

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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Table of contents

Tabula gratulatoria	v
Kiadói előszó	vi
Publisher's Preface	viii
Köszöntő	x
Salutation	xi

Boundaries, Frontier Zones / Határvonalak, határvidékek

ALEKS PLUSKOWSKI – ALEX BROWN – SEWERYN SZCZEPANSKI – ROWENA BANERJEA – DANIEL MAKOWIECKI What Does a Frontier Look Like? The Biocultural Dynamics of the Lower Vistula Borderland in the Middle Ages	2
STEPHEN POW The Mongol Empire's Northern Border: Re-evaluating the Surface Area of the Mongol Empire	8
IAN WOOD Two Roman Frontiers and Their Sub-Roman Afterlife	14

Crossing Borders / Határokon át

SZAKÁCS BÉLA ZSOLT Gyulaírástól, avagy a rendi építészeti hagyományok átjárhatósága	19
CRISTOPHER MIELKE A Queen's Crusading Connections: Yolanda of Courtenay, the Fifth Crusade, and the Military Orders	25
BÁRÁNY ATTILA Angol keresztes a magyar végeken: Robert de Champlayn	28
CRISTIAN GAȘPAR Trespassing Pigs, Sons of Whores, and Randy Dogs: Marginalia on a Medieval Document from Caransebeș/Karánsebes	32
VADAS ANDRÁS A kecskeméti marhahajtók megpróbáltatásai és egy végvár jóllakott őrsége	38
LÁSZLÓ KONTLER Borders and Crossings: A Jesuit Scientist in the Whirlwind of Enlightened Reform	41
PAUKOVICS GERGŐ Hajszá az örök fiatalságért. Dr. Voronoff és a dübörgő 20-as évek	45
PINKE ZSOLT – STEPHEN POW A Gangesz-deltából a globális porondra: történeti ökológiai szempontok a kolera kórokozó (<i>Vibrio cholerae</i>) elterjedési területének átalakulásához	50
MARCELL SEBŐK Tangible Cultural Heritage: The Early History of Blue Jeans	55

Inhabiting the Landscape / Élet a tájban

SÓFALVI ANDRÁS	
A Barcaság határai és 13. század eleji településképe a Német Lovagrend adományleveleiben	60
NIKOLINA ANTONIĆ	
The Hospitallers' Estate of Čičan and its Neighbors: Spatial Analysis Yields New Information	64
ÜNIGE BENCZE	
The Abbey of Meszes: New Insights on the Site Location	68
MÓGÁNÉ ARADI CSILLA – MOLNÁR ISTVÁN	
Kísérlet a bárdudvarnok-szentbenedeki premontrei prépostság környezeti rekonstrukciójára	72
BEATRIX ROMHÁNYI	
Monasteries along the Danube	77
PUSZTAI TAMÁS – P. FISCHL KLÁRA	
A dél-borsodi síkság bronzkori és középkori településstruktúrájának összehasonlítása	82
VIZI MÁRTA	
Komplex régészeti kutatás egy egykori dél-dunántúli mezőváros területén	89
BATIZI ZOLTÁN	
Fagyosasszony és Kammerhof	95
PÁLÓCZI HORVÁTH ANDRÁS	
A középkori Kenderes településszerkezete	99
SZŐCS PÉTER LEVENTE	
Adatok Nagybánya és vidéke középkori egyházi topográfiájához	103
ZATYKÓ CSILLA	
Eltűnt berzencei malmok	108
SZABÓ PÉTER	
Középkori cseh erdőgazdálkodás a choustníki uradalom erdőszámadásainak tükrében	113
ANDREA KISS	
Before and After the Great Heat and Drought of 1540: Multiannual Trends of Grape and Grain Harvest Dates in the Vienna Hospital Accounts	117
LÁSZLÓ BARTOSIEWICZ	
“Kleine Fische, gute Fische” – But Sturgeon is Great	121
LYUBLYANOVICS KYRA	
Vad háziállat, házi vadállat: Számi rénszarvastartás a középkori és kora újkori Norvégiában	126
JUDITH RASSON	
Mountains in the Lifeways and History of Northern Macedonia	138
JEREMY MIKECZ	
Crossing the Abyss: The Apurímac Canyon at the Time of the Spanish Invasion of Peru (1533)	142

