

The Medieval Royal Seat and Forest at Visegrád

A Proposed World Heritage Site and its Heritage Aspects

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In 2000, the Republic of Hungary submitted three applications to the UNESCO World Heritage organization for the inclusion of new sites on the World Heritage List. One of them was the “Medieval Royal Seat and Parkland at Visegrád”, a proposal worked out in a relatively short time. The application received a very positive scholarly evaluation in the first round of the selection process, but later the relevant Hungarian authority withdrew it. The two other applications (the Tokaj Wine Region and the extension of the Budapest site) were promoted for further evaluation at that time, and finally both received the World Heritage title or the extension of the heritage area. At the same time, it was suggested that the Visegrád application should be developed and it would be considered for resubmission. This article summarizes the main heritage issues connected to the Visegrád site at the time of the submission, while another paper in this volume addresses the problems of the changing heritage aspects.

Visegrád, one of the most important assemblages of medieval monuments in Hungary, was always a key site for Hungarian monument protection, archaeological investigations, and for cultural tourism as well. Its place in Hungarian historical memory has been acknowledged since the eighteenth century; very important historical and archaeological studies were dedicated to its past from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. At the same time, a proposal for the World Heritage List should take other aspects into consideration, such as unique character or universal value. This type of interpretation requires a total rethinking of the national heritage aspects in an international, global context. Therefore, a new heritage value list has been prepared for the site and we have selected those elements which can be regarded as unique in a non-national comparative approach. As a result of this, we have selected one crucial aspect, the interaction of the landscape and of the medieval royal seat as the “Leitmotiv” of the application. It has been combined with other unique factors such as the influence of the early Renaissance on the site and the wide range of monument protection practices demonstrated in restorations and reconstructions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The following text is in many ways a summary of this rethinking process, and it focuses on the main heritage elements of the site. Its structure follows the main elements of the application, thus the crucial categories of proposals for the World heritage List.

Statement of significance

The *Medieval Royal Seat and Forest at Visegrád* is a unique assemblage of medieval and early Renaissance monuments and their natural environment transformed by the presence of this centre into a rich cultural landscape. The monuments, some of which are the first products of Renaissance art outside Italy, themselves represent the history of scientific monument protection in Central Europe. The area includes a royal hunting Forest from the 11th century, a royal residence, castles from the 13th century, and a royal palace from the 14th–15th centuries.

In spite of the damage to the built heritage, the integrity of the cultural landscape has been preserved through state ownership and the foundation of the Nature Protection Area, later a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, and since 1997 the Duna-Ipoly National Park.

There are several royal centres already inscribed on the World Heritage List: in Central Europe, for example, there is Prague (Czech Republic), Cracow (Poland) and Buda (Hungary); in Western Europe, the best-known example is the Tower of London (United Kingdom). The special character of Visegrád among these is that here the natural landscape and the medieval royal hunting ground are both preserved and are in close connection with the Royal Seat itself. The aforementioned examples also share a similar fate to Visegrád: they have been damaged and rebuilt several times in history. Nevertheless, Visegrád has been a centre for monument protection based on archaeological research since the nineteenth century.

In the selection of the Visegrád assemblage, the question of authenticity was of crucial importance. It should be mentioned that the historical monuments of the Medieval Royal Seat were damaged and rebuilt several times in the last millennium. They also contain reconstructed elements; however, they still fulfil the criteria that prescribe that reconstruction, if any, must be based on the full and detailed documentation of the original elements. Visegrád is

the most complex example of Hungarian historical monument protection and restoration, acclaimed world-wide, where, besides medieval remains, visitors may also obtain knowledge on the methods and means that have been used for more than one hundred years in the scientific research and documentation of the site. Through this, the assemblage is also unique monumental heritage that demonstrates how the remains of these important eras were integrated into the scale of values of the modern age.

In connection with the reconstruction, it must be emphasised that the recently signed Cracow Charta pays special attention to this question, and states that under certain conditions reconstruction is inevitable. The reconstruction works carried out at Visegrád meet these requirements in all respects.

