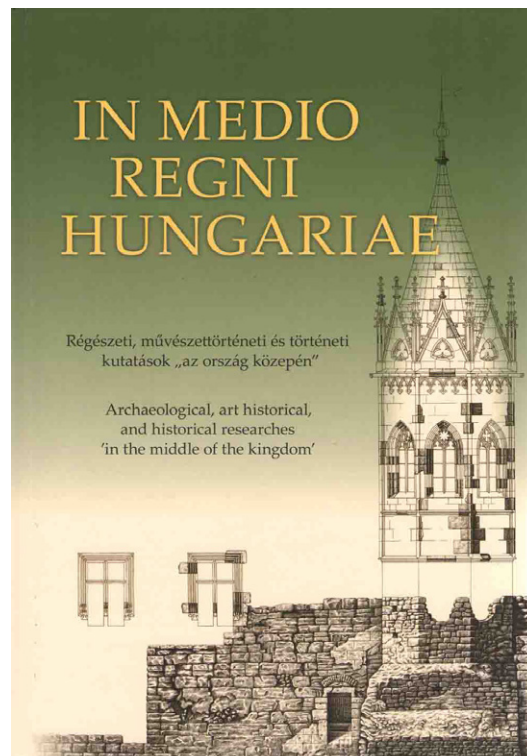


## THE “MIDDLE OF THE REALM” IN MEDIEVAL HUNGARY

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The “middle” or the centre of medieval Hungary cannot be correlated with a single town or royal residence. It would be easy to claim that the centre of the country or the kingdom was always where the king happened to be, but this was not necessarily the case. Suffice it here to recall that some sovereigns such as Sigismund of Luxemburg did not reside in the country for extended periods of time, often for many years. Sigismund stands out from among the medieval sovereigns of Hungary by his lengthy, fifty-year-long rule, but also by his well-known penchant for travel, even if some of his absences had nothing to do with his fondness of travelling since as king of Bohemia and, later, as Holy Roman Emperor, his royal seat was not always in Hungary. Even among the conditions of travel and communications of the Middle Ages, Sigismund was able to attend to the affairs of Hungary from afar. At the same time, it was the geographic distances and the available means of travel that principally determined that the region which can be regarded as the “middle of the realm” evolved near the geographic centre of the Hungarian Kingdom, to its north and west. Successive generations of historians, archaeologists and art historians engaged in the study of the Hungarian Middle Ages have persuasively demonstrated that the expression “middle of the realm” (*medium regni*) is more than a modern historical construct. In the introductory study to the volume, Elek Benkő addresses this issue in detail, concluding that the concept itself can be traced to the Middle Ages, even if it appears in different forms in the extant contemporary texts. The expression “in the middle of the realm” (*in medio regni*) did not denote the kingdom’s capital city during this period, but this central region, where various settlements – towns and royal residences – fulfilled the many diverse functions that in later periods, especially during the late Middle Ages, was served by a single town, which could be described as a capital. Medieval Esztergom, Székesfehérvár, Óbuda, Visegrád and, later, Buda all lay in this region. Although different settlements and centres rose to prominence during successive periods, the “middle of the realm” remained a small region throughout the Middle Ages compared to the kingdom’s territory.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the research of royal centres always enjoyed a prominent place in medieval archaeology. These settlements and royal residences – castles and palaces – often suffered heavy damages during later centuries or were wholly destroyed, and therefore the research of these outstandingly important historic buildings, often vested with a symbolic significance, was always regarded as one of the major tasks of medieval archaeology. It is not mere chance that these highly significant centres and architectural complexes



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*Edited by Elek Benkő and Krisztina Orosz*

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were among the first locations to be archaeologically explored from the very birth of Hungarian medieval archaeology, as exemplified by the nineteenth-century investigations of the Székesfehérvár basilica, and the discovery of the remains of the royal palaces at Esztergom and Visegrád, two major archaeological events of the excavations conducted during the interwar period. One of the key events contributing to the birth of modern medieval archaeology was the archaeological research combined with monument protection work in Buda Castle (the joint complex of the palace and the royal town) that had fallen prey to the destructions of World War 2. This would in itself justify the focus of a comprehensive monograph on the relics of the central region of medieval Hungary and their targeted investigation. However, there is yet another consideration that enhances the significance of this over seven-hundred-page-long volume. Unlike in many neighbouring, roughly similar-sized countries, there is no regularly published journal with a specific focus on medieval archaeology, or even journals or periodic publications covering the Middle Ages. Neither have the changes in national monument and heritage protection over recent years been conducive to the regular publication of comparable works. As a result, the voluminous compendiums of studies published from time to time are of enormous importance because they offer an overview of new advances in this field of research. One of these was the two-volume publication, *A középkor és a kora újkor régészete Magyarországon* [The Archaeology of the Middle Ages and the Post-Medieval Period in Hungary] that appeared in 2010, a book likewise edited by the Archaeological Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

