

## KING SOLOMON'S TOWERS

### New results on the Roman and medieval building history of the fortifications on Sibrik Hill

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*In 2013, the King Matthias Museum of the Hungarian National Museum relaunched its research on Sibrik Hill, located approximately 1.5 km from the present-day town of Visegrád, on the area of a Roman era fortification and medieval comitate centre. Numerous unique finds have been discovered in the past eight years, which proved that, following the 5th century AD, the fortification was already in use again by the first half of the 9th century and it retained its importance until the first third of the 13th century. Katalin Boruzs excavated the southwestern part of the fort between 2019 and 2021, which revealed two Roman era towers and two previously unknown medieval towers. These new findings facilitated the revision of the periodisation established by earlier excavations, revealing a formerly unknown epoch in the medieval history of the castle.*

#### HISTORY OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

This year marks the seventieth anniversary that Sándor Soproni began the first series of archaeological research at the fort in 1951. The area was cultivated at that time, thus research was possible only through trial trench excavations (SOPRONI 1954). Between 1970 and 1976 Sándor Soproni and Mátyás Szóke led archaeological excavations of greater scales on the western and southeastern sections of the fort (SOPRONI & SZÓKE 1972; 1975; 1976; 1977), which revealed the dimensions of the fort, its main walls and the locations of several external towers. Based on architectural features, stratigraphy and the findings, they discerned three Roman and three medieval construction phases. They dated the establishment of the fort between 325 and 330 AD based on coins that entered circulation under the reign of Emperor Constantine I and the shape of the towers. The features excavated near the middle of the western sidewall suggested the existence of a building phase dateable to the middle of the 4th century AD (a double arched gate) and another one dateable to the Valentinian period (a tower with a quadrate ground-plan). Furthermore, they excavated three intramural Roman era stone buildings conjoining the main walls of the fortifications, further inwards a medieval palace and numerous semi-subterranean features (BUZÁS et al. 2017, 195–203), nonetheless the internal layout of the extensive fortification is mostly unknown.

#### NEW RESEARCH AND ITS RESULTS

In 2021 geophysical prospection was conducted on the interior of the site, providing new data for internal land use and giving a new impetus to research (BUZÁS et al. 2014). Between 2013 and 2021 systematic research was conducted at the site that is still not built up, expanding considerably our knowledge concerning its Roman, early medieval and Árpád period history (*Fig. 1*). Documenting the Roman era internal buildings and cistern, trial trenches on the suggested site of a gate tower, alongside the discovery of a smelting furnaces of precious metals related to the 8th–9th centuries, an apsed church dateable to the turn of the 11th–12th centuries, two towers from the 11th–12th centuries and a semi-subterranean house dateable to the first third of the 13th century, which contained coin dies, have all provided important new data, further enriching the history of the site.

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Fig. 1. The ground plan of the Roman fort and early medieval castle of Visegrád, with its different construction phases (Drawing by Gergely Buzás)

### The Roman era

The most recent excavation confirmed a slightly curved, 35-meter-long southwestern section of the fort wall. It was 1 meter thick and ca. 18 meters long and survived up to a height of 2–5 rows of stone. An approximately 2.5 m long section of the Roman fortification wall adjoining an intermediary tower is clearly discernible, yet the bulk of the wall and its foundations had been torn down and extracted all the way to the corner tower. A coin of Emperor Gordian III, a silver coin of Stephen II of Hungary (?) and a fragment from an iron knife sheath fitting were recovered from the extraction pit of the wall. The southwestern end of the fort wall and the entrance of the southwestern corner tower survived partially (Fig. 2).