The Medieval Royal Seat at Visegrád is probably unique in the world in having an almost fully intact medieval royal hunting Forest attached to it. The integral survival of this authentic landscape is the result of the preservation measures taken by the Royal Seat in the Middle Ages and in Early Modern times. In the modern age the state took over these functions, and its conservation efforts were honoured by the listing of the Nature Protection Area on the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve list.

Visegrád was proposed for inscription on the WH List because it is unique, and is of outstanding universal value in the sense that built and natural heritages are to be found together, and with close historical integrity. One thousand years of continuity may be observed in the formation and protection of the given unique cultural landscape; the built heritage was created in connection with, and in protection of, this landscape. In the cultural landscape element it is to be emphasised that this landscape was created and managed by humans, and it survived for certain social, economic, and administrative reasons. It is also to be noted that it meets the requirements in the sense that it includes a Forest that is in connection with a group of monuments. The quality of the natural heritage is clearly demonstrated by the fact that it was listed as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

The group of historical monuments of the Royal Seat is characterised by the following: It is a unique group of monuments, in which the medieval royal Forest, its early and late medieval administrative governing centre, the royal castle, the royal palace, and the royal residence all survive. These elements may be found separately in other locations as well, but never as such an assemblage. The existence of the royal Forest and its conscious preservation can be documented from the beginning of the eleventh century. The palace is unique in the world: it is the place where Renaissance art and culture appeared for the first time outside Italy as main elements in the development of civilisation. The summer palace of King Matthias is thus not only a group of monuments, but also an artistic and intellectual centre, one of the earliest examples of the interaction of Gothic and Renaissance art. Hence it represents an important phase in human history, which is apparent in the monumental art (the Hercules fountain), architecture, and garden design (the palace garden).

The royal palace and Renaissance art: The royal palace in the time of King Matthias

Only after marrying Beatrix in 1476 did King Matthias begin to renew and alter the palace into a country residence. Construction work seems to have lasted for about ten years. The old buildings were completely renovated, and a new wing was erected along the street front. All the door and window frames, fireplaces, ceilings, fountains, loggias, and balconies were replaced. A local Late Gothic masons' workshop carried out most of the work, under the direction of the Head of the Palace of Buda. A few jobs, however, were entrusted to Italian masters working in Renaissance style.

The building served as royal residence quarters, and was therefore richly executed. After dismantling the former fountain and arcade of the inner court, they built a new Late Gothic cloister walk around it, with stellar vaults and a Renaissance loggia on the top. A splendid Renaissance fountain occupied the centre of the court. The rooms on the ground level had tunnel vaults; those on the first floor had groin vaults. On the first floor of the western wing was the throne hall, covered by a net vault. From here a Late Gothic oriel opened to the reception court. The most comfortable rooms, with wooden ceilings, must have been those on the second floor, from which the enlarged bathroom was also accessible.

The Hercules fountain

The fountain of the ceremonial courtyard is a unique masterpiece of Hungarian Renaissance art. Its prototypes were the fountains of the Italian quattrocento. On the side walls of the octagonal basin, the coats of arms of Matthias appear among fruit garlands tied with ribbons. Above the round bowl of the fountain, supported by putti

and decorated with jewel motifs, rose the central statue of the fountain representing the fight of Hercules and the hydra of Lerna. A stream of water sprang forth from the mouth of the animal. In the art of the Matthias period the figure of Hercules refers to the militant king. The leading master of the workshop responsible for this fountain may have been Giovanni Dalmata, while the decoration of the bowl and the fruit garlands are related to the works of the Roman master Andrea Bregno.

The wall fountain with lion figures

In 1483 King Matthias replaced the 14th-century wall fountain in the small, private upper garden with a Late Gothic fountain of red marble. The new fountain followed more or less closely the previous one in form. The bottom side of the cover slab of the baldachin was decorated with the king's family coat of arms with the raven, and an inscription including the year of construction. Further decoration included coats of arms of the king's countries on the sides of the baldachin, and the coats of arms of the most distinguished noble families of the court on the back wall of the fountain. The water spouts and the pendants of the baldachin were carved in the shape of lion heads, and recumbent lions were placed under the columns. Today the original fountain has been replaced by a copy.

