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**PHD DISSERTATION THESES**

The Castles of Vitány, Gesztes, Tata, Gerencsér and Their Estates in  
the Late Middle Ages

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Budapest, 2015

## **1. Introduction. Historiography, sources, methodology**

The modern, academic research of castles began in Hungary in 1970s with the works of Erik Fügedi, András Kubinyi and Pál Engel. They were the ones who abandoned the romantic picture of the medieval castle, and they declared that the castle was a territorial power base. They investigated not only the archaeological data of the castles, but the owners and their castellans, and their social status too. The last full summary of research on medieval castles was written by Richard Horvath, which outlines the possibilities of the castle research.

Examinations of the castles in the Vértes began in the 1860s led by the Benedictine monk, Flóris Rómer. Rómer collected archaeological data, and described the ruins of these fortresses. He was followed by a number of local researchers who generally processed the history of a particular castle. In the middle of the twentieth century, Mária G. Sandor summed up the results of previous research. She emphasized the necessity of excavations in order to reveal more information on these castles.

My dissertation describes the late medieval history of the castles Vitány, Gesztes, Tata and Gerencsér in the Vértes Mountain. The buildings were situated in an interesting region, near the „Medium Regni” – a zone between the main cities as Buda, Esztergom and Székesfehérvár –, the „center” of medieval Hungary. The castles were often owned by the same landlords in the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries. The investigation of these fortresses may help us to understand how the castles and estates functioned in the middle ages. I also collected data about the Vértes forest trying to answer the question if forest counties (erdőispánság) could be established in this area like the Bakony or Pilis.

The dissertation could not endeavour to investigate and introduce all the castles in Fejér or Komárom County for two reasons. On the one hand, some castles like Csókakő have already been examined in other dissertations, on the other hand, there were a lot of little fortresses in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, but we know only little about them. The dissertation focuses on the history of the four castles,

and relies mainly on the written sources. Their archaeological investigation will not be detailed, because they only started a few years before.

## **2. Subject and methods of the examination and the structure of the dissertation**

Preparation for the dissertation began with a rather long period of data collection. Parallel to the procession of the literature the most important task was the collection of the written sources. The circle of the involved manuscripts has been restricted to the period between 1300-1526, however in this interval I intended to provide a complete base of sources in order to get a picture as detailed as possible. Beyond the published charters, the dissertation is based on two important database – DL and DF collections – of the Hungarian National Archives and another, which is called MONASTERIUM and established and coordinated by an international cooperation (ICARUS – International Centre for Archival Research). Since these charters contained mostly information on possession rights, I had to reconstruct the history of the castles from little details often not related to each other. The procedure was not easy, since charter of the castles did not remain in one place and most of them are unpublished. Neither were there any ecclesiastical possessions in the investigated area, from the documents of which any conclusions could be made concerning these castles. Fortunately the medieval charters of Hungary are available online, so several aspects could be considered during the search in the databases. First, I investigated the written sources which contained references on the territory the castles. Second, I collected and examined all the charters of the former owners. In periods lacking of data, I tried to focus on the charters of the main chapters. (For example the Chapter of Győr or Fehérvár). So, despite all my efforts, new data may emerge concerning these castles.

My dissertation is divided into six chapters. The introduction contains the geographical environment and presents the data on the forest county of Vértés with the aim of introducing the initial situation of the history the four castles. The second chapter contains the history of the owners, how they tried to acquire and maintain the estates within the honor system in the thirteenth century and in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Here I examined the owners' social status and how the royal court thought about these fortresses. The focus of third chapter is on social history: it presents castellans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, their careers and activities. It is possible to illustrate the function and importance of the castle itself through the person who designated either by the king or by the landlord. The next two chapters present the power relations and economic strength of the castles and their domains: I will discuss on the one hand, the periods when royal and private landlords were staying there based on the itineraries, on the other hand, the identifiable details of county's organization. These chapters are intended essentially to refine our picture on the representation of owners, for whom the castles were possible residences. The sixth and final chapter summarizes the results. By the maps genealogical tables, charts, and tables placed in the appendix I intend to support my elaborations.

### **3. Major results**

By the analysis of the collected sporadic data of the written sources, the thesis proves that in contrast to previous hypotheses based on the early Hungarian chronicles, there was a forest county of Vértés. That means, this area did not belong to one powerful clan, but there also were huge royal estates in the Vértés in the middle ages, and this county had major influence on the changes of the possessors and possessions in the area.

