

THE BETHLEN CASTLE IN BOIU-ȚOPA*

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Abstract: The Bethlen castle in Boiu-Țopa, built at the beginning of the seventeenth century, extended and reconditioned during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the Bethlen family (its Balasz-Blasius branch), is today in a state of ruin. Valuable fragments from the castle, important for the history of Transylvanian art and architecture (sculptured stone window-frames of Renaissance influence, a stone inscription with the Bethlen coat of arms, ornamental fragments of stucco and plaster) have disappeared gradually during the past twenty years because of improper use and dereliction.

The castle ruinous state of preservation allowed us to identify a large number of finished limestone blocks, *ashlar* (ca. 45 items), with similar dimensions, embedded in the castle masonry. Following this remark, we present the hypothesis that these blocks represent Roman lithic fragments (*spolia*) from a camp located in the vicinity of the castle. The usage of Roman lithic fragments from Roman ruins for the edification of noble residences was a practice often met in the period of sixteenth-eighteenth century in Transylvania. Moreover, the analysis of *spolia* included in noble residences can contribute with precious information regarding the 'migration' of antiquities in Transylvania.

The present paper shows aspects related to the history and architecture of this noble residence together with an inventory of visible limestone fragments. Seven items among the *spolia* are presented in more detail; they have sculpted profiles and finished sides, and are accessible for research.

Rezumat: Castelul Bethlen din Boiu-Țopa, edificat la început de secol 17, extins și recondiționat pe parcursul secolelor 18 și 19 de familia Bethlen (ramura Balasz-Blasius), este astăzi în stadiu de ruină. Elemente valoroase pentru istoria artei și arhitecturii din Transilvania (ancadramente sculptate din piatră de influență renașcentistă, *pisania* castelului – o piesă de piatră cu inscripție și blazonul familiei Bethlen – fragmente ornamentale din stucatură sau tencuială) au dispărut treptat în ultimii douăzeci de ani în urma unei utilizării abuzive și a abandonului.

Starea de conservare la nivel de ruină a castelului ne-a permis să identificăm un număr mare de pietre calcaroase (ca. 45 de piese) cu fețe prelucrate și de dimensiuni comparabile, înglobate în zidăria de cărămidă a castelului. Pe baza acestei observații, avansăm ipoteza utilizării în construcția castelului a unor piese de arhitectură romană (*spolia*) dintr-un castru roman aflat în apropierea castelului. Folosirea fragmentelor litice romane din structuri ruinate la edificarea reședințelor nobiliare era o practică întâlnită adesea în perioada secolelor 16-18 în Transilvania. Astfel, analiza spoliilor înglobate în reședințele nobiliare poate aduce informații prețioase privind „migrarea” antichităților în Transilvania.

Lucrarea prezintă aspecte legate de istoria și arhitectura acestei reședințe nobiliare împreună cu inventarierea fragmentelor de piatră calcaroasă vizibile în structura zidăriei de cărămidă. De asemenea, un număr de 7 piese din cadrul spoliilor sunt prezentate mai detaliat. Acestea prezintă profile sculptate și fațete finisate, fiind accesibile studiului.

The Bethlen castle is located close to the city of Sighișoara, on the banks of River Târnava, in the vicinity of the villages of Boiu and Țopa.¹ The complex consisted of a rectangular fortified precinct with four towers in the corners and a noble residence in the middle (Fig. 1). The building has a prismatic volume, defined by the steep roof of the central body, framed on its four corners by the pyramidal roofs of the polygonal towers (Figs. 2, 3). The precinct is strengthened by corner towers: three are pentagonal, while the other is square (the one in the south-western corner), all covered with pyramidal roofs as well.

The building of the castle has been preserved until today as a ruin, while only two of the defence towers have survived from the fortified precinct (Fig. 4).

