



Noémi Beljak Pažinová*

Nitra

Ján Beljak**

Nitra

Radoslav Ragač***

Senec

The Royal Castle of Zvolen (Present-Day Pustý hrad) in the Time of the Crusades

Abstract

The site of Pustý hrad ("Deserted Castle") in Zvolen, central Slovakia, was originally the royal castle of Zvolen, constructed in the late twelfth century. Its most extensive building phases are associated with the prominent Árpáadian king Andrew II of Hungary. In 1217–1218, he served as a co-organizer and one of the leaders of the ultimately unsuccessful Fifth Crusade to the Holy Land. In the Hungarian context, this expedition represented a significant cultural phenomenon, and its impact was likely also manifested in Hungarian fortress architecture in the first half of the thirteenth century. Within this framework, particular attention is given to the residential tower of the Lower Castle at Pustý hrad, whose dimensions are highly atypical. Its design was probably inspired by contemporary large-scale Crusader fortifications that King Andrew II encountered during his crusading campaign.

Keywords: Slovakia, royal castle of Zvolen (Pustý hrad), thirteenth century, King Andrew II, Fifth Crusade, fortress architecture

Słowa kluczowe: Słowacja, zamek królewski Zvolen (Pustý hrad), XIII wiek, król Andrzej II, piąta krucjata, architektura obronna

* Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Department of Archaeology, Nitra, Slovakia, Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre, Katedra archeológie, Nitra, Slovensko, e-mail: nbpazinova@ukf.sk, ORCID: 0000-0001-9743-9789.

** Institute of Archaeology, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Nitra, Slovakia, Archeologický ústav SAV v. v. i., Nitra, Slovensko, e-mail: jan.beljak@savba.sk, ORCID: 0000-0002-7781-7313.

*** Nation's Memory Institute, Municipal Museum in Senec, Senec, Slovensko, Ústav pamäti národa, Mestské múzeum v Senci, Senec, Slovakia, e-mail: rragac@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-0806-5672.

Introduction

Present-day Pustý hrad (Deserted Castle) (Fig. 1), known in the Middle Ages as Zvolen Castle, was one of the most significant royal centers of the last members of the Árpád dynasty and a renowned royal hunting residence, situated amid forests. It consists of the Upper Castle, with an area of 3.5 hectares on the hilltop plateau, 571 m above sea level, and the Lower Castle, with an area of 0.7 hectares at 476 m above sea level.¹ The massive stone castle was built near the medieval settlement of Zvolen at the end of the twelfth century. Its principal phase of construction fell in the second half of the thirteenth century. The castle served as the administrative center of the vast Zvolen County. In the fourteenth century, the settlement gradually lost its fortified function, and this decline continued into the fifteenth century. The town of Zvolen enjoyed royal privileges from 1238 onward. The town and the castle were situated on a historic international trade route called “Magna Via,” which connected the central part of Hungary to Poland through the historical county of Zvolen.²



Fig. 1. Detail of the top of the Zvolen (Pustý hrad) Castle hill – Upper Castle (left) and Lower Castle (lower right). Photo by J. Beljak

Interest in research at the site has been evident since the eighteenth century.³ Pustý hrad Castle is now a national cultural monument and has been the subject

¹ J. Beljak, N. Beljak Pažinová, P. Maliniak, R. Ragač, M. Šimkovic, *Pustý hrad vo Zvolene. Výpoveď archeologických a historických prameňov*, VEDA, vydavateľstvo SAV, Nitra–Zvolen 2022; J. Beljak, N. Beljak Pažinová, B. Beláček, M. Golis, J. Hunka, A. Krištín, V. Kohút, P. Maliniak, M. Mordovin, M. S. Przybyla, D. Repka, M. Slámová, M. Šimkovic, B. Tóth, O. Žaár, *Pustý hrad vo Zvolene. Dolný hrad 2009–2014*, UKF v Nitre, Archeologický ústav SAV, Zvolen–Nitra 2014.

² P. Maliniak, *Človek a krajina Zvolenskej kotliny v stredoveku*, UMB v Banskej Bystrici, Banská Bystrica 2009, fig. 1a.

