

THE BETHLEN CASTLE IN THE LIGHT OF WRITTEN SOURCES AND THE LATEST EXCAVATIONS¹

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Probably one of the most beautiful Renaissance castles in Transylvania, attracting numerous visitors every year, it is situated in Criș/Keresd⁴ (Kreisch in German), on one of the ancient properties of the Bethlen family. A considerable amount of educational writings, art historical analyses, and historical works discuss the history of the castle and the Bethlen family. However, there is hardly any scientific work synthesizing the relatively rich set of available written sources, the results of the previous excavations, and the conclusions that can be drawn from the still-standing building parts. Although archaeological excavations have been carried out on the castle's territory, relatively little is known about the preceding manor or manor houses. It must be highlighted that the results of the earlier archaeological excavations and wall surveys are difficult to summarize because of a lack of documentation and never-completed publications; however, the historical and architectural importance of the building complex makes it necessary for us to survey the previous work and present a current state of research before starting new investigations. Therefore, this study aims to briefly summarize the results of the historical research and previous archaeological excavations and to formulate the research questions to be addressed by the new archaeological research project that has started in 2020, as well as the ones that may arise during a complex (historical, archaeological, art historical and architectural) investigation of the castle.

Keywords: Middle Ages, Criș/Keresd, manor house, settlement history, Bethlen family, estate, construction, Árpadian Age

HISTORICAL DATA ON THE BETHLEN FAMILY AND THEIR ESTATES AROUND CRIȘ/KERESD

The earliest authentic data on the first important figure of the family, a certain *comes Appa* (Apa), comes from 1269 (JAKÓ 1997, 220/279), while the name Criș/Keresd appears for the first time in a charter on property division from 1305 (JAKÓ 2004, 48–49/44).

The earliest part of the family's history illustrates well the complex situation in which the members of various clans and *genera* and the Saxon settlers from the surrounding territories found themselves in the case of several estates. Since very little written information is available from this period, the history of Criș/Keresd and its surroundings can be highlighted through data related to the possessor *genus* and the related families. A non-exhaustive presentation of these data is also justified by the fact that, besides data on family history, the charters provide information on the buildings that had existed in Criș/Keresd before today's castle was erected. Little information has been preserved about Apa, whom research connects to the Becse-Gergely kin (LUKINICH 1927, 4–5). According to several opinions, Apa (1258–1270) received his estates along the Târnava Mare/Nagy-Küküllő River after the Mongol invasion, between 1260–1270, when the Saxon colonization of this territory began (DIACONESCU 2013, 31–32, 147–152). His estates were clustered around two centers: one in Mălâncrav/Almakerék, belonging to the Apafi family, and the other in Criș/Keresd, which became one of the estate centers of the Bethlen family. When and why exactly did Apa

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⁴ Place names are presented in the study in Romanian/Hungarian.

receive the estates along the Târnava Mare/Nagy-Küküllő, one cannot tell from the sources. According to Lukinich, Apa was mentioned among the *ispáns* (comes) who represented King Stephen V (1270–1272, *iunior rex*: 1262–1270) (LUKINICH 1927, 5; SZENTPÉTERY & BORSA 1930, I, 456–457). The Apa mentioned in the text was the son of comes John. Comes John appears in a charter from 1258, issued by Béla IV, discussing the outcome of a lawsuit among the members of Becse-Gergely kin (in the charter: Bechagregor) concerning the patronage of the Pétermonostora and Dienesmonostora monasteries (MNL DL 470; SZENTPÉTERY & BORSA 1930, I, 361). Karácsonyi also believes that the estates along the Târnava Mare/Nagy-Küküllő were acquired by the kin before the Saxon colonization because, as a Saxon settlement, they certainly would not have been able to acquire those (KARÁCSONYI 1900, 219). The exact appearance of this *genus* in Transylvania is unknown; the family members are mentioned as already possessing the mentioned properties without any references to royal donations in the charters. According to a charter from 1340, the descendants got back their occupied properties along the Târnava Mare/Nagy-Küküllő, owned and inherited through the ancestral right (JAKÓ et al. 2008, 33/8). Apa and his brother, Becse, could have obtained their Transylvanian estates after the Mongol invasion, around the mid or at the beginning of the 13th century at the earliest, while their father could have been the first to settle in Transylvania. Since the estates along the Târnava Mare/Nagy-Küküllő were surrounded by Saxon territories, this particular estate cluster must have been formed before or at the same time as the Saxon settlement. While the Transylvanian branches of the *genus* were co-owners of other estates of the same *genus* in the territory of the Hungarian Kingdom, their relatives in other parts of the country did not pose their claim on Transylvanian estates. The sons of Apa and Becse divided between themselves only the properties along the Someșul Mare/Nagy-Szamos River, which indicates that this was the clan's initial estate centre in Transylvania, and the lands along the Târnava Mare/Nagy-Küküllő were acquired exclusively by Apa sometime later. Apa also bought properties around the Someș/Szamos River, and his sons inherited altogether 21 properties from their father in counties Belső-Szolnok, Doboka, and Fehér, as well as the Saxon Seat in Mediaș/Medgyes (DIACONESCU 2013, 147–150). From local settlement history's point of view, settlement names in the area provide essential information: the name of Apa was preserved in the names of the villages Nușeni/Apanagyfalú and Nou/Apaújfalú (later Szászújfalú), while the Apafi kindred also derives their name from him. The names may indicate more than one possibility: either that these settlements were established in Apa's time or that he and his family owned them.

