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REVIEW ARTICLES

Castle Building and Its Social Significance in Medieval Hungary

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Vár és társadalom a 13.-14. századi Magyarországon [Castle and Society in 13th and 14th-Century Hungary] (Studies in Historical Sciences, New Series, no. 82). By Erik Fügedi. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1977, 219 pp. *Regélő magyar várak* [Fabling Hungarian Castles]. Edited by Amália Bujtás. Budapest: Minerva, 1977. 213 pp.

The history of Hungarian fortification and castle-building has been a subject of Hungarian historiography ever since the 1870s, when Béla Czobor wrote his pioneering study, "Hungary's Medieval Castles."[1] Yet, neither the reasons, nor the social consequences of castle-building has really become a central research topic of Hungarian historians; and — despite the appearance of a number of significant works in the course of the past two decades — this relative lack of attention is still evident today. Most of the recent works — including those by the prolific "dean" of Hungarian fortification historians, László Gerő — deal only with the architectural and artistic significance of Hungarian castles, and pay little attention to their social, economic and political significance.[2] It was this vacuum in Hungarian fortification studies that prompted Erik Fügedi — a product of Elemér Mályusz's famed Ethnohistory School at the University of Budapest — to try to deal with this question anew, and in particular to evaluate the social and economic implications of the great wave of castle building that flared up in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Fügedi undertook this task by collecting a vast amount of data on 330 Hungarian castles built between c. 1222 and 1400, and then organizing much of this data under six separate headings in the appendix of his work.

In discussing the history of fortifications in Hungary — and here, of course, the reference is to "Historic" or Greater Hungary — Fügedi points out that their origins go back to many centuries before the

traditional Magyar conquest in the late ninth century. Some of these were Roman *castri,* while others were Avar or Slavic earthen or wooden fortresses. With the Christianization of Hungary and with the foundation and expansion of the royal counties by King St. Stephen and by his successors, many of these earlier *castri* and fortresses became the "local administrative centers" in this new network of royal administration. But the majority of these fortresses were still made of perishable material (i.e. wood and earth), and remained so right up to the thirteenth century, when a completely different type of fortress began to spread into Hungary. This was the well-known stone castle of Western Europe, that was usually built in inaccessible places, such as protruding hill tops, or within difficult-to-penetrate swamps, and contrary to its predecessors, was built largely for defensive purposes.

Hitherto Hungarian historians have generally presumed that this new castle-building was solely the result of the Mongol devastations of Hungary (1241–1242), which demonstrated that only stone fortifications and masonry structures could withstand such attacks. While this view is still correct to a large degree, Fügedi's research has proved conclusively that this new type of castle was being built in Hungary at least two decades prior to the Mongol conquest. Thus, discounting various royal fortresses that were partially built of stone even earlier (e.g. Pozsony, Moson, Sopron, Abaújvár, Vasvár), some fortified royal cities (e.g. Fehérvár, Esztergom, Veszprém, Győr, Nyitra, Komárom), and a number of fortified monasteries (e.g. Tihany, Pannonhalma, Zalavár), Fügedi found at least ten fortresses of the new type that had been built during the 1220s and 1230s. These include Léka, Németújvár, Borostyánkő, Óvár, Kobald, Fülek, Jolsva, Füzér, Toboly and Vécs. It is reflective of contemporary power relations in East Central Europe that half of these early stone fortresses faced the West, and thus were intended to defend Hungary from her most powerful immediate neighbor, the Holy Roman Empire. While this recognition is significant, it is equally important that three of these castles — Fülek, Kobald and Füzér — were not in royal hands, but were held by members of the increasingly powerful aristocratic families. This phenomenon was rather new in Hungarian history. Up to 1222 only the kings of Hungary had the right to build and to hold fortifications in the country, and not until the second half of the weak and inefficient rule of Andrew II (1205–1235) did they relinquish this monopoly. This was the direct result of the declining royal power in Hungary, which was also manifested by the promulgation of the Golden Bull of 1222, exacted from the weak king by members of the lower nobility. The decline of royal (central) power went

hand-in-hand with the distribution of much of the royal estates to the nobility, which in turn decreased the monarch's power base. It was during this period that some of the most powerful barons gained the right to build stone castles on their own estates. This change of policy soon resulted in the erection of a few private castles, whose numbers increased rapidly after the Mongol devastation. The latter increase was the direct result of Béla IV's new policy, which not only permitted, but demanded that the largest estate owners erect stone fortresses on their property. But contrary to earlier assumptions, Béla IV did not initiate the custom of permitting private lords to build their own castles; he simply speeded up an already existing tradition that had been introduced by his father during the 1220s.