The complete area of the U-shape external tower situated at the middle of the southwestern fortification wall section has been excavated. The southwestern, fan-shaped corner tower documented already by Sándor Soproni has been encountered also during the recent archaeological excavations. The U-shaped tower was built at the same time as the fort wall, it is similar in dimensions and layout to other towers on the southern side of the fortification. It had a 90 cm wide entrance, which was walled up when a superimposed medieval tower was erected. Two well-preserved coins depicting Sacra Moneta on their reverses, minted between 300–305 AD, were found during the excavation of



Fig. 2. The excavation of the southwestern corner tower in 2021 (Photo by Katalin Boruzs)



Fig. 3. The northern end of Roman period building "E"  
(Photo by Katalin Boruzs)

a 15–20 cm thick, clayey fill layer related to Roman times and the Roman floor level. Approximately 30 late Roman small bronze coins were recovered from a black, charred, burnt demolition layer on the area of the southwestern corner tower, alongside sherds from a beige garner and grey homemade pottery, and a tegula with a fragmentary Quadriburgium stamp dateable to the reign of Emperor Constantine I.

The southern section of the fort wall, springing from the southwestern corner tower, was similar in design to the western main wall. A five-meter-long section of it survived up to a height of 1–2 rows of stones. Only the 190 cm wide foundations of this wall were discovered in the trial trench delved 10 meters eastwards. A wall section with a 130–150 cm wide foundation was observed in the trial trench

jutting southwards from the main wall, marking perhaps the site of a tower. Sándor Soproni's trench Nr. 1951/6 suggested the presence of another tower, located approximately eight meters apart from this newly discovered one, implying, that the Roman era gate of the fort may have been located in this region.

A Roman edifice complete with a porch (building "D") located inside the fort was excavated in 1976. New research revealed a second and a third room of this building, with a stone-lined channel running E–W beneath its clay plastered floor. The channel guided water out (?) of the fort, through a hatch ca. 25 cm in diameter on the main wall. The doors of the rooms were located on the eastern walls. Similarly to the northern room, a 80 cm wide porch marked by pedestal stones bordered this part of the building. The southern wall of the third room has been demolished and extracted, only its extraction pit filled with rubble has been unearthed, thus at the moment it is unclear whether the edifice extended further southwards with other rooms. Room D/3 is located in the forefront of the U-shaped tower, implying that the tower was approached through this building, in contrast to towers excavated on the southeastern part of the fort.

The excavations in 2018 revealed the northern section a new edifice (building "E") located ca. four meters eastwards from building "D", which was joined to the main wall of the fort (Fig. 3). The two buildings ran parallel with each other. The foundation of building "E" followed the natural slope of the hill, thus there is a ca. 50 cm vertical difference between the foundations of its western and eastern walls. This is (also) the reason, why its western wall is well preserved, surviving up to the height of the second and occasionally third row of stones above the outthrust foundations, yet its eastern wall is demolished down to the foundation. The room is 4.2 meters wide, its length cannot be determined at the moment. Georadar surveys suggest it is ca. 25–30 meters long. Postholes situated along the walls imply that the room was bordered by a 70 cm wide open hallway from the west and a 90 cm wide one from the north. A silver coin of Ladislaus I of Hungary and a *Friesacher Pfennig* attest that the excavated building was in use during the Middle Ages and only the lowermost, thin layer is related to the Roman period, which yielded everyday items and accessories (coins, brooch fragments, iron knives and belt fittings).

The systematic use of metal detectors in recent years led to a rapid rise of metal finds.<sup>2</sup> Between 2013 and 2021, more than 1.300 Roman bronze coins were uncovered, providing an increasingly detailed insight into the monetary relations of the 4th century AD.<sup>3</sup> The earliest coin recovered from site is a sestertius of Emperor Commodus (so far the sole numismatic evidence from the 2nd century AD); the AD 270s are represented by a few bronze coins, yet the bulk of the collected material is dateable to the 4th century AD. One

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of the rather worn bronze coins dated to the last third of the 3rd century was found trodden into the clayey floor of one of the southeastern corner towers. Their evaluation is unclear: are they related to the constructors of the fort or to an earlier period? The latter hypothesis is supported by the presence of stamped tiles, of which only specimens dated to the 4th century AD were recovered (BORUZS 2021, 20–23).