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¹ The location of the castle outside the settlements of Boiu and Țopa lead to certain confusion in the nomination of the settlement it belongs to. In the nineteenth century, once the noble domain was divided between two heirs, a smaller *manor house* was built in the village of Boiu, called the *Boiu Court*; thus the castle became the *Țopa Court*. The buildings of the manor house in Boiu have been recently demolished, so the Țopa castle took over the name of both settlements: Boiu-Țopa (see Sârbu 2010, p. 32-36).

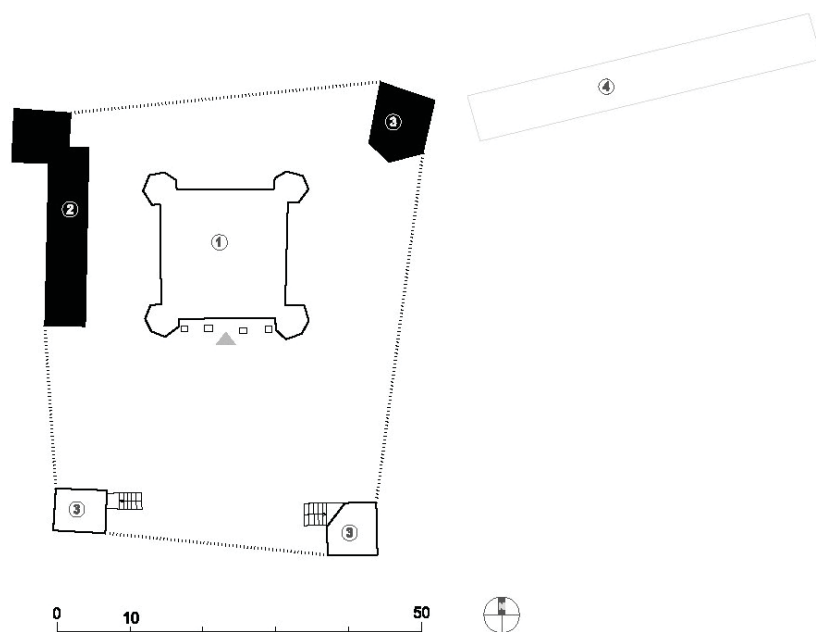


Fig. 1. Hypothetic configuration of the noble residence complex (interpretation of survey, INP Archive; DMI Collection: 1948-1977).

the site: *István Dioszegi* from Cluj, dispatched in 1617 through the prince's permission to lead the building site in Boiu⁴ and *Elias Nicolai* from Sibiu.⁵ Their sculpted stone moulding are no longer preserved in the context of this building complex. One knows of Master Elias Nicolai's presence also on the site of the Bethlen castle in Criș⁶ where, parallel to the works of the second construction phase in Boiu, extension works were performed under the patronage of János Bethlen.

According to an inscription embedded in the eastern wall of the castle (today lost), the construction was finished in 1617. The inscription was placed there in 1675, once the renovation and extension phase of the complex was finished; Chancellor János Bethlen, Farkas Bethlen's son, was the patron of this latter phase.⁷ The extension works included the fortified ring around the castle with its four defensive towers⁸ and were performed in the presence and maybe with the contribution of Miklós Bethlen, János Bethlen's oldest son, trained in the art and technique of civil constructions in Utrecht and Leyda. His trips to Holland, England, Italy, France (where the castle of Chantilly made a great impression on him)⁹ prepared him for an important political career (princely councillor and imperial count), but also made him discover a leaning towards architecture. One of his contributions to the residence in Boiu was the creation of a dendrologic park with rare trees (of which an oak survives), organized, together with River Târnava, around the castle.¹⁰

A reconditioning of the castle and the demolition of the wall fortifying the precinct was completed

History

Farkas Bethlen (†1618) initiated the building of the noble residence complex in Boiu-Țopa in the beginning of the seventeenth century. The domain of Boiu was in the property of the Bethlen family, of its "Balasz-Blasius branch", since the sixteenth century.² Farkas, a noble from the high aristocracy, was a striking personality in the political and social life of the principality of Transylvania, holding important functions: captain of Gherla, supreme *comes* of the *Comitatus* of Târnava, general of the Transylvanian principality's army during the reign of Gabriel Bethlen, councillor to the prince, captain of the princely guard, etc.³

Thus, the building site opened in Boiu surpassed local capacity and influence; as proof, two great master stonemasons of the time worked on

² Sárbu 2010, p. 29.