The nature and contents of the *In medio regni Hungariae* volume are best illustrated by the excellently chosen cover image showing the detailed, carefully drawn stone wall of Buda Castle, whose original was made during an earlier excavation (after World War 2) and was taken from among the illustrations to László Gerevich's detailed monograph on the castle. It is, simultaneously, a research document and an indication of the problems faced by researchers engaged in the study of the “middle of the realm”. The lower courses of stones survived the destructions of the centuries and can be studied in their original position. These architectural remains – and, we may add, our knowledge of them – rest on the solid rock foundation of Castle Hill. The upper portions of the structure and their more spectacular carved stone elements that offer considerably more information for art historians, did not survive in their original position and condition, but were recovered individually during the excavation of various rubble layers. Their reconstruction as a projecting architectural element with lavishly carved Gothic ornamentation is crucial for dating the building as well as for its artistic interpretation, but is nevertheless a reconstruction, which, no matter how detailed, remains fragmentary regarding its elements – the implication being that the visualisation of the building, the re-assessment of which elements can be associated with one another rests exclusively on architectural parallels and contemporaneous depictions. The same can be said of our knowledge of medieval Hungary's central region and its outstanding significance – a region that was richer than the average in terms of the buildings that once stood there, which had perished to a greater extent than in other regions of the medieval kingdom exactly owing to the region's central military significance.

The editors grouped the studies around four major themes. While the first part offers a historical, archaeological and art historical overview of the region, the second part, the lengthiest of all four, contains the studies covering various aspects of the region's churches, residences and towns. The third part is devoted to the castles and palaces of the *medium regni*, while the fourth deals with the Pilis area lying in the region's centre. The twenty-nine studies of the volume thus offer a comprehensive overview of countless aspects of this field of research, accompanied by copious illustrations, often in colour, which provide additional information for the period's researchers. While the volume's thematic organisation of the studies represents one possible grouping, a different grouping of the studies would also be possible, based on the previous research underlying the studies and how they have added to the existing body of knowledge.

The studies with the broadest scope are undeniably the ones offering an overview and summary of a particular issue, which, given the cultural diversity of the region and the subject itself, span a broad horizon since the “middle of the realm”, as a historical concept, can be associated with how political power was exercised, with residences as well as with the region's outstanding economic role, urban hierarchy and artistic irradiation. The study of these issues each assumes the integration of several fields of research when

addressing a particular subject. Ernő Marosi has devoted several studies to various aspects of art at the royal court and court art. In this volume, he principally focuses on the stone carvings from the early centres of the Árpáadian Age, from which he draws some general conclusions. In the second part of his study, he presents his views on one of the focal questions of the late medieval artistic centre, namely on the relationship between centre and periphery or, to put it otherwise, the many ways in which court art irradiated. His comprehensive study also addresses two other major issues: the interpretation of the Gothic statues from Buda and the patronage of court artists.

A series of related problems are addressed in Pál Lővei's study, which covers the cultural patterns in the use of decorative stone by the sovereigns and the elite, based in part on the findings of his earlier works. One point that emerges clearly is that in addition to technical issues, the choice of various stone and marble types raises a spate of other questions and thus the author treats various aspects of royal display as well as the availability of different stone types and the ease or difficulty with which they could be worked. The natural environment (the location of quarries) and political, social and economic conditions all had their impact on the creation of works of art, a theme that is also explored by Katalin Szende in her study on urban development. It is not mere chance that in her examination of various elements of medieval royal centres and the urban network, she focuses on the Danube, on the river's Hungarian section. The natural environment, the role of the river in shaping towns are explored, as is the question of river ports, which leads to the most important elements in terms of urban growth, namely overland and water routes, junctions and fording places, or, in other words, the complexities of medieval trade contacts and of communications in general. Aside from the environmental factors, successive sovereigns too played a prominent role in the dynamics of urbanisation and urban growth. The location, role and nature of the court was the perhaps most influential element in the region's history; the itinerary and movement of the royal court determined the most important components in the relation between towns and residences. Krisztina Orosz looks at another crucial component of the itinerant court's movement in her study, in which she examines itinerant courts and itinerant households in relation to the furnishings of royal and noble residences. This is a largely unexplored field in medieval research, which has been sorely lacking from medieval studies – no matter that the reason for this gap in our knowledge is quite obvious, given that medieval furnishing have been destroyed to an even greater extent than buildings and written documents in Hungary. Researchers studying this aspect of the Middle Ages have to reconstruct, and interpret, the overall picture of medieval furnishings from the tiny surviving fragments and on the basis of parallels taken from countries with a richer corpus of material. Miklós Takács too treats medieval material culture, although not the relics of royal households, but the archaeological finds from the region's rural settlements and their interpretation.

The studies with a broader scope are followed by ones with a focus on churches, castles and residences and their material relics. However, a different grouping would also be feasible.