The palace chapel in the time of King Matthias

During the renovation of the palace chapel, the old brick floor was re-laid in the nave, while the chancel was newly paved with glazed floor-tiles. A gallery on wooden pillars was built against the south end of the nave, and an organ ornamented with silver pipes was placed on the side wall, supported by two Renaissance corbels which were decorated with the king's and the queen's coats of arms. A baptismal font probably also stood in the chapel. Renaissance marble carvings embellished the three altars and the tabernacle. The sacristy and the royal oratory were both vaulted. The terrace in front of the chapel was enlarged, and a large, representative flight of steps was added for access.

The tabernacle of the palace chapel

Based on the excavated fragments of a white Carrara marble, the gilded tabernacle, a reconstruction copy of the piece was made for the museum exhibition. The Eucharist was kept in the central niche of the tabernacle, sunk into the wall and protected by a door. The relief around the niche depicted, in illusionistic perspective, a hall covered by a coffered barrel vault, into which respectfully bowing angels entered from the arcades on both sides. Above the door was the figure of Christ displaying his wounds, and cherubs hovering over him with their wings extended. A most similar tabernacle by Desiderio da Settignano is in Florence. The unknown Italian sculptor of the Visegrád tabernacle must have followed this master in the execution of his work.

The Madonna of Visegrád

This red marble lunette relief belonged to the furnishings of the palace chapel. The Virgin holds the child in a gentle embrace, who, standing on a cushion, raises his right hand in blessing and with his left hand presses a small bird – a goldfinch symbolic of his future Passion – to his breast. The masters of the Italian Renaissance depicted the Virgin and child on numerous 15th century reliefs in a similar arrangement. As to formal qualities, closest to the Madonna of Visegrád are two reliefs in the Ducal Palace in Urbino and the Bargello museum in Florence. The similarities are most apparent in the modelling of the drapery, the heads, and the hands.

The northwest building of the palace in the time of King Matthias

The inner facade of this building, which served representative purposes, was altered by the addition of a Late Gothic aisled walk that was flanked by stone and wooden columns on the ground and first floors respectively, and covered by wooden ceilings on both levels. The large storage room on the ground floor of the west wing was

vaulted; on the street facade, a closed balcony was added to the council hall on the first floor. The exterior of this Late Gothic balcony was decorated by statues of the king and the queen and the coats of arms of various provinces and noblemen of the court. In the room leading to the council hall stood a new tile stove – replacing an earlier one from King Sigismund’s time – which was ornamented with angel figures.

The fountain of the Muses in the Matthias-period palace

The remains of this fountain, known from the description of Miklós Oláh, have not yet been discovered; only a few fragments are known that are inferred to have once belonged to it. The fountain itself must have had more than one levels, like the Hercules fountain in the ceremonial court, only larger and more representatively executed. It once stood under the terrace of the chapel in the axis of the palace complex. According to Miklós Oláh, its side panels were decorated with the figures of the nine muses, and there was a bowl above the lower basin. The fountain was crowned with the figure of Cupid, the mischievous god of love, sitting on a bag full of water and squeezing the water from it into the large bowl below. Oláh says ”during the magnificent court feasts red and white wine flowed from this fountain at the king’s order.”

The Royal Forest

Pilis (this historical name includes what today are called the Pilis and Visegrádi mountains) is a cultural landscape. As such, its history was formed by three competing forces: nature (the community of plants and animals), authority (through some administrative form), and people living there. The cooperation between these three was the strongest in the Middle Ages; however, they have been balanced for about one thousand years.

Around the year 1000, when the Kingdom of Hungary was formed, uninhabited and lordless lands went into the possession of the king. Pilis was one of these, and until the end of the Middle Ages the sources speak of it as “the king’s own Forest”. Initially, this more or less wooded area was a royal hunting ground; several hunting lodges were built to serve the needs of the royal family and their friends. The king himself sometimes hunted in person, but if it was only for venison he mostly relied on the people called “erdőóvó” (Forest-guards). Then, in the thirteenth century, along with the changes that transformed the whole kingdom, this system was also altered. As more and more land went out of royal possession, Pilis, which had been regarded as an oversized private estate, achieved a proper administrative form and became one of the counties of the kingdom. This county, however, was different from others due to the fact that it was mainly wooded; certain characteristics of ordinary counties were entirely missing, certain people (such as the Forest-guards) replaced ordinary folk. A Royal Forest, as was mentioned in medieval sources, is not to be imagined as an oversized wood; it certainly had more trees than the neighbouring regions, but it was an administrative unit, not a biological one. In some cases one may find a perambulation defining the boundary between a settlement and the Royal Forest.

