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THE THESIS OF PHD DISSERTATION

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The Border and Self-defence of the Szeklers from the Medieval Age till the Age of Principality. Castles and other Defence Objects in the Settlement History of Udvarhelyszék

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1. Subject and aims of the dissertation

My dissertation deals with the survey and analysis of the defence of Udvarhelyszék, a central administration area of the medieval Szeklerland, respectively it examines the role of Szeklers in the border defence during the Medieval Age and in the age of principality. Beside the well-known castles which were under study for a long period, the systematic surveys of the last years and decades brought to the front some other types of objects (earthworks, caves, pitfalls, churches), whose imaginary or real military defence role had to be analyzed in order to give answers to the circumstances and function of their arising. It was obvious at the beginning of my research that the subject is in strong connection with the settlement system and has to be studied jointly with that. The large analysis of the researched topics and the question of border-defence extended far beyond the borders of Udvarhelyszék’s area in many respects and it needed a wider enquiry. The question of border-defence and of “border-castles” had to be analyzed at large because of its research history antecedents too. Some commonplaces - like the negation of castle-building by Szeklers or the exclusive use of natural refuges by Szeklers in the Medieval Age – had to be reviewed.

2. Research sources and methods

The researched area is neither geographically nor in point of source facilities homogeneous, as it can be seen in the range spread of the medieval settlements and their written mentioning. The historical data – except for Keresztúrszék (part of Udvarhelyszék) – was very poor at the beginning of the research. The data of limited documents was significantly increased by ramblings on terrain, surveys and excavations. On the surface of late medieval Udvarhelyszék (2,716 km², one third of it being mountain zone), at the moment there are 83-84 settlements and/or parishes known from the Arpadian Age, but in my estimation the number of settlements might have reached even one hundred. In the second part of the 16th century the written sources mention 138 settlements. Within the framework of my dissertation I have researched and analysed more than 70 objects from Udvarhelyszék and its neighbourhoods which, according to the historical data had, or at least during the earlier researches were supposed to have a military defence role.

In the research of medieval and principality castles and other defence objects I have followed comprehensive methods. In all cases the most important aspect of the research was the separate detailed study and knowledge of each object which, near data collection, consisted of the controlling of earlier, doubtful information. This meant ramblings on terrain and – in many cases, where there wasn’t a topographical survey – the survey of objects (castles). In the case of measuring caves we used both conventional techniques and modern instruments, refining the line of earthworks with GPS. We used traditional measuring instruments in the survey of church-towers (plans and sections). Beside the few written documents (diplomas, litigations and ecclesiastical sources) I have used in my terrain researches historical maps which arose later, geographical and forestry data and folkloristic documents as well. The knowledge of folkloristic data and its critical review proved to be useful and efficient. On the survey of church-towers and analysis I have followed the results of art historical researches. On the analysis of castles or other types of defence objects I have studied the background of their settlement history on the basis of written documents and thriving archaeological data.
I did new excavations covering the whole spectrum of researched objects (castles, earthworks, caves, pitfalls, churches), among which there are the most important places as Kustaly, Rapsóné and Csonkavár castles, Teleac’s cave system, the earthwork of Kakasbaráza, churches of Mártiniş and Dârjiu. The processing or in some cases the reanalysing of archaeological finds coming from older excavations (pottery in most cases) got a very important role due to the method of earlier researches, which dated the finds with preconceptions and without stratigraphical observations, typological describings or analogies. As far as it was possible, I used the natural science methods (radiocarbon analysis, dendrochronology, geophysics). The radiocarbon analysis in some cases (the dating of earthworks) proved to be clinching, the dendrochronological researches brought new results in the dating of defence elements of churches. Aerial photography also proved to be useful.