³ Iosipescu *et al.* 2004, p. 71.

⁴ Kovács 2006, p. 129.

⁵ Kovács 2006, p. 130.

⁶ Sabău 2002, p. 18.

⁷ Postăvaru 1996.

⁸ Sárbu 2010, p. 37.

⁹ Bethlen 2004.

¹⁰ Sárbu 2010, p. 38.

by Sándor Bethlen during the nineteenth century.¹¹ No other modifications are known until the twentieth century when the residence became property of the Romanian state.¹²

The location of the complex in connection to River Târnava Mare changed during the period 1973-1975 when hydro-technical works aimed at regularizing the river; the two towers on the northern side of the precinct were demolished on that occasion, in order to make way to the new riverbed. Also, the abusive and inappropriate usage of the building between 1948 and 1977 - as offices and storage rooms -, and its eventual abandonment in 1977¹³ led to the roof collapsing during the winter of 1995.¹⁴ This accelerated the degradation of the castle towards its present state of ruin.¹⁵ The castle's masonry, severely damaged, and fragments of plaster and decorations were still preserved in 2009 together with the towers from the southern side of the precinct.

Description

The castle of Boiu-Țopa belongs to the compact shape type of noble residence, lacking an inner courtyard and surrounded by a fortified precinct, a model of groundplan layout common in Transylvania during the first half of the seventeenth century, under the influence of Italian architecture.¹⁶ Kovács András argues, nevertheless, that there is not sufficient data to decide with all certainty that the noble residential complex in Boiu-Țopa belongs to the regular bastion-type ground plan model introduced by Italian architects in Transylvania.¹⁷ In fact, in the absence of archive documentation (inventories, cartographic representations) or archaeological excavations, the configuration of the precinct remains on the level of a hypothesis (Fig. 1). The defensive character of the castle is marked by the presence of loop-holes at the ground floor of the towers and at the attic level of the castle. The castle was fortified with a sentry-walk at the attic level (similar to that of the castle in Miercurea Ciuc).¹⁸

The main access way to the building was located on the southern side, through the portico on the ground floor. Rooms on this floor were vaulted with brick groin vaults, with the exception of the towers where sail vaults were used, i.e. of the semi spherical cupola type. Rooms on the first floor were covered with plastered wooden ceilings (today lost).¹⁹

The picturesque element in the composition of the castle is the southern façade, with wide openings

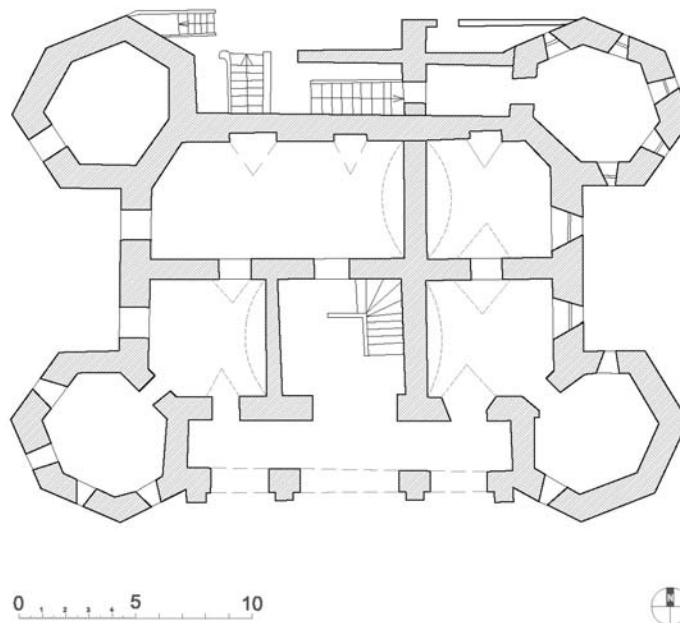


Fig. 2. Ground floor of the castle (drawing after survey, INP Archive; DMI Collection: 1948-1977).