As a result of Béla IV's policy of encouraging castle-building, between 1242 and 1400 at least 320 additional fortresses were constructed in Hungary, nearly seventy-five percent of which were built during the six decades between 1260 and 1330. The main epoch of medieval Hungarian castle-building, therefore, coincided with the critical period that encompassed the late Árpádian and the early Anjou periods in the country's history. This was the period that witnessed the total collapse and then the slow regeneration of royal power, as well as the temporary rise of a number of powerful barons to the position of near-independent provincial lords, who carved virtual mini-kingdoms out of the country's border regions (e.g. M. Csák, A. Aba, H. Kőszegi, B. Kopasz). Hungary's unity was not re-established until the 1320s and 1330s, when the new Anjou dynasty finally managed to cut down these oligarchs and restored the prestige and power of the monarchy.

In light of the above, it is evident that the policy of the Hungarian monarchs in the thirteenth century, which permitted and encouraged castle-building by private lords, had for a period undermined the power of the same monarchs. The laxening of royal control and the distribution of royal estates to the members of the upper nobility also resulted in the termination of the system of "royal counties," and permitted the latter to extend their control also over the lower nobility. Many of these became household vassals (*familiaris*) of the castle-owning barons, and thus came to constitute a dependent noble class. It was to regain their independence and to protect their collective class privileges that they later developed a system of "noble counties," which subsequently became an all-important institution in the defense of Hungarian national rights as well.

While the wave of castle-building in the thirteenth century helped to elevate the wealthy barons to a position of unusual power and influence

within Hungary, this same process also served as a bulwark to the development of lasting autonomous provinces in the country. Unlike in such Western countries as France or Spain, in Hungary the provincial barons (oligarchs) "emerged victoriously only from the struggle of every feudal lord against every other feudal lord" (p. 67). This was so because neither the powerful provincial lords, nor those who struggled against them were able to think in any other way, except in terms of "large estates," each of which was centered on a particular castle. Each castle and each estate constituted a separate entity, and thus the "province" of even the most powerful of these barons was nothing more than simply a chain of estates, with no signs of real centralization. They were linked together only by the force that the baron represented. This recognition on the part of Fügedi is very significant, and it applies equally to all of the great Hungarian feudal lords of that chaotic period, including Matthew Csák, the greatest of them all, who at one time may have held as many as fifty castles.

Following their rise to the Hungarian throne, the Anjous gradually broke the power of all of these feudal lords and re-established centralization in the country. Moreover, having learned from the experiences of the immediate past, they very seldom permitted a lord to hold more than a single castle. There were, of course, a few exceptions, such as the Újlaki, the Lackfi, the Wolfart, the Drágfi, the Szecskői-Herceg and the Jolsvai families, who held between two to four castles each. But even in these instances, the castles held by a single family were at a great distance from one another, which prevented the likelihood of the emergence of new "provinces" to rival the centralized powers of the monarchs.

The Anjous were also responsible for the development of the offices of the *castellanus* (commander) and *vice-castellanus* (deputy commander) for their castles. The holders of these offices had military, economic, administrative, as well as judicial functions. Later the office of the castellan was often merged with the office of the *ispán* or *comes,* who was the chief administrative officer of the new "noble county." Moreover, in a number of instances, these offices became hereditary in a specific local family.

To prevent the decline of their recently strengthened monarchical powers, the Anjous also made certain that the majority of the most important castles would revert to and remain in royal hands. This policy soon bore fruit. Whereas in 1300 less than one-fifth of the Hungarian castles were held by the monarchs, at the time of King Louis's death in 1382, over half of all castles were royal fortresses.

The Hungarian castles built or rebuilt during the Anjou period were far ahead of those of the late Árpád period also in the area of architectural technology. Thus, in addition to being built only from stone (some late Árpádian castles still had some perishable materials), the Anjou castles also became more complex structurally. In addition to the *donjon,* generally called the "old tower," now a second tower — usually a gate tower — was also added. In a number of instances we also encounter a "palace" that served as the quarters of the lord and of his family, as well as a chapel or a church. Thus, fourteenth-century Hungarian castles had developed into multifunctional fortresses, even though the use of gunpowder and explosive weapons — that would require additional structural developments — had not as yet come into general use in Hungary. But by that time the castle ceased to be simply a defensive fortress as it used to be during the first century and a half of its existence. It also became the center of the baronial estate, and of the baron's feudal administrative and jurisdictional powers over the peasants who were moving in the direction of becoming bonded serfs.