Busy Places / Nyüzsgő terek

PETROVICS ISTVÁN	
Újabb adatok Pécs késő középkori történetéhez	147
URBÁN MÁTÉ	
Lokális búcsújáró helyek a késő középkori Nyugat-Dunántúlon	151
BALÁZS NAGY	
The Marketplace of Csütörtök – A Local Market in Fourteenth-Century Hungary	156
KATALIN SZENDE	
The Sopron Fish Market	159
GERHARD JARITZ	
The Craftsman's Voice and Words in Late Medieval Austrian Urban Space	165

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ANA MARIA GRUIA Healthcare in Cluj in the Sixteenth Century: Overlapping Professions	168
ANA MARINKOVIĆ John Capistran's Mantle and the Early Propaganda of Franciscan Observant Cults in Dubrovnik	171
SABINA MADGEARU Ceremonial Space in Front of Medieval Buda: An Illuminated Fifteenth-Century French Vision	175
VÉGH ANDRÁS Óbuda látképeken	177

Layers of the Past / A múlt rétegei

KODOLÁNYI JUDIT Templomok és temetők a visegrádi Sibrik-dombon	181
ROSTA SZABOLCS Egy új lehetőség kapujában – tatárjáráskori védművek a Kiskunságban	186
BOTÁR ISTVÁN Árpád-kori edényégető kemence Csíksomlyón	193
PETAR PARVANOV Fire and Stone: Placing Flints in Graves in Late Medieval Kaliakra	197
GYARMATI JÁNOS Kumpi Wasi. Textilműhely egy inka tartományi központban	201
ZSUZSANNA PAPP REED Post It: Notes from Thirteenth-Century St Albans	207
VALERY REES The Salt of Genius: Marsilio Ficino on Food, Spices, and Nutrition	213
ROSSINA KOSTOVA The Mother of God Monastery near Varna, Bulgaria: More about Missionary Monasteries in Bulgaria in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries	217
DANIEL ZIEMANN The Imperial Abbey of Corvey in the Ninth and Tenth Century: At the Crossroads of Power	221
VIRÁGOS GÁBOR Kartal vagy Cyko? Kísérlet egy középkori nemesi család történetének rekonstruálására	226
TÓTH BOGLÁRKA – BOTÁR ISTVÁN A sepsikilyéni unitárius templom tetőszerkezeteinek kormeghatározása	244
RÁCZ MIKLÓS Egy tiszazugi újkori négyosztatú ház – Dokumentálás és építéstörténet	248

Objects beneath Our Feet / Tárgyak a föld alól

LANGÓ PÉTER A Tiszakeszi-Szódadombon talált kora Árpád-kori kereszt	254
RÁCZ TIBOR – NAGY BALÁZS Tatárjárás kori kincslelet Jászkarajenőről	258
SZENDE LÁSZLÓ Lehetett-e hadijelvény a csajági kereszt?	267
NÓRA UJHELYI Thoughts about Medieval Book Fittings from the Castle of Visegrád	270
MÁRIA VARGHA – THOMAS KÜHTREIBER Treasures of the “Lower Ten Thousand”? Hoards of Iron Objects	273

TABLE OF CONTENTS

K. NÉMETH ANDRÁS „Sarlóját ez okért bőszen fegyverré köszörülte” Késő középkori kiegyenesített sarló Kospa falu helyéről	280
MAXIM MORDOVIN A Collection of Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Cloth Seals from Szolnok	285
TÜNDE KOMORI Ottomans in Pest in the Light of “Luxury” Ceramics: Four Cups from Kígyó Street	289
WICKER ERIKA A 17. századi rácszentpéteri kincslelet	294

Marking the Place / Helyek és jelek

CSERNUS SÁNDOR Keresztes családtörténet és kőbe vésett emlékezet	300
LŐVEI PÁL A pilisszántói keresztes kő legendája	305
MÉRAI DÓRA Sügérek a Nyárádmentén: Sigér Mátyás síremléke leporolva	311
VESZPRÉMY LÁSZLÓ A bambergi lovas szobra és Szent István	316
TAKÁCS MIKLÓS A pétervárad-tekiai reneszánsz kőfaragvány	321
ANNELI RANDLA What and Whom Should We Remember? The Case of the Teutonic Order’s Church and Castle in Pöide, Livonia	325