The transformation of the royal estate into the Royal Forest was parallel with the transformation of the hunting lodges into monastic houses. This is a speciality of Pilis: there were four monasteries within the Forest: three Pauline (Szentlászló, Szentlélek, Kesztlőc) and a Cistercian (near Szentkereszt). Pilis provided them with the most suitable location possible; they were secluded from the mundane world, yet within a day’s walk of the most important centres of the kingdom: Buda, Visegrád, Esztergom, and Fehérvár. The Paulines are especially interesting because this order is the only Hungarian-founded monastic movement, which, according to its chronicler, Gergely Gyöngyösi of the early sixteenth century, sought its origins in Pilis Forest.

The settlement system of the area also reflects this basic development pattern, yet has its own peculiarities. Today one finds relatively few nucleated villages with large populations where there used to be many smaller settlements. We know of one hundred medieval settlements, the names of thirty-seven of which are preserved in documents. The smaller ones without known names are characteristic of the Árpadian age (1000–1301); they represent an age when there was constant tension between royal rights and settlements encroaching upon royal land. In the 14th and 15th centuries, about thirty larger villages existed. It is remarkable that the boundary of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve preserves the boundary of the Royal Forest almost intact, as can be worked out from the settlement system; namely, the Royal Forest was probably the territory surrounded by the settlements.

This system was dramatically altered by the Ottoman occupation of the area in the mid-sixteenth century. Not only did the monasteries disappear, but the whole settlement structure was also demolished (all but four settlements were depopulated, at least for some time). When the kingdom was liberated in the late seventeenth century, Pilis

was practically empty. New settlers had to be brought in, mainly from the Slovak regions, although Szentendre, for example, still preserves some of its Serb population and culture. However, these new settlements were rarely established in the woodland area, so the medieval Royal Forest area preserved its character into the early modern period. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Pilis was partly a royal possession and partly the private holding of magnates and the monastic orders that reappeared after the Ottomans had gone. Most of the wood cut in this period went to supply the Habsburg garrison in Pest-Buda. No larger settlements were established in the woodland and the industrialisation of the nineteenth century did not affect this region. In the twentieth century Pilis is taken care of by the state, through the Forestry Commission and, more recently, the Duna-Ipoly National Park.

Appendix: The main heritage elements of Visegrád and their chronology

Szentgyörgypuszta

late 4th c. – 400 Roman watchtower no. 1 of Szentgyörgypuszta

c. 370 – 400 Roman watchtower no. 2 of Szentgyörgypuszta

Monastery of St. Andrew

c. 11th c. – 1221 St. Andrew Basilite monastery

1221–1493 St. Andrew Benedictine monastery

1333–1342 Rebuilding of the St. Andrew monastery

1493–1544 St. Andrew Pauline monastery

Events

1390 Burial of Charles II in the monastery of St. Andrew in Visegrád

1500 Visit of Sigismund of Jagello to the monastery of St. Andrew

Várkert

1st– 2nd c. Roman watchtower no. 1 of Várkert

185–270 A.D. Roman watchtower no. 2 of Várkert

10th c. – 1242 The village of Várkert

c. 11th c. – 1242 The church of Várkert

Sibrik hill

330–380 Roman military camp on Sibrik hill

380– c. 400 Quads on Sibrik hill

c. 970 – 1242 Bailiff's castle on Sibrik hill

1000–1050 The parish church of the county seat

1050–1242 The archdeaconal church

Lower castle

1250–1260 The construction of the lower castle

1323–1325 The rebuilding of the lower castle

1357 The bell-casting workshop of Konrad Gaal in the lower castle

1458–1490 The well of the lower castle

1544 The destruction of the Salamon tower

1871–1882 The investigation and reconstruction of the lower castle by Imre Henszlmann and Frigyes Schulek

