

REVIEW

Gyöngyi Kovács (ed.) (2022). Medieval and Ottoman Period castles and fortifications in Pest County.

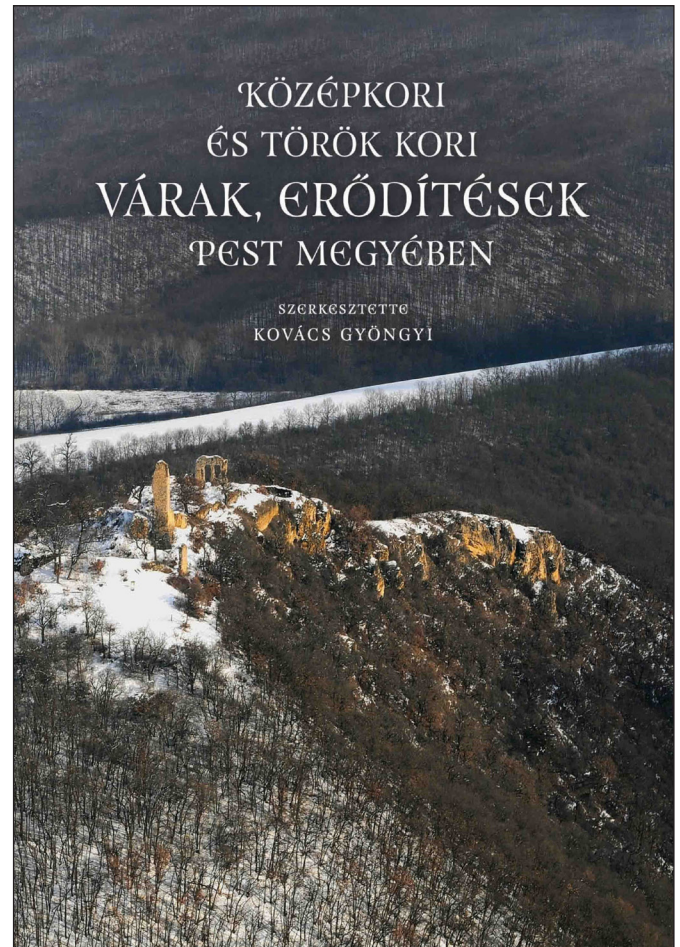
SZABOLCS BALÁZS NAGY

Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 13. (2024) Issue 1, pp. 63–67.

The volume was compiled and edited by Gyöngyi Kovács based on the manuscript by Zsuzsa Miklós.

Nowadays, it is not a question anymore that researching the poorly preserved, barely discernible remains of medieval fortifications, which often also remain hidden in written sources, is just as important as investigating the spectacular and well-known still-standing ruins bestowed with tales and legends. It has become clear that one cannot properly understand the tendencies of Árpád Age fortification architecture without knowing these ‘romantic’ relics that usually comprise no more than a few ditches and ramparts (*Figs. 1–2*). The biggest merit of the reviewed volume is its consistent approach in discussing all known medieval and Ottoman Period fortified sites in Pest County, independent of how much still stands of the rising walls and how spectacular and popular the ruins are. Only eight to ten of the thirty-nine venues discussed may be known by the general public; however, the scholarly community has been the primary target audience of the authors, whose main motive was meeting their standards. Nonetheless, non-professional enthusiasts will not be disappointed either when paging this outstandingly high-quality, well-designed and lavishly illustrated book in which the history of each fortification, even those with the most complex and eventful past, is summarised in a suitably long and easily accessible overview.

The reviewed volume relies almost exclusively on the research of the late Zsuzsa Miklós in providing a comprehensive presentation of the fortified sites of the county, including the ones with a much earlier (usually prehistoric) predecessor that have been reused later. Next to Zsuzsa Miklós, who passed away more than a decade ago, the other author is Gyöngyi Kovács, whose immense work was pivotal in reshaping the manuscripts and publications of her former colleague into an exemplarily consistent work. She was helped by several co-authors¹ who contributed the volume with a thematic study or the description of a fortification. That the division, style, and length of



*Gyöngyi Kovács (ed.) (2022).
Medieval and Ottoman Period castles
and fortifications in Pest County.
Budapest: Archaeolingua.*

*Hardcover, 482 p., in full colour. In Hungarian.
ISBN 978-615-5766-57-2*

¹ Elek Benkő, Gergely Buzás, Zoltán Czajlik, István Feld, István Kóka, Klára Kővári, Hella Mag, Tibor Ákos Rác, Gábor Serlegi, György Terei, Balázs Tóth, Bence Vágvolgyi and Gábor Virágos.



Figs. 1–2. Images from the book: the remains of the fortifications of Galgamácsa–Ecskend today

these independent studies—ones not based on Zsuzsa Miklós’s work—fit flawlessly into the volume praises them at least as much as the editor, Gyöngyi Kovács. István Feld took a major part in finalising the texts and the images; his contribution as a scientific consultant and his cautious and thorough approach to the topic shine through the text at diverse points—obviously, the most clearly in the description of the Solymár fortification, written by him.