In this case, the first group would be made up of the studies describing new research findings that fill the gaps in our current knowledge and thus make the volume indispensable to Hungarian medieval studies. Even though research on the “middle of the realm” can look back on over one and a half centuries, there are still a number of relics about which even the most basic research findings are barely available. One of the undeniable highlights of the volume is the paper by István Horváth, who has directed archaeological excavations in Esztergom for several decades and who has, through his exemplary work, covered all major subjects of the town's archaeology. His study summarises over three decades of investigations in Esztergom Castle and offers a vivid picture of the work done in this important centre, describing in detail previous research during successive archaeological campaigns in different locations in one of the most important architectural complexes of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary. No less important is Piroska Biczó's study on the major findings of the excavations at Székesfehérvár Basilica, and in particularly the research on the grave of St. Stephen. Another significant royal residence, the one at Óbuda, has received far less attention. Krisztina Havasi's study examines the art historical context of this fragmentary monument through a look at the historical events of the early thirteenth century. Her study highlights the importance of this palace that represented an entirely novel architectural type in its time and was thus a truly fitting residence for the

sovereigns of the Árpadian Age. Her study also draws attention to the fact that there is no need to search for a mythical Ancient Buda, as is so often suggested, simply because the largely no longer visible remains that were uncovered during the excavation of the royal residence at Óbuda are not deemed elegant enough. Aside from a brief remark, the volume's editors do not mention these misinformed views, most of which are disseminated over the internet – Krisztina Havasi's study offers a wealth of persuasive arguments for scholars intent on emphasising the findings of the archaeological explorations at Óbuda.

Considerably more fresh research reports on Buda and Visegrád can be found in other publications and journals. In the case of these two centres, the studies included in the volume are less summaries of previously undiscussed subjects, but rather a fresh overview of the most recent findings. The studies by Gergely Buzás, Lajos Bozóki and Orsolya Mészáros on the royal centre, the citadel and urban life cover the main highlights of recent research at Visegrád, as does Károly Magyar's study on the royal residence at Buda. In many cases, the studies complement one another, irrespectively of whether they approach the medieval relics from an archaeological or historical perspective. The studies by Klára Mentényi, Renáta Skorka and Ágnes Kolláth shed new light on various centuries in the history of Székesfehérvár, highlighting different aspects of the town's history, art history and post-medieval archaeology. Attila Zsoldos and Enikő Spekner examine the historical role of Buda and Pest from these towns' early period to the close of the fourteenth century, with an overview of the period's written sources. The archaeology of Pest during the same period is summarised by Judit Zádor, who has been engaged in the research on the town's history for several decades, and Eszter Kovács, who has actively participated in more recent investigations. The volume provides a wealth of information on the broader area of the royal centres too: Tibor Rácz discusses the archaeological relics of Vác, an episcopal town, while György Terei focuses on the settlement history of Csepel Island, an important royal estate, as revealed by the archaeological evidence. Zoltán Batizi's study examines the relation between the population of the royal centre at Visegrád and the inhabitants of Nagymaros, a settlement on the opposite side of the Danube.

Some of the studies in the volume's four main sections address more elaborate historical problems, drawing from the evidence assembled from research conducted in several locations. István Feld examines the royal castles of the Árpadian Age in the “middle of the realm”, while Gergely Buzás reviews the period's royal residences and lodges. Elek Benkő's study takes a look at the manor houses in the Pilis Mountains, which played a key role in the emergence of that region's royal monastic foundations. This leads us to the medieval monasteries in the country's central region, which are surveyed by Beatrix Romhányi in her study on the activity of the Pauline Order.

Finally, mention must certainly be made of the studies which publish new assemblages, mostly archaeological finds, the relics of medieval material culture. First among these is Imre Holl's study describing items from the collection of King Matthias. As one of the most outstanding scholars of Hungarian medieval archaeology, a scholar of rightly deserved international reputation who devoted much of his scholarly energies to the research of medieval material culture, he can be credited with laying down the theoretical, methodological and practical foundations of medieval material culture studies, and his work is therefore indispensable for anyone working in this field. It is not mere chance that Holl's work is a point of reference for many of the volume's other studies covering the period's material culture. These include the study by István Kovács and Orsolya Mészáros describing select finds from the medieval material unearthed in the town of Visegrád. Studies on medieval stove tiles are likewise based on Imre Holl's pioneering work, as shown by Péter Boldizsár's article on the stove tiles from the archiepiscopal palace of Esztergom.

Despite the briefness with which individual studies have been described in the foregoing, it is my hope that the above book review has convincingly illustrated that this rich compendium of studies illuminates virtually every dimension of the period that has been chosen as its subject and that it can be profitably used as a handbook indispensable to future studies. Hungarian medieval studies have been greatly enriched with this carefully edited, comprehensive volume, whose studies cover the most important areas in this field of research and can thus act as a springboard for future studies. Each study is provided with an English summary, meaning that international research too can familiarise itself with the most important research

findings. A general index and an index of names, usually omitted from Hungarian publications, would have been very useful in view of the wealth of data (although it is possible that this would have exceeded the length limit of this hefty volume). The publication of this volume is especially important because it will doubtless contribute to disseminating the new findings of medieval archaeological and historical research to the broader academic community and the general public. It is to be hoped that similarly to the new volumes on Visegrád published in English, works on other royal centres and the relics of medieval Hungary will also reach the international academic community. The volume's editors have certainly done their part in this work.