Based on family history research, new and important processes in the history of the estates and settlements took place at Criș/Keresd at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries (for more details, see BENCZE & ZÓLYA 2022, 121–130). We would highlight some data preserved in a charter from 1435; the document mentions not only the church but also a building, which most probably served as the noble family's residence (manor house). The charter immortalized a property division between the sons of John Bethlen (1397–1427), Nicholas (also representing his brother Gregory), and Anthony: their father's manor houses in the Beclean/Bethlen and Bozieș/Borzás estates, the mill in Beclean/Bethlen, and the fishponds in Bozieș/Borzás and Figa/Füge with the auxiliary infrastructure were given to Nicholas and Gregory. Their brother, Anthony, received their father's manor in Criș/Keresd, the mills in Dumbrăveni/Erzsébetváros, and the fishponds in Criș/Keresd, with the auxiliary infrastructure (MNL DL 36554). Thus, this is the first authentic mention of an existing manor house in Criș/Keresd. Most probably, it was the son of Anthony, also named Gregory (1448–1500), who inherited his father's house in Criș/Keresd. Later, in 1482, the sons of the late Mark Bethlen (1443–1473?), Nicholas (1465–1528), and Lestah (1454–1493) agreed upon the following exchange of property related to the houses inherited from their father: Nicholas gave the half that looked towards Sighișoara/Segesvár of the house and noble manor in Criș/Keresd to his brother and his descendants, while Lestah gave half of his house and the manor that looked towards Dej/Dés in Beclean/Bethlen to Nicholas and his descendants (MNL DL 32507, fol. 27^v, nr.1, MNL DL 26433). Based on this data, besides the manor of the late John Bethlen (given to Anthony in 1435), Mark Bethlen also owned a manor, split between his sons, in this period. It may be concluded that the two late-15th-century charters prove that in Criș/Keresd, two manor houses of the Bethlen family existed at that time already.

We have some more information available on the manors of the Bethlen family in Criș/Keresd, presented by a witness examination from 1509. The text outlines two, while later, three manors standing opposite the parish church. That means some detailed information about the buildings in Criș/Keresd in written sources from the turn of the 15th–16th centuries that must be cross-checked by excavations with the remains of earlier buildings under today's castle complex, as those may belong to the manors mentioned by the text. One such building was owned by Gregory Bethlen (son of Anthony) and another by Mark, only to be inherited by his son Nicholas. Nicholas gave his inherited paternal manor to his brother Bernard (1463–1509) and had a new one built for himself. Master George Szabó from Mediaș/Medgyes was assigned with the construction; he used 18 carts of wood for the house (MNL DL 62986). Based on the charter, our earlier hypothesis that two manor houses existed in Criș/Keresd already by 1482 at the latest (likely even earlier) is correct. Mark's manor was divided between his sons Nicholas and Lestah, but after Lestah had most probably passed away in 1493, his share passed on to Nicholas, who gave this house in 1509 to his other brother, Bernard. The collected historical data clearly show that the excavations carried out on the site of the castle need to count with relics from several earlier building phases.

PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS IN THE AREA OF THE CASTLE COMPLEX

A reinterpretation of the results of previous excavations is still in progress; in this article, we only wish to provide a short preliminary summary highlighting the most important results. It must be noted, however, that a significant part of the old excavation documentation is missing, and the finds were never published; what is more, their current location and availability are also unclear. We are still working to find the materials and the missing documentation. Consequently, we tried to use everything at hand, including old documentation and archaeological reports, even if they often provided different interpretations of the same features. We always cited the text from the original documentation or report in such cases. We did not engage in detailed art historical analyses because interpretations vary within the profession, and wall surveys were only completed for the Alexius/Elek wing but even those were never published. Despite all that, a critical overview of the previous work is a fundamental starting point for the present research.

Large-scale excavations took place on the castle complex's territory under the guidance of the National Directorate for Cultural Heritage Protection (Direcția Patrimoniului Cultural Național) between 1974–1977; the results were only published in a short report. According to that, the archaeologist, Mariana Dumitrache (DUMITRACHE 1997, 283–292), distinguished several major construction phases, which in many cases are hard to interpret (*Fig. 1*). *Fig. 1* features the ground plan of the building complex with the different construction periods and their traces, incorporating results of later excavations, which, however, do not always correspond to the observations of M. Dumitrache. The related documentation is incomplete, resulting in gaps in the ground plan compared to the descriptions: several architectural elements and wall parts appear in the archaeological reports, but there is no available map, field drawing, or detailed description about them. Part of the chronological sequence reconstructed by M. Dumitrache coincides with the picture outlined by written sources, but several of her conclusions are difficult to check because of a lack of documentation. The earliest feature she identified as a “2.20 m deep funnel-shaped ditch reinforced with planks” in the northern part of the castle's courtyard between a rectangular central palace building, the so-called Michael wing, and the western enclosure wall (*Fig. 1/L*) (DUMITRACHE 1997, 285). Its backfill did not contain either stone or brick fragments or mortar. M. Dumitrache dated this feature to the 12th century, presuming it was older than all the other buildings and indicates a settlement that had existed there before the Bethlen family entered into possession of the village. Besides, M. Dumitrache found 13th–14th-century pottery fragments in several features, discovered a semi-sunken house inside the chapel (*Fig. 1/C*), and recovered a denar by Béla III from the infill of a disturbed pit (DUMITRACHE 1997, 285). A few wall foundations indicated the presence of constructions older than the Michael wing (*Fig. 1/A*) on the territory between the northern and western enclosure walls and the Michael wing, as well as inside the octagonal tower. These wall foundations were dated between the second half of the 14th and the mid-15th century; it is unclear at this point,