Site descriptions, arranged in an alphabetic order, represent the backbone of the volume. These start with a short listing of the relevant topographic data, followed by the research history of the discussed site, including the descriptions of the field walking surveys and excavations and the finds these yielded (where applicable). This part is followed by the presentation of the latest field inspections, aerial photography surveys and, where possible, an overview of all gleaned historical data. Each description concludes with a summary, including conclusions regarding the dating of the site, which is especially useful in the case of sites where hypotheses are contradictory. The few uncertain or completely destroyed fortifications appear at the end of the site descriptions. This part is preceded by four studies focusing on diverse issues of the research of fortifications in Pest County and a Foreword by the editor, Gyöngyi Kovács. The almost 500-page volume is truly spectacular; however, the lavish and varied colour illustrations comprising well-edited high-resolution aerial and site photos, maps, survey images, survey drawings, and artefact photos and drawings suitably counterpoint its monumentality.

This book fits in the line of earlier topographical works on forts by Zsuzsa Miklós but also the one by diverse Hungarian researchers, published by various publishing houses.² With this volume, data has become available on a significant part of the country, which provides a firm dataset suitable for statistical evaluation and drawing conclusions—a sharp contrast with the time before the publication of such volumes when researchers had to rely mainly on their impressions in formulating hypotheses. In other words, the topographical research of forts represents the base for studies with a broader view and tackling more comprehensive archaeological problems and historical questions.³

The above sheds another light on the significance of this book. That it surpasses in several respects the overviews of other counties, each published as a volume of the *‘Magyarország várainak topográfiaja’* [Topography of forts in Hungary] series from 2007, is another praise to the editor, Gyöngyi Kovács. One of the extra content elements is the thematic studies complementing the site descriptions, while the other is the rich and colourful illustrations, which include images of the representative part of the find material. These

² Without being comprehensive, one may mention the overviews (exclusively or partly by Zsuzsa Miklós) on the Gödöllő Hill Range, the Börzsön Mountains, and Tolna County; the works of József Dénes on Vas County and Sopron; the volume by Kálmán Magyar and Gyula Nováki on Somogy County; and the topographical works on the forts of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, Heves, and Nógrád Counties published from 20007. As for the parts of the historical Kingdom of Hungary outside the current state borders of Hungary, the works of Ákos Karczag and Tibor Szabó must be highlighted among the summaries written in Hungarian.

³ An important example of the latter is a study by István Feld (FELD 2018).

represent a difference to the previous topographic volumes, as does its narrower focus (the book does not cover prehistoric and Roman Period fortifications); however, this volume connects to the previous ones at many points. Accordingly, it would be worth including a summary of the history of topographic research of forts (e.g., in the Foreword or the introductory study by Gyöngyi Kovács), especially as the previously published volumes represent the wider context for interpretation in these studies. An example perhaps helps the reader understand what I mean. An interesting bearing of the reviewed volume on Pest County is that by reading it, one starts to wonder how (and whether) the immediate vicinity of the royal power centres affected the network, density, and topography of forts and fortified places. Albeit Gyöngyi Kovács touches on this topic in her study, no detailed discussion is presented in the volume. Apparently, the previous topographical volumes can provide a firm starting point for a detailed investigation of this question as the body of data published in them, compiled through research with a similar approach, represents a reliable base for comparison. I believe such an evaluation, focusing on delineating the unique traits of the study area through comparison, would have done the book good.

As the volume relies fundamentally on the work of Zsuzsa Miklós, her methods and approach are also worth mentioning. The excavations she conducted in forts in Pest County were all small-scale, consisting of only some trial trenches; this method has always had its limitations concerning reconstructing ground plans, clarifying building periods, and more. But there are advantages, too—an I am thinking about the methodology applied by Zsuzsa Miklós here rather than the spatial limitations of this type of fieldwork. The find material of the forts she investigated is conspicuously richer than that of other coeval ones. For example, she found numerous medieval glass vessel fragments; while glassware was rare in the 13th century and glass sherds count as rare finds in such contexts, she regularly found some in the forts she investigated. The answer is obviously, that glassware was more frequently used by lords of the castles and castellans already in the 13th century than previously assumed, but glass sherds remained unnoticed on larger excavations due to a lack of possibility (or determination) to save them. Not only her results in the research of material culture praise the thoroughness of Zsuzsa Miklós but also the observations she made with regard to architectural technology. It is not usual for the authors of excavation reports to point out that the building of the fort started with cleaning the surface to the bedrock, the cracks of which were filled and the ground levelled with yellow clay, and the lowermost course of stones was laid on that.⁴

As for her datings of pottery, interesting are the age estimations provided for some early pieces (decorated with horizontal or wavy line bundles) assigned to the 10th–11th centuries. The presence of such vessels may be explained by a coeval settlement in the case of Bernecebaráti–Templom-hegy as the place is spacious enough and easy to access. In contrast, Ipolydamásd–Zuvár was established in a setting so extreme—on the small top of a steep and relatively very high hill—which indicates that the inhabitation and the buildings served some special role. One cannot exclude that some of these pottery finds are better connected with 8th–9th-century inhabitation, which has been outlined at some points in the area but does not count as a surprise in light of the local toponyms of Slavic origin.