Heritage Sites, Sacred Places / Örökségi helyszínek, szent helyek

ALEKSANDAR PANTIĆ The Ambiguity of Heritage Interpretation: A Late Roman Tomb in Brestovik, Serbia	330
GYÖRGY ENDRE SZÖNYI Rocamadour: Monastic Center, Pilgrimage Place, Art Historical Interest, World Heritage Site	335
KATEŘINA HORNÍČKOVÁ A Penitent Judas Iscariot: An Exemplum of Christian Morals on the Eve of Hussitism?	339
JAMES PLUMTREE Buddha, Lenin, and the Prophet Muhammad Approaching the Landscape and Cultural Heritage of Issyk-Ata	343
ROBERT SHARP The Thames Estuary: The Cultural Heritage and Memory of the Thames Estuary at Southend-on-Sea	349
ESZTER SPÄT Constructing Religio-Ritual Heritage: The New Shrine of Shekhsê Batê in Khetar, Northern Iraq	353
ZSUZSANNA RENNER Delhi, Old and New: Changing Cityscapes and the Cultural Heritage of India’s Capital City	357
FELD ISTVÁN Pseudovár vagy történeti rekonstrukció?	364
ILON GÁBOR A velemi régészeti témaparkról	371
WOLLÁK KATALIN Örökség alapú fejlesztés Kölkeden	374

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Places of Memory / Az emlékezet helyei

JÁNOS BAK	
Nádor 20 Capriccio	380
SZENTPÉTERI JÓZSEF	
Pilistől Tételig. Elektronikus levélféle a 60 esztendős Laszlovszky Józsefnek	382
RICHARD HODGES	
Scarlino in the 1980s, Forty Years On	386
KLANICZAY GÁBOR	
Egy hozzászólás Kremsben	390

Constructing Religio-Ritual Heritage: The New Shrine of Shekhsê Batê in Khetar, Northern Iraq

ESZTER SPÄT*

The landscape of Northern Iraq is dotted with small structures, shrines belonging to the Yezidis, an ethno-religious group indigenous to the region. Some of the shrines are just small stone huts or a heap of stones, others are small, square structures with a conical spire on top—the *qob*, which came to be a symbol of the Yezidi faith in the last half a century or so. In fact, many of the more simple shrines have been rebuilt in the form of a *qob* in the past few decades, a sign of the devotion Yezidis show to the holy beings (*khas*) to whom the shrines are dedicated. Replacing a simple edifice with a more grandiose one, preferably one with a spire, is a sign of respect and no one laments the disappearance of the old structures. The newer the better, as far as the community is concerned. There is, however, one (theoretically) infrangible rule: a shrine can be rebuilt in a new form, but no new shrine can be created in a new location. Such an act would go against the Yezidi belief that it is the presence of a holy being which makes space sacred. Sometimes a holy being is believed to be buried there, but more often the holy being merely resided in the place, paid a quick visit, or perhaps just took a short rest on his way somewhere “smoking a cigarette,” to quote the words of the guardian of a small heap of stones that allegedly commemorate just such an event.

Yezidis agree that humans cannot create sacred space. As one religious leader told a journalist: “We cannot make new ones [shrines]. These are all originals. Muslims will build a mosque on top of a dump site after clearing the garbage. We could never do this.”¹ People agree that such an act would be a “heavy burden” and would call

down the anger of the holy beings. Consequently, existing shrines have been in their places since time immemorial or at least since their “owners” lived or died there. Theoretically, that is. Reality is very different. In practice, there are numerous instances of creating new sacred space. Political conflicts, communal rivalries, personal ambition, and a combination of all three may all lead to the creation of new shrines, complete with their own myths and rituals. Of the many different examples, there is space here to mention only one, the new shrine of Shekhsê Batê in the village of Khetar,² which may be considered paradigmatic of how political upheavals (the destruction of Yezidi shrines and settlements) combined with rivalry between villages can give birth to new sacred space and lead to the creation of new religio-cultural heritage.