³ J. Beljak, P. Maliniak, N. Pažinová, *Zvolenský Pustý hrad vo svetle archeologického bádania (od amatérskych výkopov až po začiatok systematického výskumu)*, “Archaeologia historica” 2011, vol. 36, pp. 265–278.

of archaeological investigations since 1992. Until 2008, Václav Hanuliak directed the first systematic archaeological research conducted on the site and was also involved in its early restoration.⁴ Since 2009, research and restoration have been coordinated by Ján Beljak. The long-term aims of this work include the regular publication of the results of seasonal archaeological research and the promotion of awareness of both archaeological heritage⁵ and interdisciplinary research.⁶

Historical Contexts

Zvolen was the center of a significant private domain of the royal Árpád dynasty, known as the Zvolen Forest. Its first mention appears in the famous Hungarian chronicle *Gesta Hungarorum*, also known as the “Anonymus Chronicle,” which dates to the late twelfth century. The extensive royal castle of Zvolen (Pustý hrad) is situated on a strategically advantageous elevation that controlled a crucial route leading through the Hron Valley and into the Zvolen Basin. This elevation has been inhabited since prehistoric times, and the castle’s perimeter fortifications were partially built on an older rampart. In the first third of the thirteenth century, Zvolen Castle also became the administrative seat of the newly established, extensive Zvolen Royal County (*comitatus*) in central Slovakia, extending from the town of Krupina in the south to the High Tatras in the north, on the Polish border.⁷

Given its considerable size, Zvolen Castle undoubtedly also served as a refuge for the surrounding population in times of danger. At the same time, near the hill above the future town of Zvolen, another royal mansion of the Árpád dynasty, referred to as the “royal house,” was constructed in the early thirteenth century and is indirectly attested in written sources from 1246 onward. This complex also included the Romanesque Church of St. Nicholas and the institution known as the royal chapel (Lat. *capella regia*), which exercised extensive parish jurisdiction.⁸

⁴ N. Beljak Pažinová, J. Beljak, *Benefits of the Long-Term Research into the Pustý Hrad Castle (Deserted Castle) in Zvolen and its Prospects for the Future*, “Archaeologia historica” 2020, vol. 45, pp. 941–956.

⁵ See also N. Beljak Pažinová, R. Ragač, J. Beljak, *Expressions of Belief at the Pustý Hrad Castle in Zvolen in the Light of Small Metal Finds*, “Archaeologia historica” 2021, vol. 46, pp. 397–412; N. Beljak Pažinová, J. Beljak, P. Bačík, S. Milovská, B. Lalinská-Voleková, J. Štubňa, *Archaeometric Study of a Unique Medieval Golden Ring with a Reddish-Purple Sapphire (Corundum) Gemstone from the Zvolen Castle, Slovakia*, “Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports” 2025, vol. 66, pp. 105–203; M. Čierny, N. Beljak Pažinová, J. Beljak, *Zdobená kostená rukoväť z Pustého hradu vo Zvolene*, “Študijné zvesti AÚ SAV” 2020, vol. 67, pp. 371–382.

⁶ M. Slámová, N. Beljak Pažinová, I. Belčáková, J. Beljak, P. Maliniak, *Identification of Historical Trackways in Forests Using Contextual Geospatial Analyses*, “Archaeological Prospection” 2022, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 135–152.

⁷ R. Ragač, *Zvolenské mestské privilégia*, [in:] *Stredné Slovensko v stredoveku. Vývoj osídlenia regiónu pred udelením mestských privilégií Zvolenu*, eds. N. Beljak Pažinová, Z. Borzová, Mesto Zvolen, Zvolen 2018, pp. 202–203.

⁸ M. Chmelík, *Fara svätého Mikuláša*, [in:] *Zvolen 1238–2008. Zborník príspevkov z vedeckých konferencií*, eds. J. Ragačová, P. Maliniak, Mesto Zvolen, Zvolen 2008, pp. 32–37.

