

The Visegrád World Heritage Project: Problems and Tasks

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Abstract

In 2000, the Medieval Royal Seat and Forest at Visegrád was unsuccessful in acquiring the UNESCO World Heritage title. At the moment, a new nomination is being prepared. This paper addresses some of the problems and tasks connected to this issue. These include site selection, cultural vs. natural heritage, ownership, management and local perception. Visegrád (and the surrounding Pilis Forest) are compared to similar sites in Poland and England. The World Heritage question is examined with a critical eye to outline how the World Heritage status could improve the management of Visegrád.

1. Introduction

What is UNESCO World Heritage? According to the official definition, it is the “cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity” (UNESCO World Heritage Convention). What it really is is a high prestige collection of those sites that each country values most. Contrary to popular imagination, being on the World Heritage List does not provide any extra protection, at least not in a legal sense. WH sites are better protected (whatever that means) than others because they are in the centre of attention. No sensible government can afford major damage to happen to a WH site in its country.

The List has a history of more than three decades, and has gone through many changes. Different kinds of sites have been preferred in different periods. First, there were historic town centres, medieval castles and unspoilt national parks. Then transboundary sites and a strong preference to nominations outside Europe. There was a great age for cultural landscapes (after such a category was officially created) (RÖSSLER 2003; FOWLER 2003), and nowadays even such curiosities are admitted to the List as for example the Varberg Radio Station in Sweden, with its aerial system of six, 127-metre high steel towers.

When I write these lines (2004), Hungary has eight sites on the World Heritage List. This is comparable to other countries in East-Central Europe. Poland has twelve sites, the Czech Republic also twelve, and Slovakia, five. It is obvious that the size of the country and the number of sites are in no close relation. The small Czech Republic has as many sites as the vastly larger Poland. However, if one is interested in cultural landscapes, the choices are not too wide. The Czechs have one site: the Lednice-Valtice cultural landscape; Poland has two cultural landscapes that are really designed parkscapes and the famous Białowieża Forest; there is nothing in Slovakia; while, surprising as it may be, Hungary has three proper cultural landscapes on the List (Lake Fertő, Hortobágy and Tokaj) and two cultural sites with a significant landscape component. In other words, Hungary pays much more attention to cultural landscapes (at least as far as the World Heritage is concerned) than any other country in the region.

This paper deals with the World Heritage nomination of another Hungarian cultural landscape: *The Medieval Royal Seat and Forest at Visegrád*.¹ Visegrád and the surrounding Pilis Mountains lie north-west of Budapest in the “Danube Bend”, where the Danube changes its easterly direction from Western Europe towards the south to cross the Carpathian Basin to eventually turn east again at Belgrade. The site comprises a royal castle (of two parts), a royal palace with its renaissance garden, a Franciscan friary and the woods of Pilis in the Duna-Ipoly National Park. It consists of two zones: the property itself and the buffer zone. The latter is defined “as an area surrounding the property which has restrictions placed on its use to give an added layer of protection” (UNESCO World Heritage Operational Guidelines, Chapter 1). The property equals the township of Visegrád with selected monuments in the town, and the buffer zone is the Pilis part of the National Park, which has also been a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve since 1981 (JANATA 2004). Why we think Visegrád should be a World Heritage site will be discussed further on.

¹ The original name of the site was *The Medieval Royal Seat and Parkland at Visegrád*, which, as explained later on, I feel should be changed.

Visegrád had been on the Hungarian tentative list (from where actual nominations are chosen), when in 2000 a WH nomination was prepared for the site (Laszlovszky, this volume). For a number of reasons not to be discussed here, the nomination was not successful: it did not fail, but was withdrawn. Negotiations are now held about a possible new application, and a number of experts are working on this project. The “problems and tasks,” of such an undertaking are countless. For the present paper, I have chosen to deal with four: the existence of the site itself in a World Heritage context, natural versus cultural heritage, management and local perception. These are not necessarily the most important questions, but rather those that appear to be the most challenging in the present phase of the project.

2. Is Visegrád still a site?

As mentioned above, Visegrád was for a long time on the Hungarian tentative WH list. Recently, however, the Hungarian Secretariat for the World Heritage (whose responsibility it is to decide in such matters) merged Visegrád with another site – the medieval castle at Esztergom – to create the *Danube Bend Cultural Landscape* for the tentative list. Does this mean that Visegrád is no longer a candidate for World Heritage? Not necessarily. The creation of the *Danube Bend Cultural Landscape* signifies the intention of the responsible Hungarian organisation, but it is not a definitive statement. As yet, the new site has only a name. Neither its territory, nor its WH meaning (i.e. why it should be of “outstanding universal value”) are defined. The idea is not necessarily wrong, but it needs much effort and improvement. One can imagine a meaningful union of Esztergom and Visegrád (possibly around the medieval idea of the *medium regni*) (BUZÁS 1999), however, what will happen in reality remains to be seen. At present, it seems that the best is to continue the Visegrád project as planned, disregarding these latest developments. By the time this paper appears in print, however, the course of action to be taken may change. All of this is a good illustration of the fact that in the topic of the World Heritage there are factors outside the realm of heritage management proper.