¹¹ Buzogány 2002, p. 23, *apud.* Sârbu 2010, p. 39.

¹² Cf. Sârbu 2010, p. 39; INP Archive; Kovács 2006, pp. 129-130; Postăvaru 1996; Iosipescu *et al.* 2004.

¹³ INP Archive.

¹⁴ Postăvaru 1996.

¹⁵ In autumn 2010, after the article was already submitted, the main façade of the castle collapsed and a large part of the construction materials disappeared (Fig. 8). The information presented in this article follows the field research carried out during the period of 2008 and 2009.

¹⁶ Sebestyén, Sebestyén 1963, p. 38.

¹⁷ Kovács 2006, p. 100.

¹⁸ Kovács 2006, p. 129.

¹⁹ INP Archive.

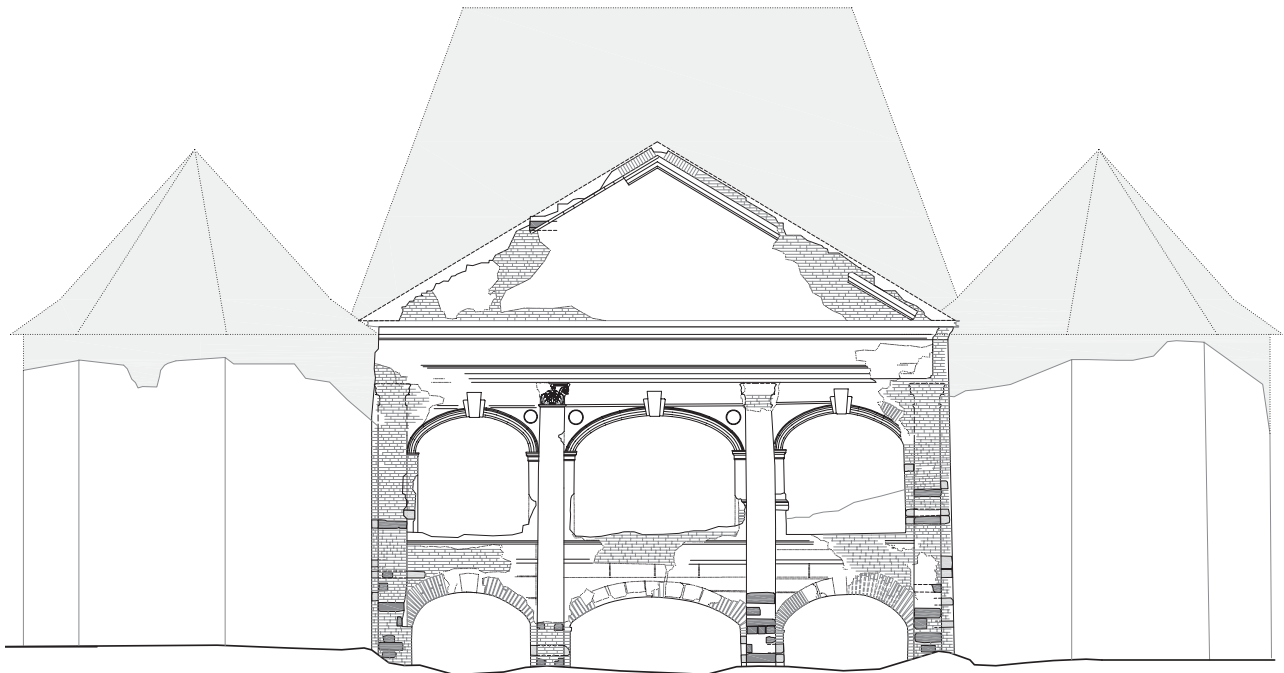


Fig. 3. Southern façade of the Bethlen castle in Boiu-Țopa: inventory of *spolia*, state of degradation 2009; (with integration of missing parts based on survey, INP Archive; DMI Collection: 1948-1977).

on the entire surface (portico on the ground floor and loggia on the first), ending in a gable outlined by a strong cornice.