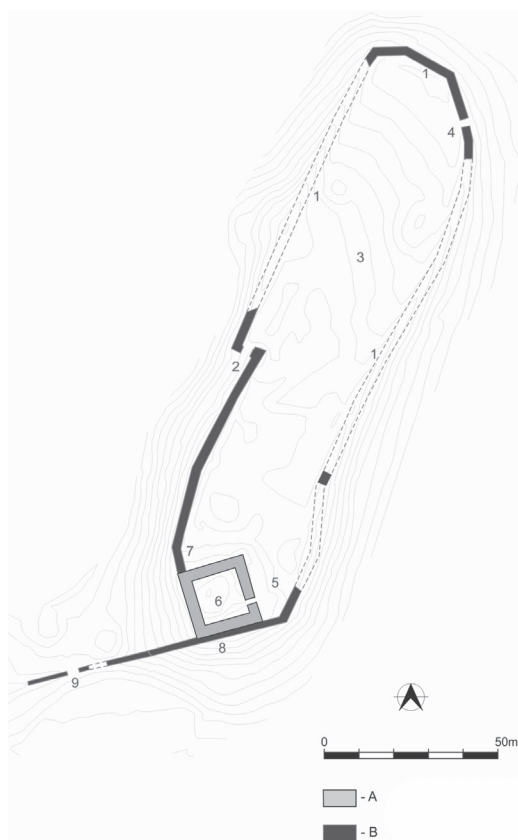


Fig. 2. Lower Castle of the royal Zvolen Castle. Construction phases and description of features. 1 – curtain wall; 2 – entrance gate; 3 – courtyard; 4 – sallyport; 5 – log building in front of the entrance to the tower ground floor; 6 – residential tower; 7 – utility buildings; 8 – advanced fortified wall; 9 – gate in the fortified wall in an advanced position. A – first half of the thirteenth century; B – mid-thirteenth century. Authors: J. Beljak, M. Šimkovic

Source: J. Beljak, N. Beljak Pažinová, P. Maliniak, R. Ragač, M. Šimkovic, *Pustý..., Nitra–Zvolen 2022*, Fig. 52.

The origins of Zvolen Castle are connected with the reign of the Hungarian ruler Béla III, who ruled from 1172 to 1196. Numerous economic, military, and administrative innovations characterized Hungarian society during his reign. In Hungary, new expressions of court culture, including heraldry, also became established during this period. The future king grew up at the Byzantine court and harbored the highest political ambitions. He was given the Greek name Alexios, and, as the designated heir to the throne, Emperor Manuel I Komnenos conferred on him the title of despot. Béla and his fiancée were recognized as the legitimate successors to the imperial throne in 1165. Following the birth of the emperor's son, Manuel revoked Béla's title and, in 1168, arranged his marriage to Agnes of Antioch, the daughter of the notable French crusader Prince Rainald of Châtillon.⁹ Two years after the death of his wife in 1184, the king married Margaret of France, the widow of Henry the Young King of England and the daughter of King Louis VII of France. Through his wives, he was culturally connected to both French and eastern Medi-

terranean crusader cultures.¹⁰ After years of imprisonment, the king's brother Géza took part in Emperor Frederick Barbarossa's Third Crusade to the Holy Land, which passed through Hungary in the course of these negotiations.¹¹

⁹ H. E. Mayer, *Dějiny křížových výprav*, Argo, Praha 2013, pp. 139–142, 156, 158, 160–163, 173–174.

¹⁰ J. Louda, M. Maclagan, *Lines of Succession: Heraldry of the Royal Families of Europe*, Macdonald, London 1991, pp. 173–177.

¹¹ H. E. Mayer, *Dějiny...*, pp. 165–182.

During this time, the Knights Templar were also active in Hungary, with their properties concentrated primarily in the southern regions of the kingdom.¹²

Another significant construction phase (Fig. 2) in the history of Pustý hrad Castle is associated with the son of King Béla III, King Andrew II of Hungary, who ruled from 1205 to 1235. All three of his wives came from the highest ranks of the European aristocracy. His reign also saw the issuance of the important Golden Bull of 1222, which strengthened the position of the Hungarian nobility and the church. King Andrew II's first recorded visit to Zvolen (*Zowolun*) dates to 1214. The castle complex underwent considerable renovations during his reign. A new residential tower was built at the Lower Castle, primarily as a royal residence (Fig. 3). The Upper Castle also underwent extensive expansion, including a new outer wall and an entrance tower, and served as the seat of the Zvolen Royal County. In 1222, the royal count of Zvolen, later known as *comes de Zvolun*, was first attested.¹³



Fig. 3. Lower Castle of the royal Zvolen Castle. Residential tower after general conservation. View of the northern (entrance) wall. The entrance to the ground floor is visible, with a window seat above it (on the first floor), and an entrance to the first floor to the right. Photo by J. Beljak

King Andrew II had strong ties to the Holy Land and the crusader world on several levels. In 1211, the Teutonic Knights were settled in Hungary by the

¹² G. Dreska, *A templomos rend Magyarországon*, "Vigília" 1999, no. 2, pp. 109–112.