### *The medieval period*

The excavations conducted between 2019–2021 revealed the ruins of a wooden house with wattle-and-daub walls and a smelting furnace for non-ferrous metals in the southwestern corner of the fortification, both dated to the 8th–9th centuries via pottery finds. Molten gold was found in the combustion chamber of the kiln. It is altogether likely that the curving foundation pit of a stake-wall filled with stones, built in front of the inwards opening door of the Roman fan-shaped corner tower, was built during this period as well.

In a subsequent phase, the Roman corner tower was pulled down and a new, 7×11×8 m large gate tower with a slightly trapezoid ground-plan, built with ashlar masonry, was erected behind it, into the corner between the castle walls (*Fig. 4*). The U-shaped Roman tower situated close by northwards was also torn down and a 9.5×6.5 m large tower was raised upon it from ashlar blocks, with lesenes on its corner and at the middle of its longer sidewalls (*Fig. 5*).

The closest tower northwards was the central tower of the western castle wall. Mátyás Szőke and Sándor Soproni excavated it in 1971 and 1976 (*Figs 6–9*). Their excavations revealed that it was also built upon a small, U-shaped tower. This tower was taken down later on, and a 13×13 meters large tower with 110 cm thick walls was constructed in its stead. Both towers were built using rubble stone masonry and gritty mortar, leading the excavators to suggest that both were erected in Roman times. However, the tower wall facing the centre of the castle was different, it was built of ashlar blocks and was barely 80 cm thick. Both its sides were divided by lesenes and a double arched gate passed through it. The level of this gate was approx. 70 cm above the original floor level of the quadrate tower, thus they could not have been contemporary. The excavators considered this latter tower to be Roman too, plausibly based on the shape of the double arched gate, and dated it to an intermediary Roman period. They believed that during the construction of the large tower, the double arched gate was walled up and the related floor level was lowered (SOPRONI & SZŐKE 1972). However, several circumstances markedly contradict this hypothesis. The straight



*Fig. 4. Towers excavated along the southwestern wall section of the castle in 2021 (Photo by Katalin Boruzs)*



*Fig. 5. The excavation of the medieval tower with lesenes and the Roman period building "D" in 2020 (Orthophoto by Teofil Rétfalvi Jr.)*



Fig. 6. The excavation of the large western tower in 1976 (Photo by Mátyás Szőke)



Fig. 7. The ashlar masonry of the double arched gate of the large western tower in 1971 (Photo by Mátyás Szőke and Sándor Soproni)

ashlar wall was not built alongside the outer plane of the thicker, originally slightly curved fortification wall, but its inner one, thus the 30–50 cm difference between the planes of the two walls is observable on the outside of the fortification wall, almost exactly at the inner corners of the large quadrate tower.

Thus, the only valid interpretation is that the ashlar wall was built in alignment with the existing quadrate tower. This is further supported by the fact that the central pillar of the double arched gate on the ashlar