3. Natural versus cultural landscape: Royal Forests

On a simple level, Visegrád is a mixture of natural and cultural heritage. The former comprises the relevant parts of the Duna-Ipoly National Park, the latter, the medieval castles, royal palace and Franciscan friary (LASZLOVSZKY 1995). However, the very point in Visegrád is that these elements do not occur together by accident. They are all integral parts of a *Royal Forest*.

To understand what is a Royal Forest (to be spelt with capital “F” to differentiate from the modern word “forest”), we have to start our story in the seventh century. It was the Merovingian Franks that first used the term *forestum*, which was understood all through the Middle Ages as having its origins in the Latin expression *foris est*, that is, “outside something”. In the Early Middle Ages, the term was not clearly defined, and had different connotations in the territories of the Franks: today’s France (*forêt*), Germany (*Forst*) and Italy (*foresta*). There were, however, elements that connected all Forests: hunting, royal representation and religion (WICKHAM 1994). The first of these was the most important. Originally, Forests were territories set aside for royal hunting (mostly of deer), in this sense they were *outside common law*. They had symbolic significance, and often contained royal residences and monastic houses that were in some way connected to the royal family. The last and clearest phase in the development of the concept was the English Forest from the eleventh century onwards, which was “a place of deer, not necessarily a place of trees” (RACKHAM 1990: 165). It is very important to understand that the original idea of Forests had nothing to do with vegetation.

Although Forests were an essentially Western European idea, they existed in some form in East-Central Europe as well. Besides Visegrád, the famous Puszcza Białowieska (which is usually translated into English as “Białowieża forest”, without understanding that it is actually the right translation with the wrong spelling) was a Royal Forest as well. Białowieża is a *natural* World Heritage site. It “must be the most famous locality in European woodland ecology” (PETERKEN 1996: 73) and is arguably the last larger remnant of the kind of natural woodland that once (before the Neolithic) covered most of lowland Europe. All this being true, it still has a history, but this history is not appreciated. In fact, its very existence is questioned. According to Tomasz Samojlik, a Polish woodland historian, ecologists prefer to see Białowieża as having no history, because its history (as a Royal Forest) would disturb its image as an untouched wood (personal communication).

While Royal Forests, strictly speaking, were characteristic of medieval Europe, the association of royal power, hunting, deer and sacred spaces is known outside Europe as well. For example, the World Heritage site of the

Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara, Japan – essentially the eighth-century capital of the island – includes the Kasuga Hills with the sacred deer *Cervus nippon*, which are closely connected to a Buddhist monastery in the region.

Royal Forests have always been very vulnerable cultural landscapes, because they consist of many elements. The removal of any of these elements would have altered the whole system and would have changed the landscape itself. Most Forests had common rights (the king usually owned the deer, but not always the land or the trees), and these had a dark period all over Europe in the Early Modern Times. Forests, therefore, extremely rarely survive in their original form and working order. At the moment, we know of *one*, Hatfield Forest in England (RACKHAM 1989).

Pilis was also a Royal Forest. This paper is not the place to go into details about what this meant, which I discussed elsewhere (SZABÓ 2005), but some points must be raised. First, Hungarian Forests never reached the kind of terminological sophistication experienced in England, although we cannot tell what this meant in terms of the actual landscape. Second, Pilis Forest survives in a rather fragmented form. The royal complex was badly damaged during the Ottoman occupation (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries); so much so that the palace was completely buried underground. The woods have also gone through many changes in fashions of silviculture, although their existence is, to a certain extent, the result of the continuous close ties to whoever ruled the country. Third, and probably most important, the medieval social fabric of Pilis Forest, which created and maintained a certain landscape, was destroyed and reshaped in the Early Modern Period. In sum, Visegrád and Pilis are special not because the Royal Forest survives intact, but because *all* elements that once existed are still there in some form.