¹³ I. Szentpétery, *Az Árpád-házi királyok okleveleinek kritikai jegyzéke. Regesta regum stirpis Arpadianae critico diplomatica. I. kötet 1. füzet*, Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, Budapest 1923, p. 97 / No. 296; *Collectio Diplomatica Hungarica*, Diplomatic Photo Collection, Budapest, ref. no. 238 568.

king and were granted extensive feudal holdings in Transylvania in exchange for military support against the nomadic Cumans.¹⁴ According to the council's decision, Andrew II was one of the leaders and co-organizers of the unsuccessful crusade to the Holy Land in 1217–1218. One of the aims of the crusade was the recovery of Jerusalem.¹⁵ The king's other aspirations concerned the vacant Byzantine throne of the Latin Empire, which also interested him because of familial ties.

The Fifth Crusade was an important cultural phenomenon in Hungary, despite its limited military outcomes. In addition to the king's acquisition of relics and numerous imports from the East, such as the Monomachos Crown, the crusade contributed to the development and rapid dissemination of heraldry¹⁶ in Hungary, which was already well established in Western Europe. The double cross of Byzantine origin¹⁷ became one of the dynastic emblems of Hungary. Contemporary Hungarian coins feature state emblems from this period alongside stone buildings, typically characterized by rising towers.¹⁸

The possible influence of the crusade on domestic architecture has so far received less scholarly attention. King Andrew II's stay in the crusader world, which depended for survival on effective fortification, certainly had consequences. In this context, it is also necessary to consider not only the Romanesque rotunda of St. Margaret of Antioch in Šivetice, Slovakia, but also innovations in Hungarian fortification architecture from the first half of the thirteenth century. What lay behind the unusual tower at the Lower Castle of Pustý hrad in Zvolen? One possible answer can be found in the large contemporary strongholds that the monarch encountered directly during the crusade.

The Lower Castle in Zvolen and its Residential Tower

The residential tower occupied the lower part of the castle hill, approximately 100 meters below the tower of the county castle at the Upper Castle. It dominates the Lower Castle¹⁹ and, with a ground plan measuring 19.9 × 19.9 meters and walls 3.3 meters thick at the level of the lower story (Fig. 3), ranks among the most prominent residential castle towers in medieval Hungary.

The interior of the residential tower was divided into four to five stories (Fig. 4); the lowest, with an interior area of almost 180 m² (13.3 × 13.3 meters), was the

¹⁴ L. Pósan, *A Német Lovagrend megítélése Magyarországon II. András korában*, "Történelmi Szemle" 2016, vol. 3, pp. 465–474.

¹⁵ H. E. Mayer, *Déjiny...*, pp. 245–252.

¹⁶ I. Takács, *Az Árpád-házi királyok pecsétjei. Royal Seals of the Árpád Dynasty*, Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, Budapest 2012, pp. 112–114; L. B. Kumorovitz, *A magyar címer kettős keresztje*, "Turul" 1941, vol. 3–4, pp. 45–62; Idem, *A magyar pecséthasználat története a középkorban*, Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, Budapest 1993.

¹⁷ M. Hroch, V. Hrochová, *Křižáci ve Svaté Zemi*, Mladá fronta, Praha 1996, pp. 197–222.

¹⁸ L. Huszár, *Münzkatalog Ungarn von 1000 bis heute*, Battenberg, München 1979, nos. 215–216, 228–229, 264–265, 279–280.

¹⁹ J. Beljak et al., *Pustý hrad...*, pp. 126–137.