The decorative vocabulary of the façades included ornaments made of stucco or plaster (four pillars with Corinthian capitals and bases, a moulded horizontal cornice, *en bosse* elements), but also valuable stone window-frames with profiles of Renaissance inspiration (today lost).²⁰

Moulded limestone items – *spolia*

The advanced degradation of finished surfaces has revealed the building techniques used in erecting the construction – mixed masonry for the polygonal towers, made of irregularly shaped river stone and brick, and brick masonry for the central body. The main (southern) façade is a particular case, with a structure consisting of brick masonry with inserted regular limestone blocks – *ashlar* –, with finished sides and even sculpted mouldings (two items) (Fig. 3). The high number of items (ca. 45) and their placement in structurally tensioned areas (pillars, building corners) make us believe that their role was mainly structural.

However, the use of lithic material from ruined ancient or medieval structures was not a new practice in seventeenth century Transylvania.²¹ Foreign travellers, collectors, diplomats passing through Transylvania, all noted the presence of numerous ancient archaeological fragments and showed interest both for studying and acquiring certain items with inscriptions.²² The tradition of collecting sculptures or stone fragments with

²⁰ Iosipescu *et al.* 2004, p. 74.

²¹ IDR I 1975, p. 36, p. 46; IDR III, 2 1977, p. 12; “*the local inhabitants fully exploit the Roman ruins they find close to the surface of the soil [...] extracting from them stone and marble blocks (some bearing inscriptions) [...]; many of them have been transported to castles, palaces and boyar manor houses [...] for procuring ashlar stone from the walls, from where it could be much easierly and readily used for constructions than from stone quarries*” (translated from Romanian) (IDR I 1975, p. 36).

²² For the scale of lithic material migration in Transylvania between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century, see IDR I 1975, pp. 33-51; IDR II 1977, pp. 11-15; IDR III, 2 1980, pp. 10-24; Mărgineanu Cârstoiu *et al.* 2004-2005; Mărgineanu Cârstoiu *et al.* 2009.



Fig. 4. Ruins of the Bethlen castle in Boiu-Țopa as of 2009.

inscriptions and mouldings (*“sculptured stones”*) became very spread in the Transylvanian noble milieu. A few known examples of using Roman *spolia* in the structure of noble or princely residences are: the princely palace in Alba Iulia,²³ the Bethlen castle in Sânmiclăuș, erected according to Miklós Bethlen’s plans,²⁴ the Kendeffy (Cândeia) manor house in Râu de Mori,²⁵ Samuel Brukenthal’s castle in Avrig,²⁶ Teleki János’s castle in Șoroștin.²⁷

At the present state of research, the origin of the limestone blocks placed on the façade of the castle in Boiu remains unknown. Two important Roman places are mentioned in the vicinity of the site, of which the Podmoale Plateau (located ca. 15 km away from the castle), where a Roman camp was identified.²⁸ A number of items were discovered on this plateau and on the banks of River Târnava Mare close to the site, among which we mention here votive altars made of calcareous stone, funerary slabs made of sandstone, and an epigraphic block made of calcareous stone.²⁹

Among the group of *spolia* visible on the façade of the castle in Boiu-Țopa, I aimed at inventorying fragments with profiles or finished sides that were accessible for study.

²³ Holban *et al.* III 1971, p. 168. There is mention of a group of inscriptions “set in the prince’s palace” in Alba Iulia transcribed by Jacques Bongars (in 1585 when he traveled through Transylvania) and sent by him in a “dedicative” letter to his good friend and study colleague Guillaume Lenomard (p. 168).

