

VISEGRÁD



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Forty minutes north of Budapest, on a bend in the Danube, occupying a strategic point on its western side, lies Visegrád. In Roman times, this was a heavily fortified stretch of the Pannonian *limes*, controlling some of the richest farming land in Europe. Today, though, its real fascination lies in how Hungary's smallest town became a royal stronghold for the Hungarian royalty and then, since the 1930s, a symbol of Hungary's Medieval and Renaissance monumental might in the heart of Europe. On a magical autumnal day in November, following a two-day conference in Budapest, I had the good fortune to visit Visegrád with Professor József Laszlovszky and his new cohort of MA students (in Medieval Studies) from the Central European University.

Visegrád lies in the shadow of Budapest in most respects. Their relationship to the Danube as a great axiomatic line connecting and separating Europe underscores about every episode in their common histories up until our times, the age of cultural tourism. So, as I shall explain, the great castle of Buda that dominates Hungary's capital is a textbook example of artful restoration and a benchmark for the equally extraordinarily audacious restoration at Visegrád. Largely obliterated in the ferocious battle for Budapest in December 1944,

post-war governments have skilfully reinvented the Medieval character of this Danubian castle.

More accurately, establishing a genesis for the Austro-Hungarian city following the steady loss since 1918 of much of Greater Hungary's once far-flung territories has been an important task for generations of the country's dedicated archaeologists and conservators. Not surprisingly, then, this Medieval fortress, rightly celebrated today, draws huge numbers of tourists. Wonder at Buda as you may, gazing from the formidable eyrie on the 19th-century city below, but as a feat in shaping a historical story Buda actually pales in comparison to Visegrád, where – among the constellation of monuments – you will find a thought-provoking early Renaissance Pompeii.

Majestic setting

Visegrád was first mentioned in a royal charter of 1009. Here Hungarian kings came to hunt in the rolling hill-country that occupies this corner of the Danube, today a wooded national park criss-crossed by trails. József has carefully planned the order of our visit. We begin at the top, close to the upper citadel belonging to this small town, from where the entire landscape can be viewed.

Of course, the listless Danube in its huge setting draws one's eye, but then there is the 13th-century upper castle, contrived to belong to a Grand Tourist's lithograph. Its crenellated battlements and turrets, evocatively restored as if for a film, command the river as it narrows through the wooded hills before it turns towards Budapest. Countless Romantic images depict it, a place of wild middle European Medieval royals, on a great fluvial highway connecting the west to the east. The modern restoration,

BELOW Visegrád Castle in Hungary.



PHOTO: Sander_123, flickr.com



FAR LEFT Visegrád, on the River Danube.

LEFT Looking from the castle at Visegrád down towards the calm waters of the Danube.



like fortress Buda, naturally draws coachloads to its dark fastness. But its history was marginal in the annals of Visegrád.

On a lower ledge, immediately below the citadel, is its precursor, and lower still, out on a point, is the Tower of Solomon, another Romantic viewshed. The precursor on Sibrik Hill between the two textbook castles is no more than a few stone courses high. This unrestored castle was a well-placed 4th-century Roman fortress, parts of which, recent excavations have shown, were maintained until the 12th century.

Being the remains of an imperial interloper, aimed at keeping the menacing Germans and Huns bottled up on the east bank of the Danube in the Migration Period, there has been no attempt to rebuild the camp. But its place in Visegrád's history has not been entirely forgotten. On the millennial anniversary of the first reference to the township, in 2009, with a sketchy allusion to an 11th-century prisoner held here, the modern followers of the Knights of St George chose this undistinguished fortress to erect a Disneyesque monument: a broadsword sunken into a deep stone.

Gazing at this brazen historical statement, as if by magic, military drums strike up in the Tower of Solomon below. Knights are jousting, József tells us with a twinkle in his eye, their enthusiastic and guttural cries travelling fast across the misty autumnal woodland. Following the path downwards, passing through its upper gatehouse we reach the source of the jousting, a much-restored 13th-century tower. With walls 5m (16ft) wide, this keep occupies the lowest concealed ledge directly below the citadel. Here, brightly attired, melodramatically, the busy knights are being put through martial paces: capacity building in perfecting their archery, throwing knives, and other everyday Medieval skills.

The tower was erected with the overt purpose of enjoying the pleasure of this Danubian panorama. Its riverside rooms were graced with high windows, worthy of a late Romanesque cathedral. Not surprisingly, this bastion was a magnet to a series of sieges culminating in 1544 with an Ottoman raid that caused part of it to collapse. That accounts for perhaps the most unexpected restoration I have ever encountered. Its Medieval

features are capped, so-to-speak, by a remodelling of its uppermost floors made in Communist times.

To repurpose the tower for popular effect, concrete has been deployed: onto the Romanesque has been grafted Cold War bunker architecture. Unfortunately, concrete rots – unlike the masterful stonework of the Medieval architect. Twenty years from now, this conundrum will provide the Hungarian authorities with a baffling and expensive challenge if Solomon's tower is to be maintained for modern knights and tourists. ▶

BELOW The path down from the citadel, through a gatehouse and on to the Tower of Solomon.