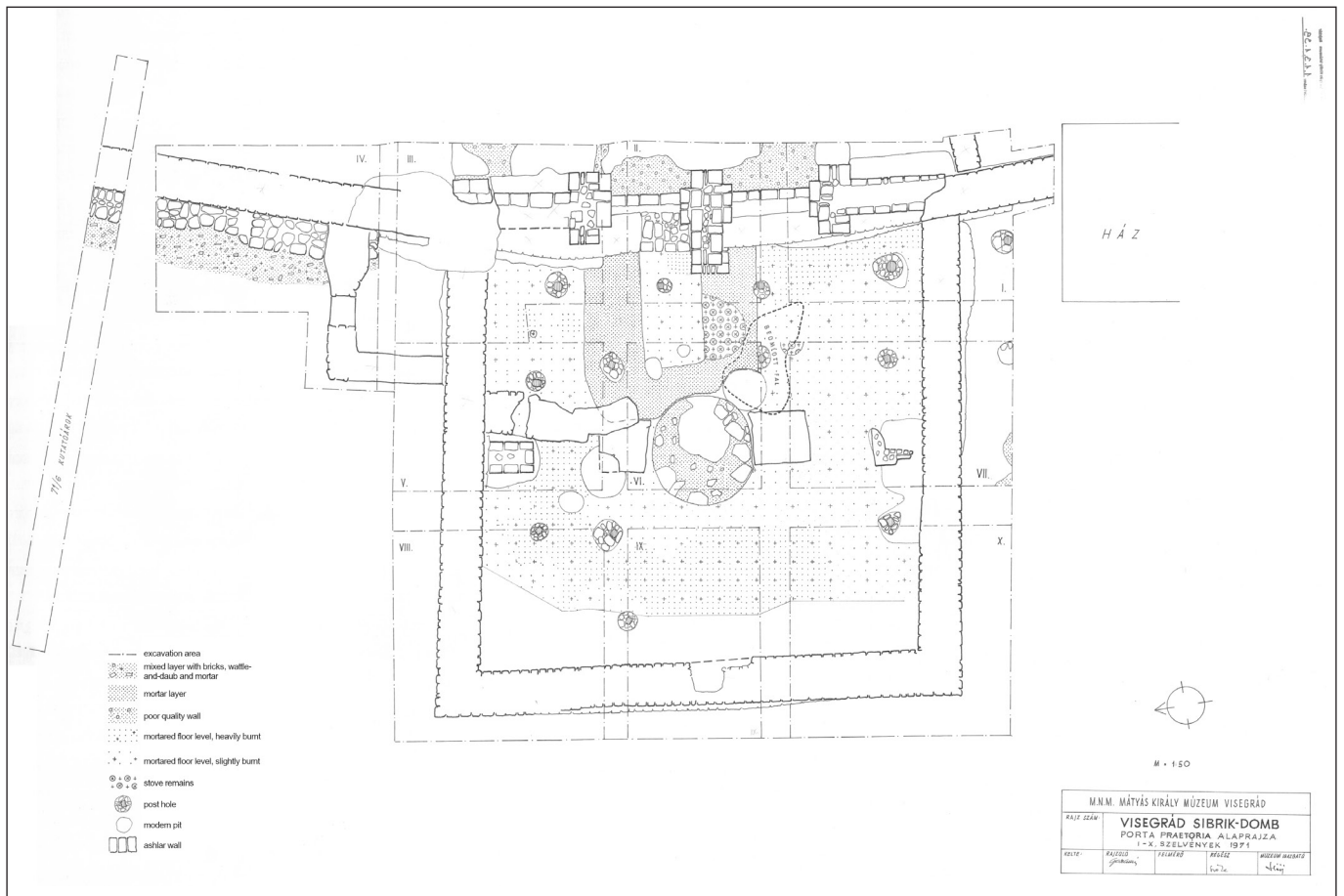


Fig. 8. The excavation ground plan of the large western tower in 1971 (drawing by Mátyás Szőke and Sándor Soproni)