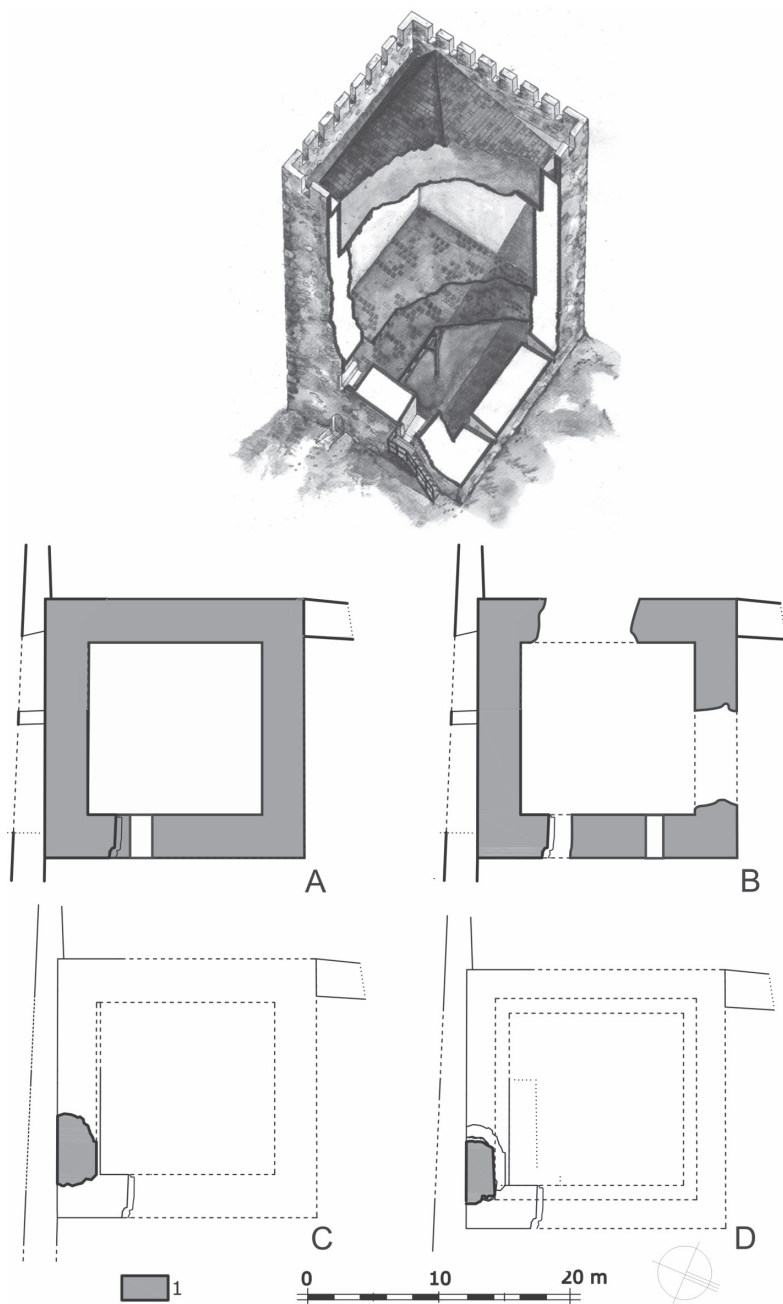


Fig. 4. Top: Possible design of the Lower Castle's residential tower. Without scale. Author: M. Šimkovic. Bottom: Cross-sections of individual stories of the Lower Castle's residential tower: A – first story, B – second story, C – third story, D – fourth story; 1 – masonry of the residential tower. Authors: J. Beljak, M. Šimkovic

Source: J. Beljak et al., *Pustý hrad...*, Zvolen–Nitra 2014, Fig. 72, 195.

best preserved. It was entered directly from the courtyard and was probably used for storage. The second story served as a residential space and was reached through the main elevated entrance from the courtyard. A fragment of a window with the remains of a side seat was uncovered directly above the entrance to the lower story. The other two stories survive only in fragmentary form.