I could also confirm the findings of Pál Engel: In the honor system the castle gave the basis of the power of the counts. Komárom County, Csókakő was in close contact with Fejér County. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries the

counts of Győr did not have territorial power, because there were no “free” castles in his own county. The count lost his power when the castles were donated to other nobles. (For example: Komárom between 1333-1372 and 1420-1465) From the mid-fifteenth century, nobles tried to gain the castles in Vértes, and the Hungarian kings donated them in different ways. So the counts of the counties Fejér, Győr and Komárom did not have more castles, and had less power to rule the area. (In the same situation in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries the king donated more counties – and fewer castles – to one nobleman, so there were times when the area was ruled by one nobleman.) After the changes there were no other ways, so the nobles, who own the castles and its estates have more power in the counties. Therefore the king donated the title of comes to the castle holders. So there were Miklós Újlaki and János Rozgonyi Jr., count of Győr in the early 1440s. The title county of Győr regularly was given to the bishop of Győr after 1452. The title count of Komárom belonged to the Szécsi brothers until 1465, later on the castellans held the count’s office. At this time the king, Matthias Corvinus ordered the castle holders (János Rozgonyi and Miklós Újlaki) to protect some of his followers. After the 1490s the castles of Tata and Komárom were given the same owner, who ruled the county until the end of the middle ages. The story was different in Fejér County. After 1440 the castle holder of Gesztes, Miklós Újlaki ruled the county alone. Probably after 1458, but after 1464 surely, Újlaki and János Rozgonyi shared the title of the count of Fejér. Both of them had castles in Vértes, the fortresses (Vitány and Csókakő) belonged to János Rozgonyi and two others (Gesztes and Gerencsér) were governed by Újlaki. After Rozgonyi’s (1472) and Újlaki’s (1477) death, one person, Mozes Buzlai followed them, who had some possessions in Fejér county, but he did not have right to the examined castles. The situation was the same during the time when Gaspar Somi was the count. Although he was the holder of Gesztes for some years in the early sixteenth century. At the end of the middle ages, the count of Fejér was Michael Szerdahelyi Imreffy, who owned the castle Vitány. Although from the late medieval period between 1458-1526 in many cases we have no information concerning the person of the count, in some cases their identities were revealed by vice comes in the county charters. This

also means that the territorial power provided by the castles could be extended to the whole county, too.

The castles' value and hierarchy have changed over the centuries. Their ranks can only be estimated from different lists, but the hierarchy was not constant during the whole age. In the fourteenth century the castle of Csókakő was more important than Gesztes. Tamás Csór generally used the title “castellanus castri Csókakő”, and we have only few data that he used de “castellanus” Gesztes too. If he mentioned Gesztes among his titles, he always placed it after Csókakő. In 1379 the sequence of the three castles in Vértes was the following: Csókakő, Gesztes, and Vitány. Essentially this hierarchy was specific in the early fifteenth century. (So Gesztes was little more important than Vitány.) After the establishment of the castle of Tata (1409) the rank of the fortresses changed, because Tata became be the most important castle in the area. The Hungarian kings spent a lot of time in this new building. In 1440, the sequence of the castles was the same as in the late fourteenth century, except for the new palace: Tata.

In the longest part of the medieval age residences (a place where the owner and his family lived) were only constructed in Csókakő and Tata. In the sixteenth century after the great reconstruction of the Vitány castle, this building also became suitable for functioning as a residence. However, in the Szentlaszló possession – which belonged to the estate of Vitány – a “castellum”, a comfortable country house was built, too. Maybe he need a building, which was nearer to Buda this time the capital of Hungary. Although King Lajos I spent a lot of time in Gerencsér, we have no information about any intention transforming this building into a residence. If we see the estate of Gerencsér, we will easily understand why this little place was not attractive to his owners. An interesting question is, what contemporaries might have thought about the importance of Komárom and Tata. If we study the title of castellans in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, we learn that usually Tata was the first and was followed by Komárom – however Komárom was the first royal castle in

Komárom County. We could not find the reason for this, maybe it had stylistic reasons, because the castellans spent much more time in the castle of Komárom.

The importance of these castles for the landlords can be interpreted after the examination of their other castles in other parts of the country. Although the Rozgonyi family held the fortresses in Vértes for a long time, we have no information what they thought about this area. If one examines the carrier of their castellans, one could see that the most important places of the family lay in the north eastern area of Hungary. The castellan Mihály Masa from Kázmér was working in Tata first, then he served his lord in Varannó and other north eastern castles and counties. During this time (1440-1492) Csókakő could be slightly more significant than Vitány to the Rozgonyis. Only János Rozgonyi tried to keep his residence in Tata although he knew that his family could have held the castle only for his lifetime.