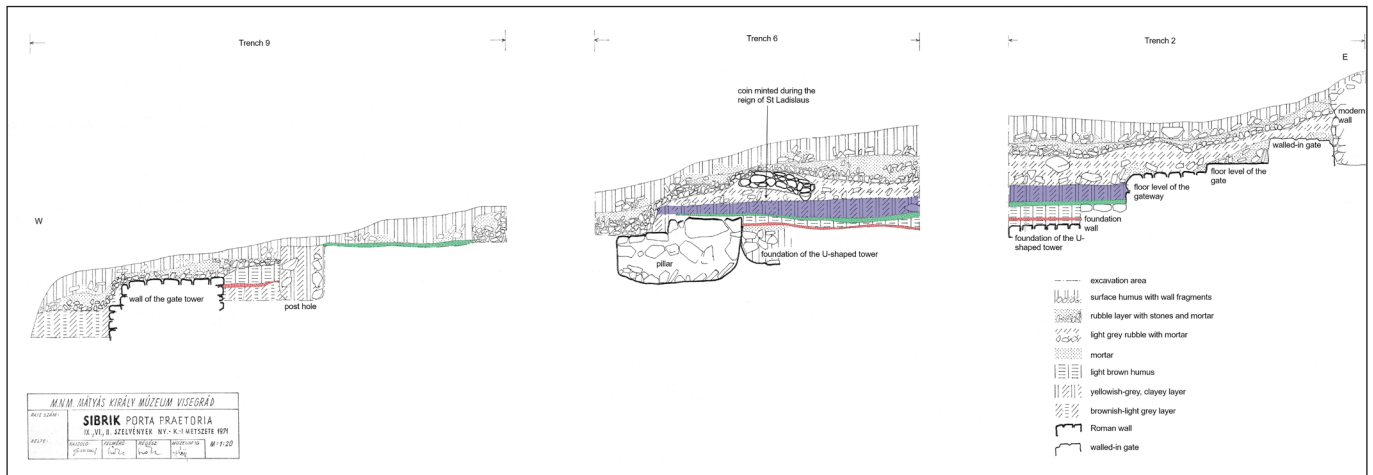


Fig. 9. The E–W section wall of the layers of the western tower in 1971. Red: Roman period level, Green: former floor level of the 11th century, Blue: later fill of the 11th century (drawing by Mátyás Szőke and Sándor Soproni)

wall has an elongated projection towards the middle of the tower and the remains of similar ashlar pillars were also observed inside the middle of the northern and southern walls of the quadrate tower, some built subsequently to existing masonry. It is likely that a fourth such pillar was present inside the middle of the western wall, where a modern extraction pit was recorded during the 1971 excavation. The northern and southern pillars and also a large round pillar situated at the centre of the tower, which was built of ashlar blocks too, were all dismantled by similar modern robbers' pits. The mortar layer with ashlar imprints on its outer surface, which was previously interpreted as a trace of the walling up the double arched gate, was more likely the foundation of a stairway built of carved stones, which connected the internal floor level of the tower with the raised courtyard of the castle. Nevertheless, if the double arched gate is not earlier but later than the quadrate tower, it must be contemporary with the floor level of the tower that was discovered at the same height as its inner threshold. This level was the third floor level of the tower, because the original floor level of the large tower was raised later. However, this second, mortary floor level overlapped the foundations of the two quadrate pillars found inside the tower, indicating that they certainly pertained to the first building phase of the quadrate tower. Multiple postholes were delved into this second floor level, dateable to the 11th century AD via pottery. Wooden stakes 18–20 cm in diameter were wedged into these postholes by stones. The stakes were arranged in a 3×3-meter-large raster and plausibly served as supports of a timber structure. One row of postholes from a timber structure was found outside the southern wall of the tower. Here, the two easternmost postholes were doubled. It is likely that during the 11th century a wooden tower was erected above the ruins of the Roman tower, which overhung Roman walls southwards. The double postholes excavated near the southeastern corner may indicate the presence of a gate structure. This wooden tower was consumed by fire. Inside the tower, burning created a ca. 20 cm thick clayey, daubed layer out of the lute of the timber structure, which yielded numerous 11th century pottery sherds. A denarius of Ladislaus I of Hungary was found in a sooty patch on the surface of this layer in 1971. The worn surface of this layer constitutes the second medieval floor level, with which the internal threshold of the double arched gate was aligned. The destruction of the tower dated by the coin of Saint Ladislaus was followed by a recon-



Fig. 10. The ashlar masonry of the tower with lesenes (Photo by Katalin Boruzs)