3. Assessments and results of the dissertation

3.1. The Szeklers and the border defence

Most of the castles in Udvarhelyszék were defined in the earlier researches as border castles, and nowadays there are opinions which still consider this theory reasonable. Due to this theory I needed to analyze the defence system of medieval and principality Transylvania, to confute these controversial questions, and in reference to the Arpadian Age I also had to analyze the defence system of the entire Hungarian Kingdom at large. In the early Arpadian Age the most important elements of Transylvanian defence system were the castlemarchias, which controlled the strategic points in the south and east borderlands. In the Early Middle Ages we can scarcely track a few border castles, such as the castle of Karácsonykő (Piatra Neamţ). The major cramps and passages were closed by border castles in the 13th century and during the Anjou period (Haţeg, Tâlmaciu, Piatra Craiului, Bran and Tabla Buţii castles), the borders of the expanding Hungarian Kingdom had been protected by buffer states established outside the Carpathian Mountains. There was no line of border castles against the Turkish invasion on the borders of Transylvania, the defence of the province was secured by the companies of the ‘vajda’ (the political and military head of the province) and nobility, respectively by the Saxon and Szekler troops. The Turkish attacks were blocked by the refortification of earlier castles or by building new ones on the passages and cramps. We have no information from the Middle Ages concerning the closing of the passages in the Eastern Carpathians by castles. In the light of the written documents it seems that the military protection was fulfilled by closing the cramps with different natural and artificial elements. The Rákóczi castles in the Ojtoz and Gyimes passages were built only in the 16-17th centuries.

Due to the military function and the border defence of the Szekler people a special historical situation developed and survived in Szeklerland.

In the Middle Ages the basis of laws of Szeklers was constituted upon the ground of personal military service, meaning not only taking part in different military companies but the defence of eastern borders too. The privilege diploma of Ulászló II. dating from 1499 underlines that Szeklers are “obliged to guard permanently in the defence of the country, for which they are excused of any taxes or other kind of services, just like the nobility privileged by the kings of the Hungarian Kingdom”. This is a comprehensible statement concerning the service of border defence in favour of personal freedom and
being free of taxes. There are data in the sporadic medieval written sources referring to the fortification and “cutting” of the cramps by Szeklers. The easy-armed, mobile warfare practice of the Szeklers was suitable for this function for a long time, meaning the control and supervision of the borderland during peacetime, and blocking the passages and cramps in the time of the enemy’s offensive. This kind of border defence obviously didn’t build an impenetrable wall on the line of the Carpathians, but it was very viable to hold up the enemy till the mobilization of the hinterland. Ensuing this action the defence of the country was set up by corps of the province, with Szeklers among them. We hardly have any data from the Middle Ages concerning the organization of border defence in Szeklerland. On the basis of sporadic written documents it seems that just as the participation in campaigns, the border defence was organized within the confines of sedes (districts) too. The external districts (Csík, Gyergyó and Kászon sedes, respectively Háromszék) held an accentuated role in the control of the borders both in military and economic aspects. In the defence in depth of the country and in the interception of enemy the military troops of Aranyos, Udvarhely and Maros districts contributed efficiently too. The border defence tasks were probably set up in the way like the general military services by Szekler states. The campaigns carried on to the east by Szekler comes (military, administrative and juridical head of Szeklers) had an indirect border defence, preventive and averting function as well. We can find some data about control activity near the borders of Szeklers in the 15th century’s written documents.

This kind of border defence of Szeklers didn’t need border castles, as we didn’t know any Szeklers’ border castles from the Middle Ages. One characteristic standpoint in the researches of Eastern Transylvanian (Szeklerland’s) castles, which have considered that these castles were built for the defence of eastern borders from the end of the 11th century till the settling of Szeklers at these territories, is not tenable any more. The researches based on the results of archaeological data have dated these castles to the 13-14th centuries, and have considered them community or nobility refuges. The most recent archaeological researches and radiocarbon dating about one of the most important elements of Eastern Transylvanian border defence, like the earthworks, have proved that these objects were built in the 7-9th centuries, so they didn’t have any Arpadian Age references. Some smaller earthworks in Szeklerland were built indeed in the Middle Ages (Tatársánc and some earthworks on the western part of Udvarhelyszék), or during the time of principality (Országhatár), which probably had a local defence role or an administrative function.