It seems to be apparent that the owners during the honor system, in the fourteenth century, did not try to establish their residence in the Vértes area. Tamás Csór and his son, János constructed their center in Gönyű between Komárom and Győr county. István Lackfi choose Tata as his new residence, where he probably began building the castle. In the greater part of his life, István Rozgony Sr. was in the same situation: he was generally a member the royal entourage, and was often far from his honor possessions. He has built his family residence in castle Csókakő, and his son tried to keep this place for himself, since he had spent a lot of time there. After the Rozgonyis lost castle, Tata they thought their main castle would be Varanno. That means that the well-known thesis works by them to: the important nobleman tries to live far away from the royal court. So the geographical proximity to Buda was not a very relevant aspect, so the castles in Vértes did not serve as noble residences, they only were administrative centers. In the fifteenth century only Tata and Csókakő became residences for a few decades, while the rest of the castles had never played such role. In the late fifteenth century Vitány and Csókakő belonged to the Kanizsai family, who chose another area as their residence. The Újlaky family had their center in Újlak located in the southern part of Hungary. We have no data from the family

Somi and Török, owners of Gesztes in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries that they had ever stayed in Gesztes. Imre Török had his own center built in Futak. Except for Mihály Szerdahelyi these examples clearly prove the thesis: if it has been possible, the landowners had tried to establish their residences far away from the center of the country.

We have much more data if we collect the royal place of dating of the examined area. In the case of the kings we have much more sources for their itinerary. On the current state of research there is really difficult to separate which charters was made in the name of the king and which were made in the royal personal presence. Unfortunately there are only two critically edited royal itineraries (King Sigismund and Matthias Corvinus). Against this background, we try to see how important were the castles in Vertes to the Hungarian kings, and we hope after this investigation we got the rank of these fortresses. During the Angevin kings we found only the name Gerencsér although the coats of arms of Tata show us that the town was a royal estate. Sigismund with his first wife spent some time in Gesztes. Based on a polish chronicle Maria, the first wife died during her pregnancy in the Vertes in an accident. In 1409 Sigismund finished the construction the castle Tata. After this time he spent a lot of time in his new palace, which became soon the center of this area. In 1420's were the golden ages for Tata, because there were a lot of day when not only the Hungarian king, but also other rulers were in the castle. There are some charters from the year 1410, 1424-1425 and 1435 which show us that the king went to Tata, and traveled to Gerencsér and Gesztes to. We found Gesztes only a few times in the royal itinerary. I think this means, that the king liked this place too, but he traveled there only to relax and hunt, so we couldn't have many sources at those times.

Tata belong to Mathias Corvinus after 1472. He reconstructed the castle too, however we haven't got so much data of the royal staying. The king surely traveled to Tata on diverse occasions, but he didn't spend so much time in this area as King Sigismund. Of course at the time when it seems from the dating places that the king have a long stay in Buda, he could in fact travel to Tata too, which show us a written sources in 1484. The contemporary sources let us to know that Tata became one of

the important royal palaces in Hungary. King Ladislaus II. also spent a lot of time in Tata in the 1490's, and he continued the construction of the castle. He was in Gesztes and in the Vertes Mountain during the war against dux Laurencius. In the early sixteenth century the king traveled rarely in this area. The last great event was a really famous diplomatic meeting in 1510. At this time here was the ambassador from Venetia, Germania and France, and a lot of Hungarian noblemen. We haven't got data that a Hungarian king ever spent a few time in castles Vitány or Csókakő, and we don't know the reasons. The Hungarian kings traveled to this area to relax and hunt, the reason of their staying could be the entertainment. King Sigismund built a great fishpond in Tata, which was remembered by many travelers to. Mathias Corvinus ordered to populate river fish into this pond, too

The terminology of location has changed over the centuries. Lajos the Great called Gerencsér sometimes village, sometimes hunting place (“loco venacionis”) sometimes the both of them; and once he called it only a hunting place of Vértes. Gesztes was named castle (castrum) almost all the time. During the reign of King Sigismund, Tata was mostly called “oppidum”, sometimes citiy (“civitas”), and only once castle. Matthias Corvinus also spent also some time in Tata. At this occasion, the location was the same as at the time of Zsigmond, but this was the first time, Tata was called arx, which show us, how heavily the humanism influenced the royal court. In the Jagellonian Age, all versions were used even the “oppidum”, the “castrum” and “arx” within a day. May be one should differnciate between charters produced in the presence of the king, and the charters of the Chancellery, however this assumption needs to be supported by further evidence.

#### 4. Publications

Tatabánya középkori elődtelepüléseinek története az írott források tükrében. *Komárom-Esztergom Megyei Múzeumok Közleményei 13–14* (2008) 85–126.

Gerencsér és várának története az írott források alapján. *Komárom-Esztergom Megyei Múzeumok Közleményei 16* (2010) 69–85.

Tata, egy jelentős mezőváros és polgárai a késő középkorban. *Komárom-Esztergom Megyei Múzeumok Közleményei 17* (2011) 191–221.

Vértesi várak. A Rozgonyi család főúri rezidenciái a 15. században. *Micae Mediaevales II*. Budapest 2012, 123–140.

A két Rozgonyi, idősebb és ifjabb István itineráriuma (1388?–1443). *Komárom-Esztergom Megyei Múzeumok Közleményei 18* (2012) 113–128.

Schmidtmayer R.: Vértesi várak "valódi" urai az 1440-es években. *Kuny Domokos Múzeum Közleményei 20*. 2014. 193–221.