

BOOK REVIEW: HAVASOK KEBLÉBEN REJTEZŐ SZÉP CSÍK A Csíki-medence középkori településtörténete [Beautiful Ciuc Hiding in the Mountains. The Medieval Settlement History of the Ciuc Basin] by István Botár

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The Ciuc Basin stands out even amongst the enchanting regions of Transylvania due to its natural beauty and the villages with their prominent church steeples visible from far away laying at the feet of the Ciuc Mountains. However, it is not by chance that one of the first scholarly researchers into Székely Land and the discoverer of its treasures, Balázs Orbán, called this area hidden. This is particularly true of its medieval period, but we can form a picture of these centuries through written texts, surviving monuments and the objects that have been fortunately preserved in treasuries, collections and churches. However, fate has treated historians of Transylvania's eastern sections poorly, because although these sources are available to us, they only exist in small numbers and cover the area unevenly. In terms of the earliest centuries of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary, these sources are almost entirely lacking. Thus, it is no accident that it is primarily the surviving churches that spring to mind in connection with the medieval monuments of Ciuc for those researching this era in this region. However, if we only depended on these, the Hungarian settlement here and the histories of the villages that came to life would forever remain obscured. The written sources and official documents also let us down, if for example we would like to outline the history here during the Árpád period, since we cannot shed light on the period before the 14th century with the aid of surviving texts. This is not even to mention that if we investigate the time preceding this in the area, we are looking for traces from the stormy centuries of the Great Migrations period. Fortunately, through archaeology utilizing the remains of material culture and examining the material legacies of the various eras, it is possible to gain an insight even into periods where the written texts are silent. Therefore, it is possible to outline the early history of this hidden region through work that is based upon every possible source, and it is even possible to shed more light on those periods when the highly visible white churches of Ciuc and the villages around them were constructed, defining the appearance of the landscape here for centuries.



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A Csíki-medence középkori településtörténete
[Beautiful Ciuc hiding in the mountains. The medieval
settlement history of the Ciuc Basin], by István Botár.
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István Botár has now been researching the archaeological remains and historical sources of the area with a great passion and solid professional basis for two decades. He follows a methodology in his work that he was employing already during his university studies in Budapest. His first essays and then his thesis and doctoral dissertation were written with the aid of this process. Its essence is to incorporate every possible source in the analysis, regardless of which aspect of the Middle Ages they relate to and which field of study deals with them. This is how the tiny ceramic finds collected during archaeological field walks have become sources for the history of the 10th century Ciuc Basin in just the same way as architectural details or grave goods discovered as a result of excavations performed on the interiors or surroundings of medieval churches that are still standing today. In the same way, he relies on medieval Latin documents when they can also be included in the research, while also not forgetting about the interesting historical information that may be lurking in folk legends, local stories and narratives. However, the use of this abundance of source materials and diverse approach can only be successful if it is accompanied by critiques of these sources and precise methodology developed within the different fields. This methodology has already brought results in the medieval research on Transylvania in other areas, through the work of archaeologists examining the Sóvidék region or even all of Székely Land.

István Botár, as he has proven in his earlier work, is at home in the past of the Ciuc Basin and with all of the methods that help in resolving all of the research areas and historical problems. He formulates important conclusions on settlement history on the basis of surface finds or the relatively rare written sources, as well as through the destroyed or existing details of churches. His interests and investigations extend to other structures from the period, for example castles, but landscape, field and land use are also included in this work, just as how natural raw materials played a role in populating of the area and affected medieval life. In addition, to shed light on these questions, it is necessary to go further, utilizing other sources as well. This is how the use of modern period maps also became a part of the work, as did the examination of the tree rings of the wooden structural elements of the churches, which through the aid of another field of study, dendrochronology, provides certain reference points in determining the age of the monuments. However, in the same way it is necessary during research on the area to deal with the interpretation of medieval mural paintings and fresco fragments or with the analysis of the spatial positioning of certain archaeological features and objects that can be identified on the basis of written sources. Analysis of the decoration and techniques for making medieval vessels is a part of the work, as is the surveying of the small carved details, vaulting, baptismal fonts and tabernacles of medieval churches. In addition, the contemporary landscape is also outlined for the reader during all of this, since it is necessary to see the reciprocal impact of the centuries of co-existence between man and nature that lies behind the villages, place names and terraces visible on their outskirts. Without this, it is not possible to understand the Middle Ages any more than without studying the castles or the churches. The testimony of the medieval and modern place names helps in understanding this, just as a survey of the patron saints of the churches provides data shedding light on the religious life of those living here.

The methodological basis of the work is represented by the uncovering and interpretation of historical and archaeological sources, employing every kind of these. This means that in addition to surveying the beautiful landscapes of the area, he often had to take out old finds that were collecting dust in museums again and identify them with meticulous work. At other times, it was possible to call upon aerial photographs for assistance in discovering medieval churches, castles or other features. The analysis of maps and the present-day villages led the author to the analysis of the forms of settlements and from this, the process of colonisation and the gradual utilization of the landscape took shape. The churches and their fortifications also arose as issues to be investigated, just as the chapels found on the outskirts of the villages. After all, the network of churches in the area has been outlined by these, and the registers of papal tithes have preserved interesting information on this for us, but only provide a single chronological horizon for this complex organization.

The processes of settlement history and issues of population history outlined here provide insight far beyond the borders of the Ciuc Basin. Although the historical administrative unit, the Ciuc seat, is not

entirely identical with the area examined in this book, the conclusions that are drawn are in many ways applicable not only to other regions in the eastern part of Transylvania, but also numerous areas on the fringes or borders of the Kingdom of Hungary. Many issues of details have arisen in connection with the question of the medieval settlement of Transylvania, such as its numerous connections with Székely history and the question of the continued existence of the medieval lifestyle and system of customs in the modern period. These are the research problems that give the author of this book the ability to make more universal conclusions that go beyond the Ciuc Basin.

In the wake of the display of the various buildings, inscriptions, objects and finds, a profile of a community that often lives here under difficult circumstances, but that also has preserved its monuments, its language and its landscape, and this community has come to the researcher quite often as providers of data, aids to investigation and local historians. However, in reality these people inhabit the area where the medieval heritage of the Ciuc Basin has survived to the present day. Through the work of István Botár, this region can at once be integrated into the medieval history of Transylvania and the entire Carpathian Basin, and can be a solid starting point for any initiatives serving to preserve these kinds of buildings. This marvelous region can thereby go from being hidden to being open to discovery and understanding by many people, now with numerous centuries of its past having been uncovered and elaborated far more completely.