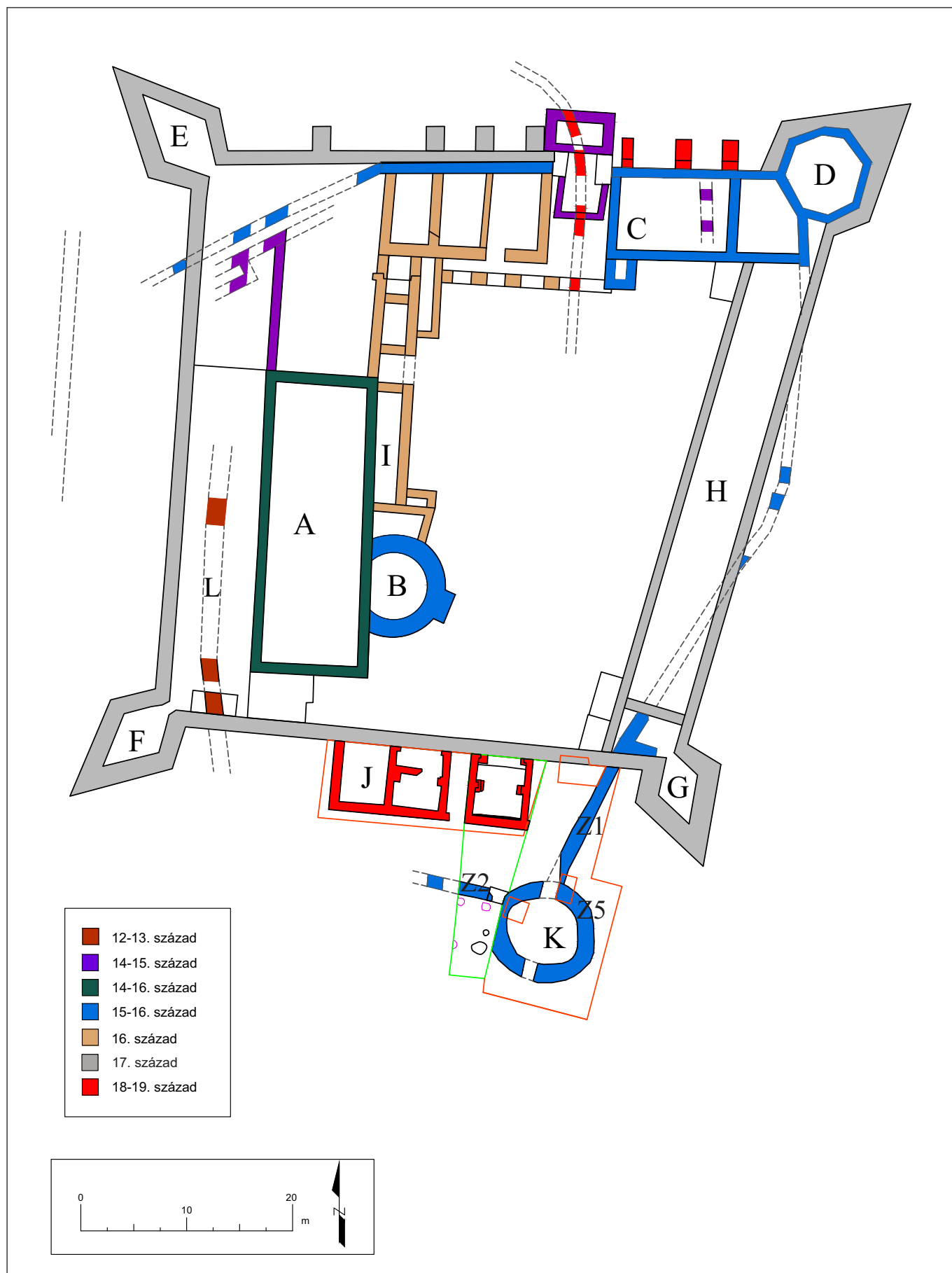


Fig. 1. Building phases reconstructed based on available excavation results (Cloudscale Digital)

however, whether they represent one construction phase or more. This detail is important because it might be related to our previous hypothesis that a manor house existed there at the time of John Bethlen (1397–1427). M. Dumitrache also raised this possibility, but she did not know of the source from 1435, presented above (DUMITRACHE 1997, 287). She attributed the subsequent constructions of the round tower (*Fig. 1/B*) and the Michael wing to Mark Bethlen (1443?–1472/3?) and noted discovering two embrasures in the eastern wall of the Michael wing's basement (DUMITRACHE 1997, 287). It has not been clarified yet, exactly who built the Michael wing; research has different hypotheses. Several factors complicate the identification of the builder: first of all, the building was rebuilt, expanded, and repaired several times in the Middle Ages and later, and due to rehabilitation and conservation works in the 1990s, it is very difficult today to differentiate between the wall surfaces, as is complicated to locate the original places of the worked stone elements. Three inscriptions are known from the building: the earliest is from 1559, set by George Bethlen and his wife; another, from 1588, can be found today in its original place in a doorframe; and a third from 1598 (now in the lapidarium), with the initials M. B. next to the family's coat of arms.

