

REVIEW: MÁRÉ CASTLE IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD

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Compiled by the Medieval Research Group of HUN-REN-Hungarian National Archives – University of Szeged Academy of Sciences Research Group for Hungarian Medieval Studies, the latest volume in the series that has since 2005 published mainly itineraries and studies of archontology seems unique to the reviewer, who does not know of another medieval castle in Hungary of which a full volume has been compiled by six outstanding representatives of the current middle generation of historians. As we learn from the editors, the material is based on a citizen science conference held in 2021 and dealing with the Máré castle.

The volume of some 250 pages contains the conference presentations reworked into academic papers. Four of the studies deal with Máré and other fortifications themselves, one paints the late medieval picture of Szászvár, a market town in the vicinity and, based on 16th century Ottoman censuses, the last one introduces the neighbouring settlements in the micro-region.

Placing István Bogár's exceptional career in a national context, the first paper written by Árpád Nógrády scrutinizes the life and connections of this highly influential nobleman in the first decades of the Anjou Age. According to written sources, he was active between 1301 and 1329, first as a member of Ban Henry Kőszegi (II), then of his son John, and finally as King Charles I of Anjou's reeve. This research is enabled by the earlier literature that discussed from several aspects the personality of Bogár, who probably came from the Zsidó *genus* and whose name we encounter in over fifty charters. The detailed analysis of his career offers a vivid picture of the last stage of the rule of oligarchs, providing an overview that is actually much more comprehensive than strictly required, as well as of the first Anjou ruler's fight for the crown. It is especially instructive to read that although King Charles donated to István Bogár, whom he had won over to his side, a deed of gift as early as 1316, only at a later point did he actually take possession of the castle of Máré; therefore, for a long time *de jure* the grantee only controlled it and its estate as a royal castellan. The reader feels that one crucial piece of the puzzle is missing though: Who commissioned this luckily surviving castle, surrounded by high walls, in the Mecsek Mountains? The charters indicate that it belonged to the Kőszegi family, but based on our information about the period's castles, it seems practically impossible that the castle had been erected by them. Given the area's Árpád-Age sources, might it have been possible to formulate at least a tentative hypothesis for the castle's provenance?

In the second study, the 14th-16th-century of the castle and its lords is introduced by the volume's co-editor and the publisher of the series, Norbert C. Tóth. Following a rather complicated discussion of the Máré



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family's descendants including István Bognár, and the ownership of the Gunyafis and the Bátmonostori Töttös family, thanks to the written documents of the nearly 150 years of litigation, we have an especially detailed analysis of the Várdai family. In fact, C. Tóth has produced the first comprehensive modern overview of the history of this significant late medieval Hungarian noble family. It is of utmost interest to follow how the Várdais managed to acquire the castle and its large estate through the marriage with Orsolya, daughter of Bátmostori Töttös. The author rightly emphasises that the phenomenon he has examined was far from unique.

Richárd Horváth, whom fellow historians respect as “the” castle-researcher, aims to define the place and significance of Máré in the Tolna-Baranya region. He lists a total of seventeen fortifications, including ones that we have no known mention of in charters. Perhaps among scholars working with written sources, he is the first to acknowledge the importance of archaeological excavation (basically for the 12th and 13th centuries), stating that “*the number of castles featuring in written sources and that of the actual castles identifiable in the field are far from identical.*” At the same time, he is not claiming that the statement implies the questioning of the applicability and sense of available statistics and map representations of castles (for the latter, see F. ROMHÁNYI 2024, 72). Subsequently, using the criteria established by András Kubinyi, he examines the role of the region's fortifications as residences. Horváth sees no sign of the owners' extending, rebuilding or fortifying Máré in the late Middle Ages, and does not think that it served as the family's residence at the time. It is especially relevant that, based again on the scoring system Kubinyi elaborated for classifying towns, he explains why it is (not) worth trying to establish a similar hierarchy of fortifications. Finally, he places the locations examined into three groups. The first comprises the residences (often qualified as “temporary”) of high priests and aristocratic families labelled as “magnificus”. The second comprises residences of families with smaller estates (labelled as “egregius”) and castles owned by the church, such as Dombó, Szászvár and Pécsvárad. About a dozen other fortifications, including Máré, are placed in the third category, because “*they were not considered to play a central role for their owners.*” This classification, which the author only suggested as an experiment, is obviously debatable at several points but still serves as a remarkable suggestion for further research.

The paper by Szabolcs Varga, who organised the conference and is co-editor of the volume, touches upon equally important issues, thoroughly examining the castle's history in the less than two decades between the 1526 Battle of Mohács and the 1543 Ottoman Occupation. His starting point is two coats of arms, each depicting an arm – one right, one left – holding a sword, and together, they form a symmetrical pair; both are associated with round-arched Renaissance doorframes made of Mecsek marl (as first pointed out by Gergely Buzás (BUZÁS 2017, 389) but of which Varga makes no mention), which was unearthed during the excavation conducted by archaeologist Mária G. Sándor in 1960.

