

**GENIUS LOCI**

**LASZLOVSZKY 60**

edited by  
Dóra Mérai  
and

Ágnes Drosztmér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,  
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,  
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



**ARCHAEOLINGUA**

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Budapest 2018

The publication of this volume was generously funded by



ISBN 978-615-5766-19-0

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2018

ARCHAEOLOGUA ALAPÍTVÁNY

H-1067 Budapest, Teréz krt. 13

[www.archaeolingua.hu](http://www.archaeolingua.hu)

Copy editing and language editing: the editors

Layout: Zsanett Kállai

Map: Viktor Lagutov, Zsuzsa Eszter Pető, Mária Vargha, István Gergő Farkas

Front cover design: Eszter Bence-Molnár

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# Thoughts about Medieval Book Fittings from the Castle of Visegrád

NÓRA UJHELYI\*

This paper aims to study three book fittings from the Visegrád castle.<sup>1</sup> The mounts were found during excavations between 1936 and 1993.

In the history and even the popular culture of Hungary, the name of Visegrád is amongst the most well-known locations. The place is strongly associated with important historic events and prominent rulers such as Béla IV, Charles I, and Matthias Corvinus. There is a widely popular but probably not authentic legend about King Solomon being imprisoned in the lower castle in the eleventh century, a story that gained enough credence to provide the name of this part of the fortification (Solomon Tower). The town possibly originates from much earlier than the Middle Ages, was a royal residence for some time, and lies in a central and today frequently visited part of Hungary, approximately 50 km north of Budapest at the Danube Bend. In order to honor its historical importance, the settlement holds the title of town despite being rather small today. Visegrád has been systematically researched by historians and archaeologists since the end of the nineteenth century,<sup>2</sup> yet—given the importance of the site—it still seems to have more opportunities and valuable information to uncover. This is especially true for the castle and its archaeological material; among the latter, a significant number of metal artifacts, among them, book fittings, are still in storage.

The low number of surviving book fittings from Visegrád is surprising, since it does not correspond to the image of wealth associated with fifteenth-century Visegrád. Of course, it is likely that there was no significant royal library or book collection in the castle and the palace, yet it is essential to consider other possibilities that may have contributed to the low number of book fit-

tings found. Perhaps some of these small bronze objects were found at the beginning of the excavations and renovations and they are just “gone with the wind” of chaotic times without being recorded, since at that time there were no inventory books to record finds. Or perhaps only this number of book fittings was found but that does not mean that they did not exist — their very nature makes book fittings easy to miss.

## Description and dating

The three book fittings in the focus of this paper are the only ones among the eleven possible book mounts from Visegrád castle that can be interpreted without any doubt as medieval book fittings. Due to these circumstances, one cannot speak of a find complex of these objects in Visegrád.

One of these fittings is from an unknown context in the castle.<sup>3</sup> The object is peculiar not only because it is very small (2.2 cm × 2.3 cm) corner piece, but also because of its shape, as it almost forms a square (Fig. 1). It is not as richly decorated as the larger, deltoid-shaped bosses that sometimes are called Continental types,<sup>4</sup> however, it was engraved with lines that form and highlight heart-shaped holes. On the two sides of the mount there are two wing-like features with further small holes for fastening, and the middle of the object is lightly embossed for protection. I know of no exact analogy for this piece, although it shows some similarities to others that could make it easier to date. Heart-shaped holes also appear on fifteenth-century corner pieces from Pilis and Buda, and the style can be considered to have been popular in book binding decoration of the time. Based on these parallels, this small mount can be dated to the end of the fifteenth century, around 1470 to 1500.<sup>5</sup>

\* Budavári Ltd.; Institute of Archaeological Sciences, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem



► Fig. 1. Book fitting, inv. no. 50.447 (photo: N. Ujhelyi)

The second corner piece is larger – almost the size of a human hand – deltoid-shaped and well-decorated (Fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> It has been published and exhibited before,<sup>7</sup> however, its exact archaeological context is not known. The piece fits perfectly into the Hungarian context of medieval book fittings and has many analogs from all over Europe, as deltoid-shaped mounts were made in many sizes and with even more variations of decoration in the fifteenth century. Similarly to the other one, this corner plate was also made of molded bronze and has heart-shaped holes lined up on its longer sides. The object is decorated with floral motifs as well. The embossing was made separately and attached to the plate. In Hungary, similar pieces dated from 1470 to



► Fig. 2. Book fitting, inv. no. 95.54.1 (photo: N. Ujhelyi)

1500 have been found in Buda and Pilis.<sup>8</sup> Numerous similar fittings can be found in the collection of the Hungarian National Museum and also among the thousands of artifacts unearthed by illegal metal detecting and kept there.<sup>9</sup> In his monograph about medieval book fittings, Georg Adler mentions numerous examples that are exact analogies of this mount: there is one from Salzburg (1460-1480) with an additional inscription, and further pieces from the area of Augsburg from around the end of the fifteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Adler also calls attention to a piece similar to the one from Visegrád that was used on a binding in Sankt Lambrecht in 1566. These parallels offer a glimpse into the popularity and the longevity of the style.<sup>11</sup>