The third level was probably the building's principal residential and ceremonial space. The upper part of the preserved southern wall of the residential tower indicates the addition of a further structure to the original tower, perhaps built around the middle of the thirteenth century, after the building was damaged during the Mongol invasion of 1241. This addition had walls 2.2 meters thick. The substantial defenses of the Lower Castle likewise date to this period, the mid-thirteenth century. The junction between the curtain wall and the tower indicates that the residential tower was originally built as a freestanding structure, with defenses added later. Analysis of the archaeological contexts and artifacts also confirms that the tower of the Lower Castle was constructed in the first decades of the thirteenth century. Toiletry items and personal artifacts from the site point to the higher social status of castle residents. These finds include various metal objects, such as decorated buckles of rectangular, square, or more complex form, made of iron, as well as more luxurious examples in brass and bronze. Other notable finds include parts of knightly belts, bronze fittings with heraldic figures, strap ends, and various decorative metal plates attached to the main strap.²⁰ Together with weapons and riding equipment, these artifacts served as markers of elite status.

The residential tower at the Lower Castle began to lose importance at the beginning of the fourteenth century. The upper destruction layer dates to 1306, when the Anjou army occupied the castle during the struggles for the Hungarian throne. By the mid-fourteenth century at the latest, the site already had the character of a ruin. The overlying debris layers, probably formed after the destruction of the tower's original residential fabric, yielded only an assemblage of later High Medieval pottery dating from the second half of the fourteenth century to the early fifteenth century.

The courtyard of the Lower Castle, measuring 183 × 38 meters, lay next to the residential tower and was enclosed around the mid-thirteenth century by a massive stone rampart (Fig. 5). Up to 2.5 meters thick, it was built in its straight sections founded directly on bedrock. The courtyard's principal entrance was formed by the main gate with a portal approximately 3 meters wide, built of large dressed stone blocks. Its massive jambs, up to 2 meters thick, were fitted with double-leaf doors. These turned on vertical pivots set into the inner faces of the jambs in sockets cut into the stone. Beyond the gate was a very short corridor, 1.5 meters in length, which may have been vaulted.

The main gate of the Lower Castle was complemented by a smaller sally port in the northern half of the courtyard, 1.2 meters wide and retaining a sill stone on the outer side. The defenses of the Lower Castle also included an almost

²⁰ N. Beljak Pažinová, R. Ragač, J. Beljak, *Expressions...*, pp. 397–412.



Fig. 5. Lower Castle of the royal Zvolen Castle. View from the north. In the foreground – the northern line of the massive rampart during restoration in 2017. In the background – the residential tower. Photo by J. Beljak

200-meter-long wall, 1.8 meters thick, extending toward the Upper Castle and known as the “connecting wall.” In the saddle below the tower of the Lower Castle, where this wall crossed the access route, there was an outer gate with a 2.8-meter-wide portal framed by dressed stone jambs.

A document issued by King Béla IV²¹ in 1255 is a valuable source for the construction activity at Zvolen Castle. Zvolen’s royal stonemason, Master Bertold, requested that the king grant him the property of Dubové, situated between the village of Bacúrov and the town of Banská Štiavnica, near Zvolen. In view of his diligence and loyalty in building the royal castles (*in faciendo opere castrorum nostrorum*), the king released Dubové from the jurisdiction of Zvolen Castle and granted it to Bertold as a hereditary holding.²² Bertold’s activity in royal service is associated primarily with the construction of the Lower Castle rampart and probably also with the reconstruction and expansion of the residential tower after the Mongol invasion of 1241. The strengthening of the defenses was likewise reinforced by the introduction of mechanical weapons with a longer range than bows.

²¹ Zvolen Castle (Pustý hrad) is considered the main royal seat of King Béla IV (1235–1270).

²² J. Beljak et al., *Pustý hrad...*, p. 40; *Codex diplomaticus et epistolaris Slovaciae II*, ed. R. Marsina, Obzor, Bratislava 1971–1987, p. 333, ref. no. 480.

Discussion

The architecture of the residential tower in the Lower Castle of Zvolen suggests that its builder, most likely employed by King Andrew II of Hungary, was influenced by large rectangular donjons. However, no primary source survives for the construction of the tower or for the model on which it was based. The architecture of the Lower Castle tower is closely comparable to that of prismatic residential towers such as the tower at Serednje (Šeredné, present-day Ukraine; 18.5 × 18.5 meters) and the tower at Bratislava, Slovakia²³ (23 × 23 meters). Other analogous examples of massive residential towers include the hexagonal Solomon's Tower of the Lower Castle in Visegrád, Hungary (30 × 17 meters), the so-called White Tower at Esztergom Castle (16 × 13 meters), and the circular tower of Spiš Castle²⁴ (23 meters in diameter).