A chief asset of the volume is that, while following the footsteps of Zsuzsa Miklós and being impregnated with the deepest and most honest respect for her work, its authors did not stop at creating a pseudo-Zsuzsa Miklós book but introduced their own, sometimes different, views and approach. This liberty appears at countless points throughout the volume, including the interpretation of a particular site (e.g., Perőcsény–Jancsi-hegy, Galgahévíz–Szentandrás-part, Kerepes–Kálvária-hegy) and more comprehensive topics like the church remains identified within the fortifications. Most presented criticism and the different opinions are definitely justified and right. Another great merit of the studies is that they incorporate the latest scientific literature, not only on forts and fortifications but also on more loosely connected topics.

Last, let me share some thoughts about the studies accompanying the site descriptions, especially the second and third. The introductory study by Gyöngyi Kovács is followed by a writing by Zoltán Czajlik on the archaeological aerophotography of the forts of the county. This latter one may be interesting for

⁴ See the description of Ipolydamásd–Zuvár on p. 201.

its research historical and methodological aspects. Both studies are the authors' homages to the highly esteemed colleague and 'aerial' archaeologist.

The study by György Terei on the connection between the Árpád Age forts and settlements in the area is a short version in Hungarian of a longer study published in English in 2021, also representing a step forward in the research of a topic the author started with Zsuzsa Miklós. His (and, partly, her) extremely important observation is that not only the geographical features and the position within the settlement network of the fortified places established in a non-mountainous setting differ from those established in mountain regions, but there are differences between them in two other aspects, too: hillforts are usually smaller and less fortified. Therefore, as (among others) István Feld has pointed out, they have much more in common with manors, and many of them can be considered one despite (or better, besides) having a rampart-and-ditch fortification. Many such complexes had a fundamentally manor-like character, making it easy to understand why these were frequently established next to settlements in venues with a good prospect at them. This visibility does not necessarily represent control; rather, higher grounds with a great setting simply had more prestige.

Zsuzsa Miklós believed that the fortifications that included the remains of a medieval church building were, without exception, fortified places abandoned at some point and reused later for ecclesiastical purposes; i.e., a 'landlord's' fort was there first, and the church only occupied the area within the ramparts and ditches after life had ceased there. In her study, Gyöngyi Kovács highlights some uncertainties of this hypothesis, while György Terei tactfully but firmly presents his doubts, which, I believe, are thoroughly justified as no conclusive proof of Zsuzsa Miklós's theory has ever been found yet. It is unclear what could confirm the presence of a landlord in these complexes: the results of the past decades of research have revealed that weapons cannot be considered rare finds even in a rural context, and the fortifications may have been coeval (and belonged to) the churches themselves. György Terei is absolutely right in suggesting that, in some cases, the church might have been fortified quickly at the advent of a crisis, e.g., the Mongolian invasion. I believe the question requires further and more detailed investigations. What are the similarities between the fortified places with *intra muros* church remains and those (more and more) fortified churches in the Great Hungarian Plain, destroyed in the Mongolian invasion, where the dating and connection of the enclosure and the church building could already be cleared?⁵

The fourth study in the reviewed volume, a joint paper by István Kóka, Balázs Tóth, György Terei, and Hella Mag, is an evaluation of the medieval and early modern metal finds from a single fort, Perőcsény–Salgó vár, and its surroundings. The increasing reliance of the profession on metal detectors is transforming archaeological methodology before our eyes, also disproving or at least correcting many earlier hypotheses in the process. Not unrelatedly, conflict archaeology, an approach that also appears in this volume, seems to have a bright future; the first complex and modern results by Hungarian archaeologists have only been published in recent years. Not only the focus but also its structure makes this study significant: the detailed description of the methodology applied in the metal detector surveys is exemplary, and this is pivotal for understanding how representative the presented find material might be. In this respect, a map displaying the limits of the surveyed area, the tracks, and the find scatter (possibly with different marks for each find type) might have been useful.

The applied methodology is also exemplary, not only because it includes a systematic reconnaissance of the site and its finds but also because its scope extends to the broader setting. Besides material objects, significant features in the landscape are detected and documented, including old dirt roads, bigger rocks, artificial terraces and phenomena, quarries, etc. The collected find material is presented, besides descriptions, in high-quality colour plates, which include important images of many types that are rarely published in Hungarian scholarly literature (e.g., the parrying spike of a *messer* or war knife, an almost complete 15th-century currycomb, and early modern and modern axle head bolts with various decorations). The most important part of the study is the conflict archaeological analysis with convincing arguments for a siege of the fort in the Middle Ages, also unravelling some of the related events.

⁵ See ROSTA & PÁNYA 2022.

The book is a thorough and comprehensive work built on the decades-long traditions of research on forts in Hungary, and it also makes good use of the latest archaeological results and approaches. It was prepared and published by the Archaeolingua Foundation for the HUN-REN Archaeological Institute. One can safely state that the aims formulated by the editor of the volume in the Foreword have been fulfilled, and ‘the completed volume, despite its inevitable shortcomings, is worthy of the memory of Zsuzsa Miklós’.

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