The last piece from the Visegrád castle that is undoubtedly a book fitting is a gilded, T-shaped clasp (Fig. 3).<sup>12</sup> This long hook is also the only fitting from a known archaeological context: the piece was found in the upper cellar of the palace wing. The object was initially thought to be of copper but based on similar examples it is more likely to be of bronze. Based on its size, it was probably fastened to a short strap and closed the book by hooking onto a smaller and similarly designed plate; therefore, it is likely that this one was approximately the same length (6.4 cm) and



► Fig. 3. Book fitting, inv. no. 50.310 (photo: N. Ujhelyi)

of the same thickness as the book. Georg Adler notes that this object is of a rather late type that appeared around 1500 and became a widespread book fastening form everywhere on the continent from the North Sea to Austria in the 1530 to 1540's — exactly at the time when the general size of medieval books became smaller in all dimensions due to bindings made of hard paper.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

The book fittings discussed here show little or no difference from those known from late fifteenth-early sixteenth-century Hungary and continental Europe. Similarly, like most book fittings of this period, we cannot clarify where the pieces were made. Interestingly, the group of book mounts from the Visegrád castle is not homogeneous and the pieces do not tell a great deal about the probable book culture at the royal court. Was there any kind of book culture in Visegrád at all? There must have been some, even if the famous library was in Buda<sup>14</sup> and the lack of archaeological traces of books can be explained in some other way. Perhaps the books in Visegrád had different bindings that did not need mounts and fittings or the volumes were taken away from Visegrád or the books went through other changes or deterioration from the environment had a striking effect on them. The pieces discussed above, however, carry enough information that the items can be placed on the timeline of European archaeological book remains.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The paper is based on the following master's theses: Nóra Ujhelyi, MA Thesis (Cultural Heritage Studies Program, Central European University, Budapest, 2017); Nóra Ujhelyi, "Középkori könyvek nyomai magyarországi leletegyüttesekben" [Traces of medieval books in Hungarian find complexes], MA Thesis (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, 2017).
- <sup>2</sup> László Iván, "Régészeti kutatások és műemléki helyreállítások a visegrádi fellelégvárbán 1871–1998," in *A visegrádi fellelégvár*, ed. Gergely Buzás, Visegrád régészeti monográfiái, 6 (Visegrád: MNM Mátyás király Múzeum, 2006), 26–46.
- <sup>3</sup> King Matthias Museum, Hungarian National Museum [HNM], inv. no. 50.447
- <sup>4</sup> Charlotte L. Howsam, "Book Fastenings and Furnishings: An Archaeology of Late Medieval Books," PhD dissertation (University of Sheffield, 2016), 116.
- <sup>5</sup> Imre Holl, *Funde aus dem Zisterzienserkloster von Pilis* (Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2000), 182–183.; Katalin I. Melis, "A Mátyás-kori budai királyi könyvkötőműhely leletei" [Finds from the royal book binding workshop from the age of King Matthias Corvinus in Buda], *Művészettörténeti Értesítő* 34, no. 1–2 (1985): 50.
- <sup>6</sup> King Matthias Museum, HNM, inv. n. 95.54.1
- <sup>7</sup> Gergely Buzás and József Laszlovszky, *The medieval royal palace at Visegrád* (Budapest: Archaeolingua, 2013), 367.
- <sup>8</sup> Holl, *Funde aus dem Zisterzienserkloster von Pilis*, 183.
- <sup>9</sup> Ujhelyi, "Középkori könyvek nyomai," 34.
- <sup>10</sup> Georg Adler, *Handbuch Buchverschluss und Buchbeschlag: Terminologie und Geschichte im deutschsprachigen Raum, in den Niederlanden und Italien vom frühen Mittelalter bis in die Gegenwart* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2010), 106–107.
- <sup>11</sup> Adler, *Handbuch Buchverschluss und Buchbeschlag*, 138.
- <sup>12</sup> King Matthias Museum, HNM, inv. n. 50.310
- <sup>13</sup> Georg Adler and Jörg Ansoerge, "Buchverschlüsse und Buchbeschläge vom Marienkirchhof in Pasewalk – Zeugen der ehemaligen Bibliothek des Pasewalker Dominikanerklosters," *Bodendenkmalpflege in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Jahrbuch* 54 (2006): 166.
- <sup>14</sup> Árpád Mikó, "Mátyás király könyvtára az uralkodó reprezentációjában" [The Library of King Matthias Corvinus in the ruler's self-representation], in *A holló jegyében. Fejezetek a corvinák történetéből*, ed. István Monok (Budapest: Corvina Kiadó, 2004), 19–43.