1916–1927 Reconstruction work by Kálmán Lux in the lower castle

1927–1944 Reconstruction work by János Schulek in the castle of Visegrád

1950 The Salamon tower burns down

1959–1964 The restoration of the Salamon tower after plans by József Szanyi and János Sedlmayr

Upper Castle

9th c. B.C. Late Bronze Age settlement on the Várhegy

1247–1251 The construction of the citadel

1477–1490 The rebuilding of the citadel

1493 The placement of the plaque by the guardians of the crown in the citadel

1871–1872 Excavations by Imre Henszlmann in the citadel

1965–1998 Modern excavations and reconstruction work in the citadel

The Town of Visegrád

6–8th c. Avar cemetery in present-day Széchenyi street

10th – 11th c. Hungarian cemetery in present-day Széchenyi street

- 1285 First record mentioning the *hospes* of Visegrád
- 1323 The foundation of the town
- 1338 First record mentioning the parish church of the Virgin
- 1355–56 A record mentioning the St. Ladislav monastery
- 1414 A record mentioning an Augustinian monk from Visegrád
- 1425 The beginning of the enlargement of the Franciscan friary
- before 1510–1513 The rebuilding of the Franciscan friary
- 1540 The last record mentioning the Franciscan friary
- second half of 14th c. A bone-carving workshop
- c. 1400 c. The glassworks
- 1524–1526 The mint at Visegrád
- 1762 The erection of the manor house granary on the site of the former palace
- 1895 The conversion of the manor house granary into a house
- 1712 The construction of the first baroque parish church
- 1756 The rebuilding of the first baroque parish church
- 1787 The conversion of the first baroque parish church into a school
- 1773–1782 The construction of the present-day parish church
- first half of 18th c. The construction of the Mary chapel
- 1788 The rebuilding of the Mary chapel
- 1873 The renovation of the Mary chapel
- 1770s The construction of the Calvary chapel
- 1896 The construction of the St. Sebastian (millennium) chapel
- 1860–1870s The construction of the Görgey villa
- 1870s General Artúr Görgey moves to Visegrád

The Royal Palace

- 1323–1330 The construction of the town house of King Charles I in Visegrád
- c. 1347 Construction work on an unfinished church on the site of the later palace
- 1355 A record mentioning the royal mint in the town
- 1355–1366 The construction of the royal palace
- 1366 The construction of the chapel of the Virgin
- 1378–1408 The alteration of the royal palace
- 1476–1490 The alteration of the royal palace
- 1479 The construction of the cellar of the palace garden
- 1483 The erection of the Fountain of the Lions
- 1484 The construction of the cloister walk in the ceremonial courtyard
- 1539 The renovation of the palace
- 1934–1944 Excavations by János Schulek in the palace
- 1948–1980 Excavations by Miklós Héjji in the palace
- 1985– Modern excavations in the palace
- 1986– First year of the Palace Games

Kőbánya, Lepence

- 3200–3000 B.C. Settlement of the culture of Lengyel at Lepence
- 1050–950 B.C. Settlement of the Urnfield culture at Lepence
- 2nd–3rd c. A.D. Roman watchtower and cemetery at Lepence
- 371 The construction of the watchtower from the Late Imperial period at Lepence
- 372 The construction of the watchtower of Kőbánya
- 11th–12th c. Árpadian-period settlement at Lepence

Gizellamajor, Diós

- early 13th c. B.C. Settlement of the Tumulus culture at Gizellamajor
- 3rd c. B.C. –1st c. AD Celtic settlement at Gizellamajor
- 330s – early 5th c. Roman fortress and settlement at Gizellamajor, cemetery at Diós
- mid-5th c. Hun-period settlers at the Roman fortress of Gizellamajor
- 7th c. Avar grave at Diós

Literature

- This article has been prepared on the basis of the official document submitted to the UNESCO World Heritage organization: *Application by the Republic of Hungary for the inclusion of the Medieval Royal Seat and Parkland at Visegrád into the UNESCO World Heritage List*. Editor in chief: Laszlovszky, József, Visegrád 2000. The main parts of this were prepared on the basis of studies by Gergely Buzás, József Laszlovszky, Péter Szabó and Mátyás Szőke.