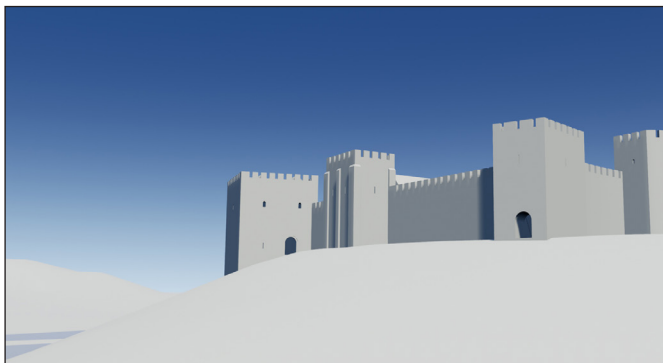


Fig. 11. Reconstruction drawing of the outside of the southwestern towers of the castle (drawing by Gergely Buzás)

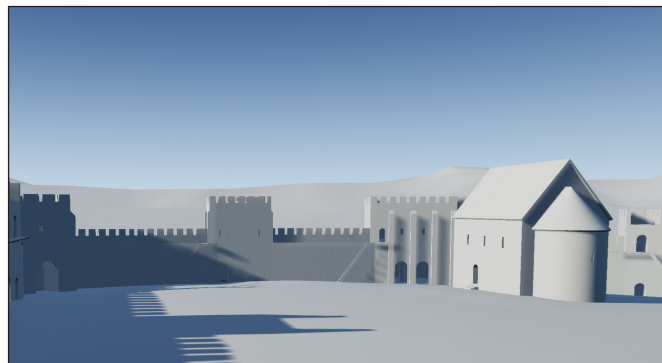


Fig. 12. Reconstruction drawing of the inside of the southwestern towers of the castle (drawing by Gergely Buzás)

struction phase, during which a garderobe tower was erected near the northeastern corner of the tower. Furthermore, a central round pillar of ashlar blocks was placed inside the tower and four rectangular ones alongside its walls. A double arched gate was constructed on the new eastern ashlar sidewall of the tower, alongside lesenes dividing the wall surface. In front of the eastern part of the southern tower wall, in 1976 Mátyás Szőke excavated a road section with stone foundations and a mortared surface, in level with the third floor level of the tower. A section of the southern tower wall was pulled down in line of the road, down to the level of the inner floor level of the third construction phase. Most likely this was the location of the threshold and jamb of the 11th century outer gate, that was quarried in modern times. It is plausible that the earlier, 11th century wooden tower also had an outer gate, since the above-mentioned double postholes were discovered beneath the road.

The medieval phase of all three excavated towers is characterised by ashlar masonry, lesenes on the walls, and the use of white gritless mortar, suggesting their contemporary nature (Figs 11–12). Thus, the denarius of Saint Ladislaus discovered in the burnt layer preceding the final phase of the large tower dates this entire construction horizon. A second coin of Saint Ladislaus was discovered in the vicinity of the towers in 2021, behind the southwestern castle wall, on the floor of a medieval above ground wooden house built atop a medieval burnt layer. These coins imply that sometime during the rule of Saint Ladislaus, at least the southwestern part of the castle burned down and the Roman towers were laid in ruins. The three towers were subsequently reconstructed.

The ashlar masonry characterising the reconstruction of the three towers is not unparalleled in the castle of Visegrád. Mátyás Szőke observed that the bipartite medieval palace building he excavated in the southeastern corner of the castle in 1974, was built in an identical manner. This palace complex was raised during the 11th century, atop two Roman stone edifices and multiple 9th–11th century early medieval pit houses (SOPRONI & SZŐKE 1976).

