence of the royal court explains the high ratio of other trades in the town: we know of stonemasons and carpenters, as well as minters, silversmiths and bell-founders. After the topographical gazetteer, a detailed analysis of the medieval topography of the town follows, reconstructing property transfers and clusters of houses. Here all the data gathered in the previous section is analysed, and correlated with archaeological evidence. The book also contains a charter collection transcribing about 60 documents relevant for the history of the town and its ecclesiastical institutions.

I would have liked to see a few additional issues discussed in the book, in order to give a fuller overview of archaeological finds from recent years. A more detailed treatment of the remains of the parish church would have been useful – this was published earlier in Hungarian by Buzás and Mészáros.⁷ Also, a more detailed analysis of the workshops excavated in Visegrád – the glass workshop mentioned above, as well as a bronze foundry excavated in 2006 (73 Fő Street), and active during the first half of the 15th century – would have been also useful, as these had so far only been published in Hungarian. Several aspects of the glass workshop are discussed in the book, and the excavated remains are shown in good-quality illustrations, but a detailed overview is missing from here.

From the analysis presented in this volume, the special character of Visegrád emerges. Although regarded in the Late Middle Ages as one of the most important towns of the kingdom, the settlement in fact was not significant when the court was away. It had no (or only regional) economic significance, no ecclesiastical institutions of national significance, no serious fortifications (apart from the fortifications of the royal residences). The presence of artisanal guilds cannot be demonstrated and only a very small number of the town's citizens are known to have studied at foreign universities. Even when the court was at Visegrád during several decades in the 14th century, Visegrád was not regarded as the capital of Hungary – that role was reserved for Buda. The main reason of its emergence during the 14th century was that high-ranking nobles and court officials owned houses there, which also served as their offices. No wonder then, that when the court left in the early 15th century, Buda (and Pest on the opposite side of the Danube) far surpassed Visegrád in importance. Although Visegrád retained its privileges until the end of the Middle Ages, during the 15th century it was only a small settlement next to an important royal residence, the royal palace.

Overall, the book is a welcome addition to the growing library of books on medieval Hungary available in English. It presents a detailed overview of an important settlement, situating the analysis of the town

⁶ Végh, András: *Buda város középkori helyrajza I-II.* (The medieval topography of the town of Buda I-II.) (Budapest: Budapesti Történeti Múzeum, 2006–2008).

⁷ Buzás, Gergely – Mészáros, Orsolya: A középkori Visegrád egyházainak régészeti kutatása (Archaeological research of churches in medieval Visegrád). *Magyar Sion*, New Series 2 [44] (2008/1), 71–103.

into the wider framework of urban development in Hungary and the research of residence towns in Central Europe. The production quality is very high: I would like to mention the colour and black and white illustrations. Most striking are the series of maps – reproductions of historical maps as well as new maps, showing archaeological sites and topographical features. The volume can be recommended not only for archaeologists and medieval historians, but to anyone interested in questions of urban history in general. As the second part of the series, it adds a nice balance to research on Visegrád in general, which traditionally focused on the royal castles and palace in the town. The Árpád Period settlement of Visegrád – with the bailiff's castle, the archdeaconal church as well as the 11th century monastery of St. Andrew – and the Upper and Lower Castle (the latter two most recently published in Hungarian in 2012)⁸ certainly provide ample material for future volumes in the series, and I hope we can see these soon.

⁸ Bozóki, Lajos: *Lapidarium Hungaricum 8. Pest megye II. – Visegrád, Alsó- és Felsővár* (Pest County II – Visegrád, Lower and Upper Castle) (Budapest: Kulturális Örökségvédelmi Hivatal, 2012).