Following an exemplary analysis of the data available for the period, Varga concludes that the Várdais, mentioned in the previous study, must have controlled the fortification up to 1527. He argues that in the pre-Mohács period it is likely to have served as one of the family's permanent residences. Although Varga agrees that the image in the coat of arms cannot be tied to one of the Várdais from the Gutkeled *genus*, nevertheless he still assumes that the Renaissance rebuilding of the castle may have been commissioned by a member of the Várdai family. In an unusual manner for historians, which however is certainly justified, in order to substantiate his thesis, he uses arguments taken from art history, namely the parallel stone carvings at Pécs and Szászvár. I would add that his point is supported by Renaissance details known from the castles of Ozora, Nyék and perhaps Dombó in Tolna County, which are made of the same material and also originate from the same 1510–1520 period. For this reason, it seems that Mária G. Sándor's thesis connecting the building to György Fráter and to Renaissance constructions at Pécsvárad in 1531-1543 also needs to be revised.

It is a big question, however, what the researcher should think of similar heraldic sources, moreover of the inscription in a door frame that, in the words of the author, is “bursting with pride”. Admittedly, G. Sándor, who supplemented the latter from its fragments, did not think either that it meant an armed occupation of the fortification, although that theory would fit Pál Bakics who, through his servitors Zsigmond Nagy

and István Thardassy in 1527 and 1533, was in control of the castle, and was regarded by the archaeologist as the commissioner of the reconstruction, while the hand holding a sword could only be interpreted as a part of his coat of arms at best. However, it is not only because of heraldic problems and a lack of direct construction data that Varga regards this idea highly improbable. He thinks that the locations and chronology of the valiant Serb soldier after the Battle of Mohács also contradict it. Varga is not convinced by the proposition that Gergely Buzás made in 2017, namely that a construction between 1533 and 1537 could be related to one of his men mentioned above, because we are not familiar with their coats of arms and also because their social status would not suggest this either. Thus, it is a fair decision on the author's part not to offer a conclusive answer, leaving the problem open for future research.

In the study by Bálint Lakatos, an expert on medieval market towns, in addition to a thorough analysis of the Szászvár charter and the case emerging in it, which he convincingly dates to 1468, he also addresses the 15th-century self-government organisation of the *oppidum*, its topography and place in the network of settlements. His paper is a good example of the wide-ranging possibilities of evaluating a single document, with the text and the translation of the charter obviously included in an appendix. In the book's final paper, Balázs Sudár analyses six Ottoman censuses of some 25 settlements located at the upper region of the Völgységi-patak (that includes Magyaregregy and Szászvár). Rather than giving a more detailed summary, let me quote how Sudár explains the reasons for fathers missing from censuses: “*We know, for example, that in 1566 the conquerors drove the villagers to do trenchwork at the siege of Szigetvár, where the defenders had no choice but to shoot them all.*” The tragedy of ordinary people's lives in the period could not be better expressed in one sentence.

Based on the above, readers may be justified in assuming that now they can see an important and highly influential new addition to Hungarian historiography on their screens, and their assumption is not mistaken. But we cannot conceal that the volume has major shortcomings in the area of images. Not that it does not contain sufficient illustrations! On the contrary. There are photos of nearly twenty charters, maps and family trees, as well as numerous tables aiding a better interpretation of the texts. This is a fundamental requirement for a volume on historiography. It would also be wrong to question the necessity of eight full-page photos of the excavations carried out at Máré in 1960 and of the research and reconstruction work “*in the 1960s*”. Naturally, a more precise formulation of what the images show cannot be expected, although a historian may probably disapprove of an art historian or archaeologist sharing a photo of a charter or a document without exact particulars (i.e., date, storage location and accession number), using the illustrations simply to “decorate” their work. In this book, the photographs seem to be serving this purpose.

Beyond this, fourteen pages of the volume contain several dozen digital 3D reconstructions, and their number defines the entire visual material. They are anonymous; in the caption all we read is “Pazirik Ltd.” as copyright. And this is not a coincidence. The reconstructions seem to have been made without any professional control. Thus, these images may be regarded as mechanical unsupervised products of the by now market leading enterprise in the field. Naturally, spectacular “visualisations” and “reconstruction attempts” should not be banned from a volume of this type: They are generally accepted elements of historical exhibitions and information tableaux, but in an academic publication we expect visuals to be well-established.

Giving an itemized list of the mistakes would be inappropriate in this review. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that on page 36 we see a ground plan that shows no living quarters in the 14th-century castle. Then where did István Bogár, the nobleman introduced by Árpád Nógrády, live? It also shows that the castle had two exits, which is obviously impossible. In further drawings of the 14th-century state of the complex, the latter feature is missing but, for whatever reason, we see a single-storey building in the place of the palace. Admittedly, a monographic publication of the excavations conducted by Mária G. Sándor is still non-existent. She only published two preliminary reports (G. SÁNDOR 1964, 1966) and paid special attention to the Renaissance reconstruction and the related stone carvings (G. SÁNDOR 1984). The complete excavated ground plan was only included in the latter, and – unfortunately – without any comment. This is what the anonymous employee of Pazirik Ltd. simply digitized for the volume. The person made three sketches out of it, from which they took random selections. Probably unintentionally, they showed their ignorance by

calling it the castle's "periodical ground plan". On this basis, they went on to produce a number of 3D images featuring several periods of a monumental outer castle with several towers, while according to the excavation reports, there was no more than a palisade.

It is certainly a weakness that the organisers did not request a researcher to undertake the investigation of the building archaeology and building history of the fortification, together with giving a rough but critical assessment of the find material, as well as compiling the documentation worthy of the project. This would have very considerably boosted the volume's value, indicating the possibilities of interdisciplinary cooperation and showing that no professional field intends to appropriate any of the themes. This is still an important task to be carried out following the fundamental preliminary historical investigations that have already been completed.

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