All these are not just interesting bits of historical information, but have direct relevance to the present situation. The essence of cultural landscapes is their historical development. Without understanding how they evolved, it is impossible to manage them properly. In other words, first we must understand what we have, and only then can we start thinking about what we should do with it. This, however, is not a simple task to achieve. Landscapes are far more difficult subjects than buildings, for example. Not only do they involve the activities of civilisations long gone and civilisations that did not care to write, but they also incorporate the workings of nature, which, at the moment, are understood only superficially. The study of the *combination* of human and natural activities has a rather short history,² and the future of the world's cultural landscapes depends on how quickly advances are made in this field, and how quickly the knowledge thus acquired is put into policy practice and practical management. The history of Pilis as a Royal Forest also feeds back into what I have argued in connection with the World Heritage List. Royal Forests, these unique cultural landscapes, are – on a larger scale – unknown and unappreciated. This is where Visegrád could make a contribution: if it made it to the WH List, *as a Royal Forest*, this could enhance the whole issue. Forests could become better known and studied all over the world, some more could be discovered and eventually saved.

4. Management

All places are managed somehow. Doing nothing is also a kind of management, it is in fact often the preferred option in today's nature protection. However, I hope to have made it clear in the previous chapter that Royal Forests should be managed based on their historical development. Besides theoretical considerations, there is a practical aspect, as well. World Heritage nominations require that a Management Plan be prepared for the site. To prepare such a Plan, first we have to examine the present management situation, which is what will be outlined here.

Some Forests are in an admirable position. Hatfield, for example, is owned and managed by the National Trust, a large, non-governmental organisation. Today, the history of this Forest is well understood, and management keeps up with the high standard of background research. Białowieża is a fully state-owned National Park, where management is extremely simple: no one can go in without permission, and only scientific activities are allowed.

The situation at Visegrád and Pilis, on the other hand, is much more complex, and has four main characters: the town of Visegrád, the local King Matthias Museum, the National Park and the Pilis Parkforestry.³

² The first larger study was probably TUBBS (1968). Note that this was also about a Royal Forest.

³ The following is based on interviews with Gergely Buzás (archaeologist, King Matthias Museum), Péter Erdős (director, Visegrád branch of Pilis Parkforestry), Árpád Kalotai (vice-mayor, Visegrád), Gábor Mártonffy (architect, Visegrád), and Miklós Papp (area manager, Duna-Ipoly National Park). I wish to acknowledge my gratitude for their help and declare that the views expressed in this paper are not necessarily theirs.

4.1. The town of Visegrád

The Management Plan of the town was issued on 30 June, 2004. As all of the inner area of Visegrád is outside the proposed World Heritage site (except for the royal palace and the castles), this Plan has little direct relevance to the present topic. It notes the existence of the monuments and the National Park, and imposes protection on their territories, but it does not go further than that, implying that managing these areas is the responsibility of the Museum, the National Park and the Pilis Parkforestry.

4.2. The Museum

The King Matthias Museum is affiliated to the Hungarian National Museum. It is a partly independent unit, however, economically and financially the National Museum exercises control over it, and there is an increasing tendency towards centralisation. At the moment, there is no territorial protection in the town of Visegrád, only single monuments are protected. This should not be a problem as far as the World Heritage is concerned: all the monuments proposed to be included are protected. The only problem is the Upper Castle. This very touristy location (with over 300,000 visitors yearly) is in a most peculiar situation. At the end of a complicated story, it became the *property* of the local forestry institution, the Pilis Parkforestry. The irony of the situation is that the Parkforestry (a limited company) only manages the woodland at Visegrád, the territory is state-owned. Therefore the Parkforestry does not own a single tree in Pilis, but does own a castle. It is clear to all those involved that this situation should change, however, they do not agree on the ideal solution. The Parkforestry would like to continue managing the Castle, which should be state-owned; while the Museum agrees about ownership but wishes to manage the Castle itself. In principle, there is much money involved: the Castle brings 150 million HUF a year from entrance fees alone. If, to complicate the situation even more, the Castle went into the hands of the Museum, it would be subject to an Act of Parliament of 2004, which made state-owned museums free to enter. The museums must be compensated for their missing income by the Government. It is easy to see that with this Act in place, the Government would certainly not want to give the Castle to the Museum.

4.3. The National Park

The Duna-Ipoly National Park was founded in 1997, incorporating the Pilis Nature Protection Area that had existed before. The whole World Heritage area in Visegrád (including the town) is part of the National Park, and is protected as such. This protection should be implemented through the Management Plan of the National Park. This, however, does not exist. It *should* by law, but under the current circumstances the National Park Directorate⁴ cannot produce it. As a temporary solution, the Management Plan of the Pilis Parkforestry applies to the region. It is, in fact, the Parkforestry that manages the area, in other words, it is the foresters that actually do things. The Pilis branch of the National Park comprises only four people, who are covered in paperwork.

4.4. The Pilis Parkforestry⁵

The Management Plan of the Parkforestry is renewed every ten years. 2004 has been the third year of the present Plan, a very detailed document covering topics from history to game management (ZÁTONYI 2002). Here, I shall not discuss the practicalities of the Plan, but rather point out some of the contradictions inherent in the situation.