²⁴ Bethlen 2004, p. 123-124. Miklós Bethlen described in 1668, in his memoirs, the usage of stones from a ruined structure in the erection of the castle in Sânmiclăuș: “The Lord has shown in a miraculous manner, through the trace made by a pig and through a pig herder, at the border towards Glogoveț, *the foundations of an ancient pagan fortress, from the stones of which the main part was formed* (a. n.). This must have been a terribly ancient construction, since I could not find anything about it neither in history, nor in documents, nor in oral traditions; *I found no sculpted stone* (a. n.), no written document; it had a terribly compact wall, so strong that the cobblestone cracks rather than the lime”. Then, we find out of the insertion of some sculpted stone fragments, the origins of which are no longer mentioned: “[...] the foundation was laid for the bastion of the pupils, and *the two of us introduced there several sculpted stones, with my name and hers engraved on them, besides the year and the day*”(a. n.).

²⁵ Mărgineanu Cârstoiu *et al.* 2004-2005, p. 179.

²⁶ IDR I 1975, p. 46. The castle held a collection of epigraphic monuments and Roman sculptures from southern Transylvania.

²⁷ IDR III/4 1988, p. 80.

²⁸ IDR III/4 1988, p. 143: “starting from the Middle Ages and until today, the ruin fields were always noted and frequented by the local inhabitants [...] some searching for «treasures», others for antique and maybe artistic objects, while others yet, for building materials”.

²⁹ *Idem*, pp. 142-159.

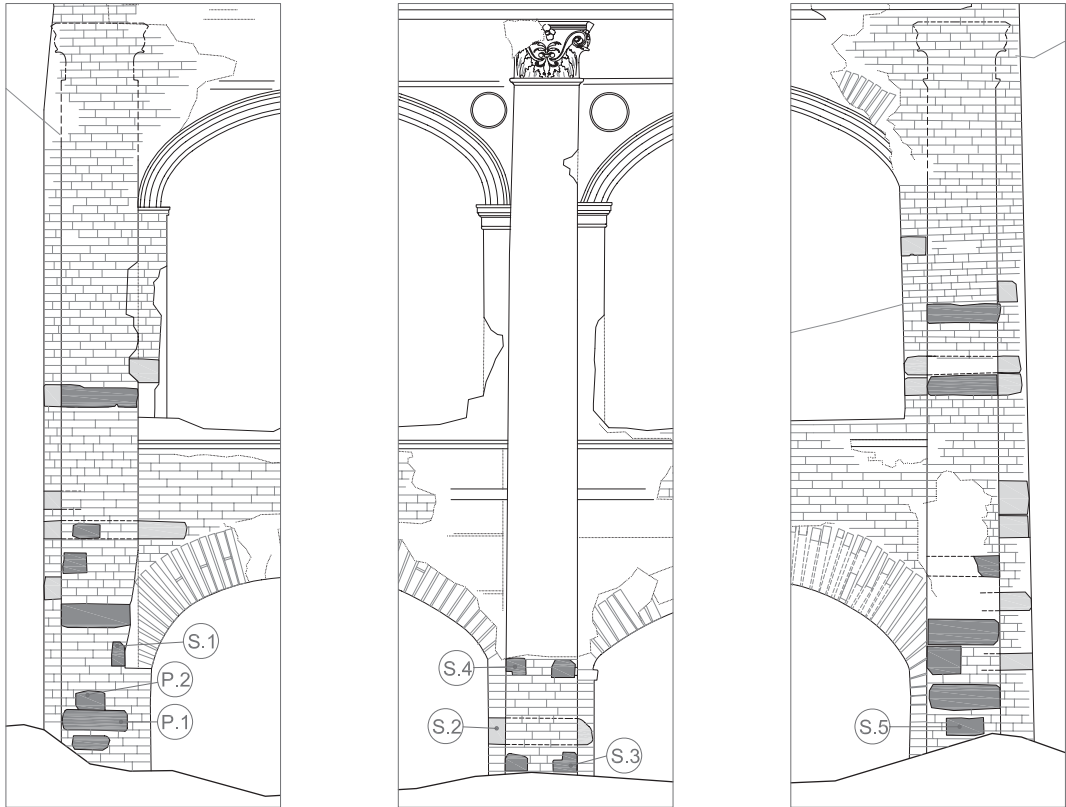


Fig. 5. *Spolia* on the castle's southern façade.