ALL PHOTOS: Richard Hodges, unless otherwise stated



ABOVE The Medieval courtyard now hosts re-enactments of jolly Medieval jousting.
MIDDLE The sword in the stone recalls a thousand years of Visegrád.
RIGHT The Tower of Solomon, restored with its concrete upper floors.



Medieval fun and games

On we go as a group, following the path from the lower gate, through the town clinging to the lower slopes, we arrive at Visegrád's main monument – the Renaissance palace. I was quite unprepared for this benign assault on my senses. Pannonian (Roman) fortresses and feudal castles swarming with burly shaven-headed *faux* knights did not really surprise me as much as the coachloads of Chinese tourists.

By contrast, the palace is a heritage theorist's dream: discovered accidentally in the 1930s below centuries of colluvium that had tumbled from the sharp slope reaching to the upper citadel, this 15th-century utopian venture is really a Florentine Pompeii. It is a Pompeii because it has been unearthed and reassembled to serve contemporary aims. Palaces from Florence and similar Tuscan oases seem to have been uppermost in the mind of its Danubian architects. Medieval archaeology is normally never given such grandiose treatment; such expansive reconstruction is reserved for Minoan, Greek, or Roman monuments, as most nations expediently conclude that if the palace survives in Italy, why invest in returning it to its former glory?

There was, of course, a reason. Here in 1335, the kings of Bohemia, Poland, and Hungary met to define themselves as the Visegrád countries, a precursor of modern pacts. Released from the entrapment of Communism in 1991, the newly elected prime minister of Hungary, József Antall, repeated

this late Medieval meeting at Visegrád, inviting Václav Havel of Czechoslovakia and Lech Wałęsa of Poland to reaffirm a treaty then six centuries old. The re-enactment, marking the closure of the Cold War, was a celebration of verbal diplomacy rather than martial exhibitionism. Since then, the V4 countries (with the division of Czechoslovakia) have met regularly as a group, tracing their roots to this Medieval town. The connection brought satisfying resources to Hungary's archaeologists, as well as a modern purpose.

First conceived by King Charles I around 1325, the palace was enlarged in two bold steps by King Louis I and King Sigismund.



BELOW The (much restored) Renaissance palace, as completed by King Matthias Corvinus.

INSET The private pleasure garden of the palace, reconstructed from the excavations.





LEFT The palace courtyard, returned to its 15th-century elegance.
INSET The 'Hercules' fountain that once graced the palace courtyard, now in the museum.

visitors to the Hungarian court. The museum also includes an original Regensburg stove, a colossal corner oven completely covered in lustrous lead-green tiles, each bearing the coats of arms of properties of the illustrious owner. This vaunting audacity did not end in the main building.

Matthias's legacy was to overhaul everything.

The philosopher-king, much enthused by the ideas of Plato's *Republic*, also rebuilt the kitchen, private quarters, grand church, and gardens (with imported pleasure plants), to the extent that soon you, as a simple visitor, are seduced (as presumably his Neapolitan queen was) to feel as though this could be central Italy – except nine-tenths is truly fake and modern.

Managed as an outpost by the National Museum in Budapest, this is Medieval archaeology on a bold scale. Eighty years of intermittent research excavations, restoration, and thoughtful display mean that this is no Las Vegas. The range of ceramics, glasses, and household knick-knacks in the museum have all the more meaning because you've walked through the rooms from which these have come.

Two final points about Visegrád. First, the National Museum has made the ultimate children's playground in front of the palace. A place of gaily painted wooden swings and ships and seesaws. Needless to say, 'King Matthias' greets the children on entering and offers an entrancing rustic pleasure rather than a commonplace plastic one. Second, for the palate, there is the Renaissance restaurant. With waiters dressed for the age of Da Vinci, and with tableware worthy of the neighbouring royal households, the – allegedly Medieval-style – food is first class, as are the beverages. Budapest, then, is undoubtedly glorious; Visegrád is an unexpected treat, an assault on the senses as benign and memorable as that first view of the great river that gave reason to its special history. ■

The next chapter here belongs to a king elected from outside the royal lineage: Matthias Corvinus (1443-1490). Insecurity about his birth may explain much about the zenith of the palace at Visegrád. Its specific inspiration, though, surely resulted from the monarch's marriage to a young Italian beauty, Beatrice, daughter of the King of Naples.

Renaissance delight

One issue of this amorous union was an audacious refashioning of the earlier buildings into a majestic, square complex constructed around a colonnaded courtyard with suites of rooms worthy of the Arno valley. Now, almost everything has been rebuilt with great attention to archaeological detail. For purists it is a nightmare dwarfing Sir Arthur Evans' reconstruction of the Minoan palace at Knossos. Yet in this case, of course, there were written descriptions, some sketches, and plenty of parallels. Far from being vulgar, every effort has been made to retain the original colour scheme, and to furnish each room with the assistance of contemporary paintings.

Perhaps the most remarkable discoveries were the red 'marble' fountains. Dominating the quad of the main palace is a full-size replica in marble of the 'Hercules' fountain, remains of which (now restored from thousands of fragments) exists in the two-room museum. Made by a master imported from Italy (of course), this breathtaking work of art must have astonished central European

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more on studying the Middle Ages at the Central European University in Budapest, see medievalstudies.ceu.hu



LEFT The children's playground, paying homage to Visegrád's Renaissance man, King Matthias Corvinus.