Fügedi's introductory essay is a very useful summary of the social, economic and political impact of castle-building in thirteenth and fourteenth-century Hungary. Yet, at least of equal importance is his lengthy appendix that contains the relevant data of the 330 castles he was able to locate. Here Fügedi was searching for answers to the following six basic questions with respect to each of the castles: 1. Who built it? 2. When was it built? 3. What was its strategic importance? 4. Who and during which time period were its commanders in the fourteenth century? 5. What was its history like during the same period? 6. What are its architectural data? In light of the scarcity of sources, naturally it was impossible for the author to answer all of these questions for all of the castles. But even with the unavoidable omissions, Fügedi's work is still a treasurehouse of information on medieval Hungarian social and fortification history. The usefulness of his data is further increased by the two appended maps that pinpoint the location of the castles built before 1270 and 1300 respectively. His bibliography is also useful. But one would wish that the book also contain a name and subject index. The lack of such an index makes its use more difficult; and this, in my view, ought to be corrected in a future edition. This is all the more desirable if — as rumored — Fügedi's work will also appear in Western languages.

Erik Fügedi, who has published a number of significant works since 1939,[3] has again done a great service to Hungarian historical scholarship. His research on medieval Hungarian fortifications has filled a considerable void. We hope that he will continue his research, and

eventually will also produce a similar study on the development of Hungarian fortifications during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. With such a sequence to his present work, he would contribute much to our understanding of Hungarian social history of that period.

As opposed to Fügedi's monograph, the multi-authored *Fabling Hungarian Castles* is not, nor does it purport to be a scholarly work. Rather, it is a popular compendium of twenty-seven individual essays, one of which introduces the work, while the other twenty-six deal with the history and architecture of as many Hungarian castles. The introductory essay by László Gerő, the "dean" of Hungarian fortification scholars, is an excellent summary that discusses the history of Hungarian castle-building and fortification technology right up to the end of the sixteenth century, and does so with ample number of illustrations for the general reader to follow the technical aspects of these developments. Gerő, however, could not as yet incorporate into his study some of Fügedi's conclusions, and consequently he still regards the Mongol conquest as the starting point for the new type of stone fortresses in Hungary.

While Gerő's introductory study goes only up to the end of the sixteenth century, the essays on the individual castles carry their history right up to the present. But in addition to narrating the history of each of the castles, the authors also make an effort to reconstruct the castles as they were during the heyday of their history; and do so with the use of floor plans, sketches, as well as photographs.

Although many of the twenty-six castles discussed belong or at one time were among the largest and most important fortifications in Hungary (e.g. Buda, Diósgyőr, Eger, Esztergom, Győr, Gyula, Kőszeg, Sárospatak, Siklós, Szeged, Székesfehérvár, Szigetvár, Vác, Várpalota, Veszprém), this does not apply to all of them (e.g. Csesznek, Egervár [Zala county], Hollókő, Kisnána, Nagyvázsony, Sárvár, Sümeg, Szerencs, Szigliget, Tata, Visegrád). Moreover, numerous others of equal or almost equal importance were left out simply because they are not located within present-day Hungary (i.e. those in Czechoslovakia [Slovakia], Roumania [Transylvania], Austria [Burgenland], Yugoslavia [mostly Croatia-Slavonia], and the Soviet Union [Carpatho-Ruthenia]). Although indefensible from a historical point of view, the editor and the authors justified their selection on the basis of the purposes of the book, which was intended to serve as a guide to those castles that are readily accessible to their readers.

As each of the essays was originally written to be broadcast on radio, the authors used easy-flowing styles, and they also sprinkled their

essays with quotations both from contemporary sources, as well as from later poetical works. This makes for easy and enjoyable reading. Moreover, because the authors are all recognized authorities in their fields, the book can be useful reading even to historians. This also holds true for the bibliography, which lists some of the better and more accessible works both on fortification research in general, as well as on each of the castles discussed.

The *Fabling Hungarian Castles* is a beautifully printed and amply illustrated work, but like Fügedi's volume, it too lacks an index. In this case, however, this omission has less significance.

NOTES

1. Czobor Béla, "Magyarország középkori várai," *Századok* 11(1877): 602–641, which also appeared as a separate publication in 1878. See also Csaba Csorba, "A magyarországi várkutatás története," *A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia II. Osztályának Közleményei* 23 (1974): 296–310.
2. See for example: László Gerő, *Magyarországi várépítészet* (Budapest, 1955); idem, *Magyar várak* (Budapest, 1968); *Várépítészetünk*, ed. László Gerő (Budapest, 1975); and László Gerő, *Történelmi városmagok* (Budapest, 1978).
3. Erik Fügedi's main works include: *Nyitra megye betelepülése* (Budapest, 1939); *A 15. századi magyar arisztokrácia mobilitása* (Budapest, 1970); *Uram, királyom . . . A XV. századi Magyarország hatalmasai* (Budapest, 1974); and the work under review.