Particularly noteworthy in this context is the former crusader stronghold of Kolossi Castle,²⁵ located on the southwestern edge of the village of Kolossi on the island of Cyprus, whose tower matches the residential tower of the Lower Castle at Zvolen in size. It was first erected in the thirteenth century and subsequently rebuilt in the fifteenth century, assuming the form it retains today.

King Andrew II of Hungary encountered various styles of fortification in the Eastern Mediterranean, including crusader fortresses in the Levant, during the first phase of the Fifth Crusade (1217–1218), in which he played a leading role. He spent only three months in the Holy Land but visited the castles of Margat (Marqab) and Krak des Chevaliers (Ḥiṣn al-Akrād). Although the Fifth Crusade itself did not involve a significant building campaign, contact between the Hungarian court and crusader fortifications, together with the broader context of the period, may have influenced Hungarian fortress design in certain respects. The crusade facilitated the transmission of military architectural knowledge and techniques, including features such as concentric walls, improved gatehouses, and enhanced battlements. These foreign elements were gradually adapted to local needs and conditions. The need for stronger defenses amid regional conflicts and emerging threats, including Mongol invasions later in the century, encouraged castle building and modernization, as well as the adoption of new features in Hungarian castles. Although direct documentary evidence linking the Fifth Crusade specifically to Hungarian fortress construction remains limited, some stylistic similarities and architectural parallels can be observed between castles built or upgraded in the early thirteenth century and crusader fortifications

²³ T. Štefanovičová, A. Fiala, *Stavebný vývoj Bratislavského hradu od 11. do 13. storočia*, "Zborník Filozofickej Fakulty Univ. Komenského, Historica" 1965, vol. 16, pp. 77–110.

²⁴ A. Fiala, A. Vallašek, G. Lukáč, *Spišský hrad*, Osveta, Martin 1988.

²⁵ E. Ch. Aristidou, *Kolossi Castle Through the Centuries*, Aristidou, Nicosia 1983; P. Edbury, *The Kingdom of Cyprus and the Crusades 1191–1374*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, pp. 4, 66–67; S. Spiteri, *Fortresses of the Knights*, Book Distributors Limited, University of Michigan 1991, p. 104.

abroad.²⁶ One example is the massive residential tower at the Lower Castle at Zvolen in Central Slovakia.

Conclusion

Zvolen Castle, situated in the Zvolen Forest in central Slovakia, was a significant private domain of the Hungarian royal Árpád dynasty in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Built on a strategically advantageous elevation south of the medieval town of Zvolen, the castle served as a refuge for the local population and became the administrative seat of the newly established Royal County of Zvolen. Its origins are most likely connected with the reign of the Hungarian ruler Béla III, who ruled from 1172 to 1196, and that of his son, King Andrew II, who ruled from 1205 to 1235. During Andrew's reign, the castle complex underwent considerable renovation, including the construction of a massive residential tower at the Lower Castle. With a ground plan of 19.9 × 19.9 meters and walls 3.3 meters thick, the tower was one of the most imposing residential towers in medieval Hungary. It was built in the first decades of the thirteenth century, and associated artifacts indicate the elevated status of its occupants.

The architectural design of the Lower Castle tower was probably inspired by large rectangular donjons, for which there are only a few parallels in Slovakia and Hungary. The structure may also have been influenced by King Andrew II's contact with crusader fortifications. During the first phase of the Fifth Crusade (1217–1218), he encountered various forms of fortification in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Despite the lack of direct evidence, Hungarian participation in the Fifth Crusade likely facilitated the transmission of military architectural knowledge and may, in turn, have influenced the design and construction of fortifications in medieval Hungary during the Árpád period. What is clear, however, is that the Fifth Crusade was an important cultural phenomenon in the Hungarian context, influencing both architecture and the development of heraldry in Hungary.

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