The changes which took place in the Szekler society and military organization during the 15-16th centuries produced serious consequences in the aspects of border defence too. After the insurrection in 1562, there are hardly any written sources about Szeklers’ border defence activities. The setting back of the laws and military role of the Szeklers at the beginning of the 17th century had an influence on border defence as well, which meant the providing of some communities living near the borders with special roles. Their privilege diplomas given by princes of Transylvania ordered them the controlling of roads, passages and valleys going to Moldova and Muntenia, blocking these in case of danger, and to spy outside the borders. The task of Háromszék and Csíkszék were building and controlling castles near the borders. There were custodians in the 17th century drafts among the people from Csík-, Gyegyó- et Kászon sedes, which set up the guarding and controlling of castles and customs. The law-book Approbatae Constitutiones also underlines the support of castles and the guarding of roads among the obligations of Szeklers. The document Diploma Leopoldinum sets out the requirement of
military services of Szeklers, which in aspects of border defence century had only economical aspects at the end of 17th century.

3.2. The self-defence objects of Udvarhelyszék’s Szeklers

The castles and other defence objects from Udvarhelyszék described in the dissertation were classified on several aspects in the course of the analysis.

The prime aspects of classifying the medieval and principality castles were their territorial jurisdiction and their law and order. There are some objects which could be set apart from Szekler castles on the basis of the above criteria.

The research of Kustaly castle resulted in a lot of important information about the early, Arpadian settlement history of Udvarhelyszék. On the basis of the similarities with tower-castles in Rika forest, respectively the topography analysis, it managed to show that originally Kustaly castle was settled on the county administration area during the 12-13th centuries, which was annexed by Szeklers later with the occupation of the areas (Bardóc district) beyond the Rika forest. The Kustaly and Rika forest’s tower-castles have an important role in the range of Transylvanian castles, namely their archaeological finds date them squarely among the stone castles built before the Tartar invasion. During the expansion of Szeklers from Udvarhelyszék in the Middle Ages another county’s castle (Jacod – castrum antiquum) became part of our researching area.

The vajda’s, later the prince’s castle needed a detailed analysis, because this is the point of Szekler history to which the commonplace of the Szeklers having not built any castles is strongly connected. I have tried to confute this theory beforehand by the interpretation of documents and I lined up counterexamples. Beyond the Szekler aspects of these castles I have tried to analyse their military, defence role and their components. The defence system of Székelytámadt (Szekler attacked) castle on the basis of written documents and archaeological researches was outlined very well, some special elements of it (gun-towers) are the unique creations of Szeklerland principality’s military building.

The need for plenitude required the inclusion of the analysis of the mansion-castles at Sânnapaul and Dumitreni in my research, which mansion-castles first of all were residences of nobility, but their military role isn’t negligible either.

The self-defence of Udvarhelyszék’s Szeklers in the cross-section of the analysed and researched objects shows a very complex and varied image. During the Middle Ages and principality almost all kinds of military defence were used in the framework of geographical facilities for the saving of human and material goods.

The basis of the late Arpadian age’s self-defence in Udvarhelyszék was composed by the community castles. Some of them (Rapsóné, Tartód castles) came off at the edge of the area of settlements on the common property of districts or groups of villages, being built and operated with the contribution of more villages. These castles and the phase of stonewall of Budvár castle, which one was built on the strategical point according to archaeological finds, came into existence on the shock effect of the Tartar invasion, and after being on the alert for a few decades in the 14th century they were gradually given up by the leave of Tartar offensives. On the surface of simple structured castles surrounded by stone walls some remains of buildings were discovered (houses deep in the earth, buildings standing on the surface) during the time of excavations. Having a few thousand square meters, like other Szeklerland examples, more village communities had a refuge in the time of eastern offence. Being generally built on high grounds with good natural facilities, the number of castles in Udvarhelyszék is hardly smaller than, for example, the
number of similar castles built in Csík district (in Udvarhely district: 5; in Gergyő- and Csík district: 6; in Háromszék district: 11; in Maros district there were only 2 castles from this type). In the framework of my dissertation, on the analysis of the parameters of Szeklerland’s castles I have tried to work out a typology of Szeklers’ castles, which in many aspects divides the earlier homogeneous image of research. Beside the Szekler communities, the role of Szekler nobility (primipili and primores) has gradually become more and more underlined, separating one special type of castle (small size castles with towers) on the basis of plans and formal properties.