Based on the excavations, a fortification was raised around 1500 or at the beginning of the 16th century, the irregular layout of which followed the terrain features and was used before the construction works by George Bethlen. M. Dumitrache assigned the octagonal tower (*Fig. 1/D*), a wall on the northern and another on the eastern side of the castle, and a presumed corner tower to this construction phase (DUMITRACHE 1997, 286). One of the most important construction projects in the castle's history, in 1559, is linked to George Bethlen and his second wife, Clara Károlyi, as recorded by a currently-lost inscription mentioned above. The reconstruction works concentrated on the Michael wing: the first floor was divided into vaulted rooms, and additional smaller rooms were added to the eastern side of the ground floor, above which a loggia was built (*Fig. 1/I*). The 1977 excavations revealed that the rebuilding might have affected an even larger part; a building with three vaulted rooms was discovered on the northern side of the castle courtyard, with an open gallery towards the courtyard attached. As the Michael wing is shorter than the loggia, research was carried out between the loggia and the northern courtyard, revealing that other rooms had existed there towards the open gallery. The loggia continued above these rooms; moreover, a narrow staircase led from there to the northern three-room building's first floor (DUMITRACHE 1997, fig. 4). According to some hypotheses, the constructions started by George Bethlen were continued by his sons, Michael and Francis; the excavations could not clarify, however, that exactly which works can be connected to them. The next series of large-scale constructions were conducted by Alexius Bethlen (1643–1696), who had the old fortification demolished and a new one raised in its place, designed, according to the fashion of his time, with Italian-style corner bastions (*Fig. 1/E, F, G*). These constructions are relatively well-known and define the castle's look today. Dumitrache classified the last minor constructions and rebuildings in a single loose cluster and dated them between the 18th and 20th centuries. The main gate was rebuilt twice during this period, only to become demolished entirely during excavations to research the area underneath.

A part of the eight trenches of the 1998 excavation was already opened in the 1970s (IOSIPESCU & IOSIPESCU 1999, 68–79). The western and, more importantly, northern parts of the castle courtyard were almost entirely explored. A two-room brick-vaulted building was identified in the northern part, identical to the three-room building found in the 1970s. Some hypotheses by M. Dumitrache were partially reinterpreted, reducing the number of main construction phases to three. Furthermore, the excavators identified a walking surface paved with hexagonal brick tiles in the northwestern corner tower (*Fig. 1/E*) that was connected to the very first constructions of Alexius Bethlen. The building in the northern part of the courtyard was dated to the same period as the “oval” fortification identified earlier by M. Dumitrache (IOSIPESCU & IOSIPESCU 1999, 73).

NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE CASTLE COMPLEX

The latest archaeological excavations were conducted by the Mureș County Museum in collaboration with the Saint Ladislaus Foundation in 2020–2021. The investigated area, comprising two large sections, was situated outside the southern enclosure wall, towards the castle park in the south (*Fig. 1–2*). The border



Fig. 2. Drone view of the castle and the first large section in 2020 with the imprint of the corner tower (Cloudscale Digital)

of the first section, opened in 2020, is marked by a red line in Fig. 1, while that of the second, investigated in 2021, by green. The excavations continued in 2022 when geophysical surveys complemented the archaeological investigations (the results shall be published soon). Currently, we are not in a position to formulate new hypotheses, as the results and the finds are still being processed. However, a summary is necessary to formulate the most important questions for future research and also because hypotheses can help interpret uncovered features. Therefore, in the next part, we shall briefly outline the most important results of the recent excavations.

In 2020, we investigated a large section and three smaller trenches (S1–S3) and identified an earlier wall (Fig. 1/Z1) under the southern enclosure wall, close to the southeastern corner tower (Fig. 1/G). This 13 m-long and 1.10 m-wide wall (parts of which were completely dismantled, leaving only a trench indicating that it had once existed) joined a previously unknown round tower (Fig. 1/Z5) in the south-southwest. According to our current assumptions, these features may belong to a former, most probably 15th–16th-century fortification (Fig. 1/K), about which we did not have any data. Based on earlier excavation reports, wall segments connected probably to this fortification were already unearthed



Fig. 3. Stone-lined drainage canal near the kitchen (Mureş County Museum)



Fig. 4.a. Northern part of the 18th–19th-century two-room building (Mureș County Museum)



Fig. 4.b. Southern part of the 18th–19th-century two-room building (Mureș County Museum)

outside the eastern enclosure wall, in the northern and northwestern part of the courtyard, and even outside the southern enclosure wall (marked in blue in Fig. 1). As recent excavations did not have a chance to verify these discoveries and we struggle with a lack of essential bits of the related documentation, we can only presume that all wall segments unearthed earlier and seemingly connected to this tower were indeed built in the same construction phase. Wall Z1 was raised above an earlier feature that yielded characteristic 12th and 13th-century pottery fragments (of clay cauldrons and vessels decorated with wavy lines), confirming previous observations on the existence of an Árpáadian Age rural settlement in the area.