The original shrine dedicated to Shekhsê Batê³ stood by the Tigris River, next to an Arab village. The *mijawirs* or guardians of the shrine lived in the Yezidi village of Bapirê, two hours away, and had to walk to the shrine and back every Wednesday and Friday (the Yezidi holy days of the week). But, as they recalled, building a new shrine was not even an idea that would have occurred to them—until the shrine disappeared under the waves of the “Sea.” This is how Yezidis refer to the reservoir created in 1985, when the Mosul Dam (formerly the Saddam Dam) was finished and the Tigris inundated scores of villages along its shore. The shrine of Shekhsê Batê and Bapirê disappeared under the lake. As the village was rebuilt, a new shrine was also built next to it, dedicated to the holy being Shekhsê Batê (Fig. 1). As the current guardian said, this was not really the same thing as building a new shrine in a new location (that is, creating new sacred space), as the shrine of Shekhsê Batê “had already existed.”

It must be mentioned that despite what was said above, the rebuilding of an existing shrine in

* Cultural Heritage Studies Program, Central European University, Budapest. The paper is based on field research among the Yezidi community in Northern Iraq, supported by the Hungarian Research and Science Foundation [OTKA, PD 83921] and the Gerda Henkel Research Foundation [AZ 28_F_10].



► **Fig. 1.** Shrine of Shekhsê Batê in Bapirê during the shrine feast in April 2011 (photo: E. Spät)

a new location was not an isolated phenomenon in the late twentieth century. A decade later, when Saddam Hussein destroyed many Yezidi villages and moved their inhabitants into easy-to-monitor collective settlements (in order to prevent support for the Kurdish guerilla movement), rebuilding existing shrines in new locations became an accepted practice. Shrines are traditionally the foci of much religious as well as social activity and the Yezidi community's need for continuity overrode the old ban on creating sacred space. As Yezidis themselves say, including religious leaders (whose consent is needed for building or rebuilding any shrine), "the villagers just could not be without their shrines." In such cases, sacred objects belonging to the shrine, the metal *hîlal* (literally "half moon") decorating the spire, and some sacred earth from the old location were transferred to the new spot. In this way the divine essence conferred by the presence of a holy being who once inhabited the original sacred space is believed to have been transferred to the new place.

This is what happened in the case of Shekhsê Batê. The new shrine is said to resemble the structure of the old one, with a central spire for Shekhsê Batê himself and smaller spires around it for other holy beings. Rituals were also transported to the new place along with the ritual objects.⁴ These included the "wishing balls," three metal balls balanced on top of each other. A member of the guardian family has to lift the top ball three times, murmuring a short blessing for the pilgrims,⁵ so their wishes may come true (Fig. 2). There is also the "tent" of Shekhsê Batê, symbol-



► **Fig. 2.** Wishing balls in the shrine in Bapirê (photo: E. Spät)

ized by a circle of stones. In its original location there was a small hill some distance from the shrine on top of which the tent of Shekhsê Batê is thought to have stood. People visiting the shrine had to climb this hill and circumambulate the place of the tent, symbolized by a circle of stones three times, kissing the stones. In the new spot there is no hill and the stones symbolizing the tent are placed in a circle right next to the shrine, but the ritual act of circumambulation still persists (Fig. 3). Soil taken from the precinct of the shrine is smeared on the foreheads of pilgrims and distributed in small packets to take home,⁶ just as at other shrines. The guardians' answer to the query about where the soil came from, that "it cannot be brought from anywhere else [but the grounds of the shrine]," clearly indicates that the new site is believed to be imbued with the power of Shekhsê Batê, just as the old (original) site was.

The story of Shekhsê Batê does not end here, however. The social upheaval accompanying the uprooting of whole communities brought old rivalries to the surface, ultimately leading to the creation of new sacred spaces that had not exist-



► Fig. 3. Circumambulating the “tent” of Shekhsê Batê in Bapirê (photo: E. Spät)



► Fig. 4. Pilgrimage to the hill with the “tent” of Shekhsê Batê in Khetar during a shrine feast (photo: E. Spät)

ed before.⁷ Today there is another shrine dedicated to this holy being in the village of Khetar, a few kilometers away. This is not a “historical” shrine, but was built by the people of Khetar recently, just after the rebuilding of the shrine in Bapirê was finished. While the inhabitants of Bapirê, especially the guardian family of the original shrine, claim that this shrine is “wrong” and should not have been built, the present guardian of the “illegitimate” shrine in Khetar is quick to justify the decision of his village. According to him, the people of Khetar, even though the village had its own shrines, also used to pay their respects to Shekhsê Batê. When the old shrine was inundated, they helped the people of Bapirê transport the sacred stones and other things necessary for recreating the sacred space to the new location and rebuild the shrine. But despite their help, they were not invited as guests to the “inauguration” ceremony of the new shrine. This oversight was