As mentioned above, the Pilis Parkforestry is a state-owned limited company, which manages, but does not own the woods in Pilis. It must be stressed that at the moment the Parkforestry is a commercial enterprise partly aimed at producing profit from the woods, and is therefore engaged in commercial woodland management. Nature protection, although the National Park is a higher authority than the Parkforestry, is in a rather passive position. The National Park has to countersign every action that is planned by the foresters, but it cannot actively *make* the Parkforestry do anything. I shall bring an example to illustrate what this means in practice.

Meadows are typical examples of semi-natural, cultural landscapes. No one has planted their characteristic plants, but without regular mowing, they would be colonised by trees and disappear (SUTHERLAND – HILL 1995: 197–230). The meadows in Pilis are no exception. The National Park, however, has no means to tell the Parkforestry to mow

⁴ There is an odd distinction in Hungary between National Parks (pieces of land) and National Park Directorates (administrative organisations). The Directorates are responsible for larger areas than their respective National Parks. In this paper, however, I shall use “National Park” to mean both. I do not think this may cause any confusion.

⁵ This awkward expression is the verbatim translation of their name in Hungarian.

the meadows. They can only say yes or no to the actions proposed by the Parkforestry. If no mowing is proposed, the National Park cannot save the meadows.

Let us suppose that at some point in the future the management plan of the National Park will be ready. This will result in one place having two different management plans, with the management plan of the town in the background. It is hard to believe that this would be an ideal situation. Some officials at the Ministry for the Environment apparently shared my thoughts, and produced a policy document entitled “The Forestry Concept of Nature Protection and Its Long-Term Development Strategy”. This includes a section on management plans, and specifically on the management plans of such territories as Pilis. Unfortunately, the directions are somewhat blurry: there should be “co-operation” between forestries and national parks, and problems (such as the meadows described above) should be solved. *How exactly* these should happen, however, is not described in any detail. The reason for this is that the actual problem lies deeper than the level of management plans. All parties seem to agree that the present situation of forestries is no longer compatible with the changed circumstances. Because forestries (including the Pilis Parkforestry) are limited companies, they have economic pressures on them from the side of the state: they have to make profit. Their company status also means that they cannot get any funding from the state for nature protection. Even if they understand and possibly share the ideas of the national parks, they are very often not in the position to comply with them. The obvious solution would be to transform forestries (or at least those that operate mostly in protected areas) into budgetary agencies, which would relieve economic pressures, and would open sources of funding from the state. Once this is done, the Duna-Ipoly National Park and the Pilis Parkforestry could start a meaningful co-operation, and work towards a possibly united management. This, however, is a long way ahead, and what course of events will in fact follow remains to be seen.

In sum, it is clear that management – including ownership – is a very problematic issue, some aspects of which reach much further than the scope of a World Heritage project. In this chapter I have only touched upon problems that have to be faced in formulating workable management plans for the site. What these plans should contain, how Visegrád and Pilis should in fact be managed is the next, arguably even more problematic issue, which I shall not discuss here. The World Heritage Management Plan has a peculiar status in the present situation. Unlike all other plans discussed so far, it has no enforcement power other than the possible removing of the site from the WH List if the Management Plan is disregarded. It will really be a list of things every party agrees should be achieved. Ironically, this may be an asset: it could serve as a starting point that might, in the future, lead to unified management.

5. Local perception

Countries, and especially governments, are proud of their World Heritage sites. Whether the people living at those sites share this enthusiasm or not is a different issue. At Visegrád, there is a unanimous will from all the institutions mentioned so far that the site be nominated, although there has been no survey among the residents. However, the consequences of a successful application are little considered. The recognition that the World Heritage title brings is seen, naturally, as an advantage. The inevitable rise in the number of tourists should be welcomed by the Museum, but somewhat worries the Parkforestry and the National Park. They hope, on the other hand, that increasing visitor numbers would enhance their opportunities for getting funding for improvements in tourist facilities. The Museum is in a most peculiar situation. Normally, more visitors bring more income, however, the reader may remember from a few paragraphs above that entrance to the Museum is free of charge at the moment. Paradoxically, the compensation the Ministry provides for the lost income is not based on the number of visitors. More visitors would then simply mean more money spent on maintenance; therefore the Museum is disinterested in having more tourists around. This situation, nonetheless, might change at any point with another Act of Parliament.

6. Conclusions

This short writing demonstrated the kind of difficulties the World Heritage project faces at Visegrád. Most of the problems apparently result from the fact that the site is complex: in its history, present outlook, ownership and management. We think, nonetheless, that this complexity is an essential characteristic of the site, some aspects of which should be maintained. The World Heritage status may be a good means to preserve complexity in a coherent form.

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