In 2021, three trenches were opened west of the first large section; later, these became joined, forming another large excavation area that allowed for a better understanding of the unearthed walls and features. A three-room kitchen attached to the southern enclosure wall (Fig. 1/J) was still used at the beginning of the



Fig. 5. Fireplace in the two-room building (Mureș County Museum)



Fig. 6. Z2, the northwestern fortification wall (Mureș County Museum)

20th century. Although we do not have precise data on the time of its construction, we have excavated one of its rooms (with a large oven). About 1.50 m south of the kitchen building, we discovered a stone-lined drainage canal running west-east, which probably carried the water down the hill into a stream below the castle (Fig. 3). About 3 m south of the drainage canal, right below the walking surface, we have discovered some 0.70 m-wide stone and brick walls of another building with at least two rooms, dated to the 18th–19th centuries (Fig. 4/a–b). This building comprised a larger fireplace (Fig. 5), which, at some point, most likely functioned as a cold smoker (also used later). Its north-east oriented exterior wall was built on an earlier, thicker wall. This early 1.10 m wide and 3.30 long wall (Fig. 1/Z2) also joined the corner tower, identified in 2020, from west-northwest (Fig. 6), supporting our earlier hypothesis about that being the corner of an earlier fortification. Based on our current field observations, this fortification corner can probably be dated to the 15th–16th centuries. It is important to highlight that the area stretching towards the castle park, where the excavations had taken place, suffered significant landscaping works prior to our investigation. It is not known exactly how much soil was removed and what building parts or features were destroyed but based on old photographs, the amount seems to be considerable. These observations are important because by assessing all these details, we can identify the areas of the castle complex where the remains likely suffered significant damage or were destroyed and those that remained relatively undisturbed. We found numerous postholes and a few beam remains in the second section's deeper layers, while some postholes' infill contained Árpáadian Age pottery fragments. The exact dating of all the features is still in progress as the field-work has not been finished yet, and the find material must also be processed.

CONSTRUCTION PHASES AND OBSERVATIONS ON SETTLEMENT HISTORY

Many questions raised in the introduction of this study can only be answered by further excavations; however, the results of the new investigations and the re-evaluation of previous results can provide few conclusions even at this point. The first question to arise in context with the newly-identified fortification is, to which member of the Bethlen family can it be attributed? Was it perhaps the fortification that surrounded the manor houses of Mark Bethlen and his sons or an earlier construction that could be linked to John Bethlen or his son Anthony? It is important to clarify that to determine the character and extent of the buildings that preceded today's castle. Also, it is still unclear when this newly identified fortification corner and the attaching wall segments were demolished; perhaps during the construction works carried out in the 17th century, to resource building materials. We could only observe that this part was entirely demolished, and in many places, even the foundations were removed. The charter from 1509 does not mention fortifications around the manor houses. Further questions arise regarding the relationship between the fortification and the round tower, and perhaps even the presumed early ditch: were they used in different periods? Could the fortification have been built simultaneously with the round tower or the oldest part of the Michael wing?

The most important result of the latest excavations is related to the chronological position of the manor house that preceded today's castle. Recent research revealed that the builder of the first castle in Criş/Keresd was not Mark Bethlen (to whom previous hypotheses attributed its construction) but one of his ancestors; the construction of the earliest noble residence on the site can probably be connected to John Bethlen (at the end of the 14th or beginning of the 15th century), when already at least one but more likely two manor houses existed. However, the exact position of the three manor houses from the beginning of the 16th century is still unknown. According to the generally accepted interpretation, the central palace building near the round tower, especially the ground floor/basement, was the earliest of the castle complex. However, this building today incorporates the construction works of several Bethlen generations; thus, based simply on the visible architectural characteristics, it is almost impossible to outline its earliest parts, knowing that the two large-scale conservation works extensively interfered with the relics of all previous building phases. It has also been proven that an early rural settlement existed in the area of the castle complex in the 12th–13th, perhaps even 11th–12th centuries (BALTAG 2021, 258); currently, we know very little about that, but the related archaeological record proved the presence of such early land use.

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