Towers with quadrate layouts and lesenes dividing the surfaces of their walls, similar to the ones at Visegrád, appeared in Normandy and in the Loire Valley by the end of the 10th century and became widespread in France and England during the course of the 11th and 12th centuries. One subgroup of these towers had L-shaped lesenes enveloping the corners instead of the more general cross-shaped ones. The Visegrád tower outfitted with lesenes pertains to this subgroup, examples of which were also known in Normandy (MESQUI 1997, 152) and England (GODALL 2011, 77–144). However, these



Fig. 13. Chauvigny, Château d'Harcourt



Fig. 14. Chauvigny, Château de Gouzon  
(Photo by Gergely Buzás)



Fig. 15. The gate tower of the Imperial Palace of Gelnhausen (the so-called Kaiserpfalz) viewed from the courtyard  
(Photo by Gergely Buzás)

phase of the 9×10-meter-large tower outfitted with lesenes and conjoined to the outside of the city wall, is similar in shape to the 12×12 meters large 11th century tower built into the 13th century donjon of Château de Gouzon (Fig. 14). Chauvigny has been the city of the bishops of Poitiers since the early 11th century. The first bishop's keep was erected in a corner of the city during the 11th century. The exact construction dates for the city walls and towers are unknown, yet plausibly they were built together with the episcopal keep, as parts of a uniform concept (SAILHAN, 1975), likely during the course of the 11th century.

The gate tower layout consisting of a gate house with a central pillar, a single gate outwards and a double-arched gate inwards, is another characteristic feature of Visegrád during the reign of St Ladislaus. In terms of shape, the gate tower of the Imperial Palace in Gelnhausen (the so-called Kaiserpfalz) built after 1158 is the closest parallel to the large gate tower in Visegrád (BINDING 1996, 262–292; Fig. 15). However, the Kaiserpfalz postdates the Visegrád gate tower by multiple decades, thus one may suggest that both were constructed in likeness of a common ancestor that has since become lost.

### HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

The sole mention of Visegrád in the Árpád period is known from the *Chronicon Pictum* (Hungarian: *Képes Krónika*) and refers to the age of Saint Ladislaus: “Then King Ladislaus discovered the wickedness of Solomon, captured him, and imprisoned him in Visegrád.” The chronicle notes the following as a prequel to these events: “In the fourth year of his reign, he [Ladislaus I of Hungary] made peace with Solomon and granted him sufficient allowance for his royal necessities. However, the nobility of the country acted carefully to prevent a renewed outbreak of turmoil and strife: they did not suffer him sharing the country with Solomon...” (SRH I. 407). The conciliation between Ladislaus and Solomon that took place sometime around 1080 was most likely the result of the Hungarian campaign of Henry IV, Holy Roman Emperor



in spring 1079 (PAULER 1899, 145), a topic on which the chronicle favouring Ladislaus remained silent, probably not without a reason. In case Henry IV followed the route of his 1074 summer campaign which advanced until Vác, his next expedition might have brought about the siege and destruction of the castle of Visegrád. This siege might account for the appearance of a new comitate at Esztergom in that very year, which can be interpreted as the successor of the comitate at Visegrád (ZSOLDOS 2001, 39). Gurcu, the count (Hungarian: *ispán*) of Esztergom mentioned in the year 1079, was a man of Saint Ladislaus, as his father, Péter fell in the Battle of Kemej in 1074 on Géza's side (ZSOLDOS 1995). The reason behind him moving to Esztergom may have been that he had lost the castle of Visegrád. Nonetheless, Ladislaus was forced to provide Solomon with a revenue befitting a royal retinue, although the country has not been divided. It is likely that he ceded Visegrád and the related woodlands of Pilis to Solomon, which he had already occupied. Not much later, King Coloman tried recompensing Duke Álmos for his principality in a similar manner. This may have been the cause for Ladislaus imprisoning Solomon right in Visegrád, when he broke the pact later on. Before that, King Solomon restored the castle of Visegrád that he acquired in 1079 as his royal seat. Solomon, who returned home with imperial support, likely commissioned imperial masons to furnish his new residence. There, Solomon could well have hired masons who were previously employed by the entourage of Agnes of Poitou, a French-born empress of the Holy Roman Empire and Solomon's mother in law, who were familiar with the most up-to-date features of castle architecture of contemporary Western Europe and Germany, especially the County of Poitou.

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