In the Vargyas-fold and its surroundings a special defence system came into existence, where the using of cave-sites could be shown from the 12th century. We have no data about the wall built of stone without adhesive at the south entrance of the fold, three caves were only closed by stone walls probably in the age of principality. On the northern side of the fold stands the church Tatárkápolna (chapel of Tartars) on the Kőmező camp; the determination of its straight function needs further researches (a special role: intermittent ecclesiastical function for runaway people looking for shelter in the Vargyas-fold, or the parish church existing near the fold). The Pipások dombja (‘pipers’ hill’) with defence function and the Tatársánc (‘the earthwork of Tartars’) were in use till the late Middle Ages.

The castle from Porumbenii Mari standing on the surface of a prehistoric earthwork was used in the 13-14th centuries and it belongs to the type of castles built far away from settlements. According to the archaeological findings it could be a nobility castle, in this case we have to reckon with the existence of a wood-tower. On the basis of archaeological findings actually known from the surface of Firtos castle we have to consider that it was built in the late Middle Ages, which also belongs to the Szeklers’ community castles. In the time of Principality a prominent family and/or the monk activity had an important role on the life of the castle. The unclarified chronological and functional connection between castle–chapel–stone building inside makes Firtos castle unique in the series of Szeklerland’s castles. The castle from Bădeni built in the 17th century with the contribution of more villages is a relatively well-known example of Szekler refuge castles. In its formation the effects of residence castles and fortified churches together with modern field engineering had an important role; on the basis of surveys I have tried to clarify the history of the castle building and its reconstruction.

By the late Middle Ages some changes took place in the defence approach and thinking in Udvarhelyszék, which were also manifested in the type of the objects, namely, in contrast with earlier times, the defence places were established near the settlements (artificial caves), or the fortification of the most important buildings of the villages (churches) came to the front. According to the actual knowledge it seems that the horizon of artificial caves made and used in the surroundings of Odorhei town in the 16-17th centuries are specific for Udvarhelyszék. The group of caves having proper formal attributes by some unique characteristics are connected between them with similar geographical factors, the closeness of settlements, occurrence in groups, space distribution etc. The survey of objects and archaeological researches confirmed the legendary tradition, which indicated the use of caves in the 16-17th centuries in the time of Turkish invasions. The origin of cave type, the circumstances of its establishing and actuation needs further researches. The defence character of these caves is confirmed by place-names like ‘ambush’, ‘custodian’, ‘watcher’, ‘vigilant’, befalling close to the caves, which show in the direction of natural kinds of refuges and observer places.
The natural refuges (forests, valleys, mountains, caves, prehistoric castles etc.) couldn’t be neglected in the medieval and principality history of Udvarhelyszék, but – and this is one main conclusion of the dissertation – it was a methodological mistake made by earlier researchers to determine this type of refuge as the most important defence frame of Szeklers.

Parallel with the documentation of gradually destructed artificial caves the analysing of another type of object came to the front. During the principality against the Turkish-Tartar robberies the creating of pitfalls dug in the earth was an efficient form for the storage of goods. Only three of these pitfalls were identified in Udvarhelyszék, but this is only a fragment of their original number. In reference to storage of goods and defence the function of fortified churches is also concerned; in the recent past during the excavations in Mártiniş behind the precinct walls of the fortified church we discovered some dwelling and storage buildings, which were mentioned in documents too.