perceived as an insult to the whole community. Luckily, at the time Khetar had a *kocheh* or seer (who is able to communicate with the supernatural). The seer had a vision,⁸ in which he saw the shrine of Shekhsê Batê fly to their village. This was interpreted as a sign that Shekhsê Batê wished to have his new place in Khetar rather than in the village of Bapirê. The seer and the villagers soon convinced the religious leaders of the Yezidi community to give permission for building a new shrine.⁹

While the legitimacy of the shrine is still questioned by some, it has become an integral part of religious life in Khetar. Its shrine feast is visited by huge crowds who dutifully perform all the traditional rituals. It is not merely the structure of the shrine itself which was rebuilt in Khetar, but the ritual heritage of Shekhsê Batê was also faithfully recreated. The “tent” of Shekhsê Batê, a small circular platform lined with stones, was also rebuilt. The geographic location of Khetar made it possible to build the “tent” on the top of a small hill, just as in the case of the original (Fig. 4). Pilgrims circumambulate the “tent” three times, in a continuation of the old ritual (Fig. 5). The ritual of the wishing stones was also reproduced. Three metal balls were also procured (despite the widely held belief that such sacred objects are passed down as inheritance from holy beings). The guardian of the shrine lifts the top ball murmuring a blessing while the pilgrims kiss the top stone and leave the customary note of paper money, just as in neighboring Bapirê (Fig. 6).

The disappearance of the old shrine of Shekhsê Batê under the waves of a new lake that also



► Fig. 5. Circumambulating the “tent” of Shekhsê Batê in Khetar (Photo: E. Spät)



► Fig. 6. *Wishing balls in the shrine in Khetar (photo: E. Spät)*

consumed a number of Yezidi villages was countered by a flexible interpretation of traditional religious ideas. It resulted in the creation of new sacred spaces not simply in one but in two locations. Though the second location had no legitimate claim to house the shrine of the holy being Shekhsê Batê, the new situation facing the Yezidi community and the need to solve the rivalry between two villages, along with recourse to the authority of the supernatural (communicated through visions), made it possible to create a new shrine and new religio-ritual heritage.

Notes

- ¹ “The Beginning of the Universe,” Michael Totten’s Middle East Journal, accessed August 31, 2018, <http://www.michael-totten.com/archives/001064.html>.
- ² Khetar lies some 30 km north of Mosul, east of the Mosul-Duhok highway.
- ³ Literally, “Person from Bate.” Some Yezidi shrines are dedicated to holy beings bearing the designation “person” (from Arabic *shakhs*) Yezidis claim that in such cases the real name of the holy being is “too heavy” to mention, thus it was safer to refer to them as the “person of such and such place.” According to Philip Kreyenbroek, the name of Shekshê Batê probably refers to a famous fifteenth century Muslim poet, Mela Hesenê Batê, born in the village of Bate in the Hakkari region and one of the first to write in Kurdish. The Yezidi sacred poem “Beyt of Advice” recited on religious occasions, derives from a poem he composed. As Yezidis would have preferred not to call him “Mela” (meaning *mullah*), they used *shekhs* or “person from Bate” instead. (Personal communication from Philip Kreyenbroek, 2018.) For the poem “Beyt of Advice” see Philip Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi are Perfect* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 301–316.
- ⁴ I observed the following rituals during the yearly shrine-feast or *tiwaf*, when huge crowds of pilgrims visited the shrine, but such rituals may be observed during any visit to the shrine.
- ⁵ Usually the words “may Shekhsê Batê fulfill your wish.”
- ⁶ Soil from a sacred place imparts a blessing and is also used for healing.
- ⁷ Shekhsê Batê is not the only example of this phenomenon.
- ⁸ Dreams and visions are the traditional way for the supernatural to communicate its wishes. All newly created sacred spaces share the motif of some holy being claiming the place as his own through dreams or visions.
- ⁹ As one such leader told me, in such cases they try to ease the tensions in the community and avoid further conflicts, even if this means accepting somewhat dubious claims for the need to build a new shrine.