

THE BETHLEN CASTLE IN CRIȘ (MUREȘ COUNTY): OVERVIEW OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS AND A SHORT REVISITED EARLY HISTORY OF THE ESTATE¹

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Abstract: The present article discusses the early history and evolution of the Bethlen castle in Criș and the constructions undertaken by the members of the Bethlen family, based on the preserved written sources and the results of the archaeological investigations. The literature connects the very first constructions in Criș to Mark Bethlen; however, the written sources and the excavations indicate the existence of a much earlier settlement, dated approximately to the 12th and 13th centuries, about which little is known. Written documents mentioned an already existing manor house in 1435, and in 1482 the sons of Mark Bethlen divided their father's house between themselves. Based on the written sources, in the beginning of the 16th century there already existed three manor houses in Criș, one that belonged to Gregory Bethlen, another to Bernard Bethlen, and a third (built from wood) to Nicholas Bethlen. For now, the re-evaluation of the results of the older and newer excavation results is crucial in understanding the early constructions, which are hard to identify in the archaeological record since the site of the castle had been continuously used through the ages.

Rezumat: Articolul discută istoria timpurie a castelului, evoluția acestuia și diferitele faze de construcții timpurii ale membrilor familiei Bethlen printr-o scurtă analiză a surselor scrise și prezentarea rezultatelor săpăturilor arheologice vechi și noi. În literatura de specialitate primele construcții de la Criș au fost atribuite lui Mark Bethlen, însă din izvoarele scrise și din săpăturile arheologice reiese clar existența unei așezări mult mai timpurii, care se poate data în secolele XII-XIII. Despre această așezare știm foarte puține, sursele scrise nu conțin informații despre aceasta. Mai târziu, în anul 1435 este deja amintită o curie/casă existentă, iar din 1482 aflăm de o împărțire de case în Criș între fiii lui Mark Bethlen. Conform surselor documentare, la începutul secolului al XVI-lea existau deja trei curii/case în Criș, una era a lui Grigore Bethlen, alta a lui Bernard Bethlen și a treia (construită din lemn) a lui Nicolaus Bethlen. Aceste case și construcții timpurii sunt greu de identificat în săpăturile arheologice din mai multe motive. Unul dintre aceste motive este folosirea constantă a terenului castelului până în zilele noastre; un alt motiv este distrugerea contextelor și a straturilor arheologice datorită reconstrucțiilor masive de-a lungul timpului (cele din secolul al XVII-lea dar și din anii 1970). Un al treilea motiv implică reinterpretarea rezultatelor săpăturilor vechi în lumina rezultatelor noi, dar și analiza materialului arheologic rezultat din cercetările arheologice vechi și noi. Până acum rezultatele arheologice au fost corelate numai cu studiul arhitectural și de istoria artei (și acestea parțial), însă materialul arheologic a fost neglijat în totalitate.

The present study aims to offer a short and revised early history of the castle in the framework of the estate, as well as to provide a detailed insight into the results of the archaeological excavations that took place at the site of the castle over the years. Since the history of the castle, which is closely bound to the Bethlen family, has been the subject of several studies, reports, and books,² we shall discuss mainly its lesser-known parts and the issues which in the light of the newest archaeological investigations need to be reconsidered. The first part of the study is based on the written records and deals with the early owners of the castle and the estate, and the existence of several manor houses on the site of today's castle. The second part focuses on a detailed presentation of the results of the excavations and proposes new questions and issues to be analysed.

The earliest authentic data on the founder of the Bethlen family comes from 1269, when the chapter from Alba Iulia confirmed that *comes Appa* bought lands in *Dycha* (Cireșoiaia, Magyardécse).³ The earliest mentioning of Criș (Keresd) in the written sources was preserved from a charter issued in 1305.⁴ The charter, issued by the chapter in Alba Iulia, confirmed that the sons of Apa (circa 1258-1270), *comes* Gergely and his brother Jakab, as well as Gergely, the son of their brother Miklós, after a long litigation, had divided their Transylvanian estates. According to this division Gergely (son of Miklós) received Mălâncrav (Almakerék),

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² B. Nagy 1970; Kovács 2003, pp. 140-142; Rusu 2005.

³ Jakó 1997, p. 220; MNL DL 62674 (archives of the Bethlen family).

⁴ Jakó 2004, pp. 48-49, transcribed in the charter from 26 January 1560 issued by János Zsigmond, see under: MNL DL 1688, the original was allegedly in the archives of the Bethlen family.