Through the systematic terrain researches it turned out that the self-defence type of objects in Udvarhelyszék was the fortification of churches too. Next to the classic fortified churches (Mártiniş, Dârjiu) more churches have come into the front which show some partial defence function. Beyond the simple walls, which in my opinion couldn’t demonstrate in itself the defence role, we have documented on certain churches many auxiliary elements (loopholed walls, machicolations, ditches next to walls, storage places, special spaces and elements etc.), which were made with defence function. We can rarely find examples for the fortification of church frames itself, the defence of churches was manifested in the fortification of gate towers built together with churches or separate from them and in the drilling of defence walls surrounding the ecclesiastical building. Next to the enumerate elements which, according to our current knowledge could not be considered as generally used, the towers had a main role in the fortification of Udvarhelyszék’s churches. Within the framework of the dissertation the western towers or gate towers were surveyed, the defence function of which – though some of them were transformed significantly in the modern age – turned out to be obvious. In many cases these towers were dated by dendrocronomological analysis, so it was possible to work out their typo-chronology and their development between the 15-17th centuries. The prototype of defence towers in Udvarhelyszék was the Gothic one, spread from the 15th century with vaulted ground floor, having in general three floors (in some cases there are two or four floor occurrences too), loopholes and machicolation at the top of it. The spreading of firearms in the 16th century had notably changed the character and drilling of towers (dimensions, number of floors with loopholes, the shape and form of loopholes). As the research of defence function of churches in Udvarhelyszék proved to be very complex, the accent was on their documentation. A wider comparison could only be realised after systematic researches done through all Szeklerland.

The grade and number of fortified churches in Szeklerland could be analysed and appreciated in the function of the geographical situation of a certain region. The relative distance of Udvarhelyszék from the eastern and south-eastern borders differentiates it from the permanent and increased emergency of Háromszék and Csíkszék districts settled along the borders, which determined the number and stage of fortifications. According to our knowledge in the building of fortifications the village communities had a main role, but the example of the two most important objects in Udvarhelyszék warns us that the role of primores and primipilii can’t be ignored.

The distribution of churches with defence character provides a good outline of the most endangered parts and points of Udvarhelyszék in the 15-17th centuries. According to
the written documents the Homorod river’s region was mostly affected by smaller and bigger attacks, raids or robberies of adjourning Turkish troops. Next to the fortified churches we can find here some of the caves with defence character and the Bădeni castle was also built here in the 17th century. On the south edge of Udvarhelyszék, due to the nearness of Altland (region of Saxons) hostile troops had often appeared. The fortified church of Dârjiu, the artificial defence caves in Mujna, and the place names of the ‘custodian’ type on the south border of the district reflect this very clear. The military relevance of the most important roads passing through Udvarhelyszék is shown indirectly by some defence type churches, like the road crossing Șoimoșu Mare and Roua, which is confirmed by written sources too.

If the occurrence and use of defence type objects are watched through the entire cross section of the researched period, there are more villages where the communities made experiments on several defence techniques and used them along the centuries (Merești, Ionești, Satu Mare, Porumbenii Mari, Mujna, Odorhei Secuiesc, Vârghiș).

The organisation of medieval and principality defence system of Udvarhelyszék, its methods and mechanisms constitute a proper segment of the defence-system of Szeklerland, with special characters in some references. On the basis of the presented and analysed objects we have seen that next to the natural forms of refuges the area is characterized by varied transitory and built defence forms. The border-defence role of the Szeklers from Udvarhelyszék in the Middle Ages and Principality was outlined by the written documents. The image sketched on the basis of known objects is fragmentary, but we have to underline that these objects provided a successful self-defence system against offences, robberies and destructive invasions along the centuries.
The main researches done in the framework of the dissertation:

Excavations:
Teleacu – Órhegy, artificial defence cave (2007)
Earthworks in the Rika forest (2005, 2011)
Mereşti – Tatárkápolna (2008)
Mărtiniş – Unitarian Fortified Church (2011)

Publications:
The Defence Organisation of Transylvania in the 10-14th centuries. (Recension of book written by Ioan Marian Típic). Castrum 2008. 2. 152-175.