

Development of the Building of Castle Bystrica (Authors: M. Turošík, J. Maloney 2011)

The origin of the settlement on the cliff is not clear. Remains of the Puchov and Great Moravian culture, pieces of ceramics, and Celtics coins, have been found on the hill so the precise dating of the establishment is unclear. Because there has not been any proper archeological research, this question remains un-answered. Therefore, our assumptions are based on the latest, partial, investigation done by Mr. Martin Bona and from the remaining, visible parts of the castle.

Uncertain Beginning

Throughout its history, the Vah valley has been an important place in the security and welfare of our country which had to be protected. The large rock on one of bank of the river was an important feature in the defense of the valley.

The earliest proven fortifications date from the 1st century BC. The 'new' castle was built on the foundations of this earlier settlement.

According to the historian Mrs. D. Menclova, the Eastern, and highest part of the complex is the oldest part of the castle. This residential section has not yet been properly identified by archeological research, but from its location we can assume it functioned as a keep (donjon).

Second half of the 13th century

The castle gained its present area in the second half of the 13th century. This century was marked by the Tatar siege, which devastated the kingdom.

*"Mongol depredations lasting nearly a year and produced devastation unparalleled in Europe for centuries. According to contemporary Austrian monks, "No country had suffered such a tragedy since the birth of Christ." Damages caused by sword and fire were followed by famine and epidemics. A contemporary chronicler noted that "the calamity of bitter starvation had decimated the Hungarian people as effectively as Tatar's heartless butchery."*¹

This disaster proved the ineffectiveness of most of the old Hungarian defence system. There were though, two features which had proved valuable and effective: close combat and stone fortification. As a consequence of this king Bela IV supported the building of fortresses along the country.

*"Based on the experiences of the occupation, he began to grant estates to his partisans, but simultaneously he also obliged them to build up fortresses there, because only fortresses could resist the conquerors. He also encouraged the towns to protect themselves by erecting walls."*²

¹SUGAR P., HANAK P., FRANK T., *A History of Hungary*. 1.edition.Indiana: Indiana University press, 1990. 416 p. ISBN 0-253-35578-8. s 27.

² **Bela IV**, In *en.wikipedia.org*,. [online] [cit.2011-03-01] available on internet: <https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/B%C3%A9la_IV_of_Hungary>.

Castle Bystrica was not an exception. In this era the curtain wall, substituting older ones was built. The new wall varied in width from 1.75m to 1.95m. In the clearly differentiated upper part of the wall, there was a walkway topped by crenellation.

During this phase of building of the castle, the main entrance gate, located on the Northern side of the castle, together with the nearby square tower was built.

14th Century

After the death of Máté Csák the castle becomes the centre of the small comitatus "*comites Biztrichienses*" (Hungarian administrative unit), which must have influenced the appearance of the castle as it was intended to demonstrate the power of the king.

For this reason, on the Western, and more accessible side of the castle, a new entrance tower was built. The Northern, Early Gothic, gate was immured. The method of laying out the path leading to the gate is unknown, but it probably copied the shape of the curtain wall along the Northern part and from that point it stretched to the new gate.

End of the 14th century and 15th century

During this period the fortification was again raised, in some places, as by much as 1.5m. Along with these improvements, the main entrance gate had been upgraded with a portcullis. Improving the security of the castle was considered vital because of the growing danger of a Hussite invasion.

*"The major Hussite methods of warfare were creative adaptations to circumstances... the Hussites rapidly adopted the gunpowder weapons, which had proved so successful for the Turks, and which were beginning to enter the European military arsenal.."*³

16th Century

During this century, the castle was already in the possession of the powerful Podmanicky family, who ordered many reconstructions to enhance the safety of their 'eagle's nest'.

Medieval crenellation had been rebuilt to give wider and rounder merlons to be more efficient in deploying hand-held weapons. On the Northern side, in the place of the immured gothic gate, a small wicket gate was built for use in emergencies. For protection of the escape gate a bartizan (*Echaugette*) was built on the nearby wall.

³ H.L.C., Agnew, *The Czechs and the lands of the Bohemian crown*. City: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 2004. 441 p., ISBN 9780817944926, p.1851

During this same period a contemporary gate was rebuilt, with a great solid dyke built in the Northern part of the castle to allow building of the new residential wing. These improvements are probably connected with the reconstruction after the fire that broke out in 1543.

End of the 16th century and 17th century

Throughout this period the main entrance was moved back to the Northern side which was not easily accessible. The old gate was immured leaving only a small gate to a passageway stretching above the dry moat.

To the East, a new gate was added to the earlier Gothic one

The newer gate was protected by a barbican. It was placed further to the East, out of the of the cannon's field of fire. Further protective feature a drawbridge with a battered plinth were also added.

*"the base of a wall being provided with a widening slope, both to strengthen the bottom of the wall against undermining and to provide a ricochet surface for objects such as rocks being dropped down from machicolations that would bounce off horizontally and zap the attackers."*⁴

Among other improvements was the vaulting of the 1st floor of the Eastern residential complex. This was probably done by Gaspar Seredi, because of the inscription "*fiery fecit*" from 1563, observed and noted by Alojz Mednansky.

17th Century

This century is connected with the house of Balassa. It was a difficult, turbulent period in the history of the region. Reflecting this instability, the castle's defenses were improved to allow the castle to be used for secure storage of valuables, However we have to add that this was the stage when castle started to deteriorate. In the engraving by Bouttats, this is represented by circling crows above the castle.

This period is notable for the Kuruc rebellion, in which nobles from the castle also took part. In spite of this, the town was given more and more privileges which differentiated it from others in the region.

There were further additions to the residential part to the west. On the northern part a decorative bay window was built, presumably as a display of wealth and power. The old Northern Gothic tower

⁴ *Glossary of the Parts of a Fortification*, In *quashnick.net*,. [online] [cit.2008-03-15] available on internet: <<http://quashnick.net/index.php?itemid=212>>.

was reconstructed; two floors were merged to form a prison. A fifth floor was added to its construction.

On the Northern side of the castle, a rampart terreplein was built to provide a bastion securing the old southern entrance.

The most recent renaissance constructions are connected again with the need for enlarging the capacity of the castle due to the Turkish invasion. The North-Eastern part of the residential palace was enlarged by the addition of two floors.

19th Century

A strong earthquake struck the country on 15th February 1858 at 8. pm destroying the tower of the prison.

20th and 21st Century

In 1930's, missing parts of the face of the barbican were replaced, together with vaulting of the second floor windows. The Foundations of the curtain wall, the Northern tower and Western bastion were repaired.

In 2008 the voluntary organization Zdruzenie Hradu Bystrica , was established. The whole area of the castle and access road was cleared of plants and trees. The face of the Northern mural was replaced. The Northern tower's quoin was replaced. In 2010 intrados together with the missing wall was added to the Northern tower. Bushes which had taken root were cleared away from the top of the tower . In 2011 the Northern towers entrance and interior vault were reconstructed. Interior of the tower was secured by new entrance door. Southern entrance tower was cleared of clay and fallen material. Its entrances were reconstructed.