Excerpt from ARA Reports 2, 2011.

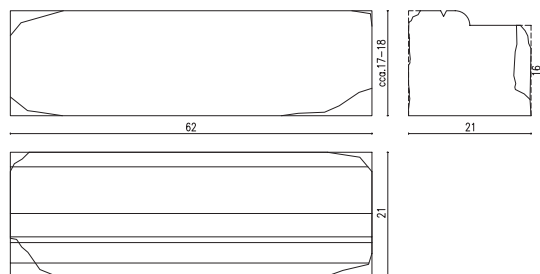


Fig. 6/1 Spolia with moulding P.1.

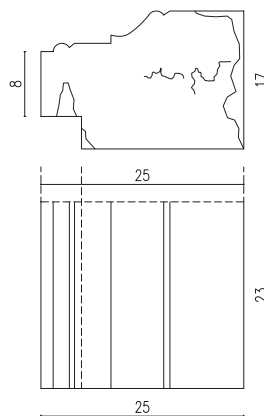


Fig. 6/2 Spolia with moulding P.2.

Moulded stones (P.1 and P.2) are located at the base of the pillar placed on the left side of the faade (Fig. 5).

Item P.1, longitudinally placed in the masonry; its dimensions could be fully determined, thus: height: 21 cm, width: ca. 17-18 cm, length: 62 cm. The item is placed with its moulded side as bedding surface, below item P.2 (Fig. 6/1).

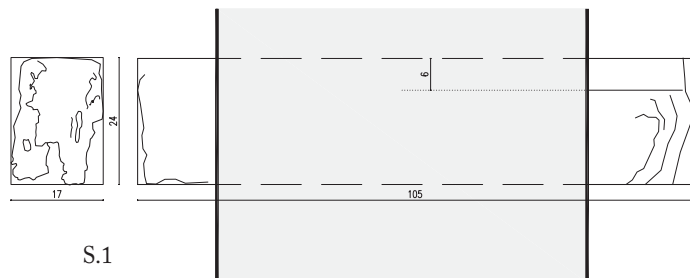
Item P.2, transversely placed in the masonry; only two of its sides could be measured: height: 25 cm, width: 17 cm. The item is placed with the moulded side as bedding surface, below the brick layer (Fig. 6/2).

Simple items (S.1-S.5), lacking any moulding, but having defining elements that can be determined (the dimensions of their sides, constructive details, traces from the finishing of the visible sides). Items S.1-S.4 are placed in the lower part of the left median pillar, while item S.5 is located as the base of the pillar in the right corner of the faade (Fig. 5).

Item S.1.

Reconstructed dimensions: height: 24 cm, width: 17 cm, length: ca. 63 cm.

The item is transversally placed in the brick masonry, its extremities extending beyond the limit of the wall. Its visible sides show advanced degradation, through flaking and turning into powder (Fig. 7/1).



S.1

Fig. 7/1 Simple spolia S.1.

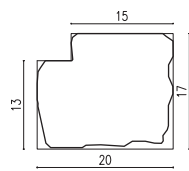
Item S.2.

Dimensions: height: 22 cm, width: 17 cm, length: ca. 95 cm.

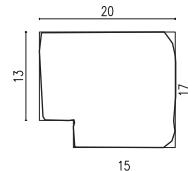
The item is transversally placed in the brick masonry, its extremities extending beyond the limit of the wall. The right side face is fragmentarily preserved, but one may notice two sides tilted at 308 degrees, that might belong to the original item (contact surface with another item) (Fig. 7/2).

Items S.3 and S.4. They are placed at a distance from each other, but share the same dimensions (on the side that could be measured). Dimensions: height: 20 cm, width: 17 cm, length: inaccessible (Fig. 7/3).

Item S.5. Dimensions: height: 15.5 cm, length: 40 cm, width: inaccessible (Fig. 7/4).



S.3



S.4



Fig. 7/3 Simple *spolia* S.3 and S.4.

S.2

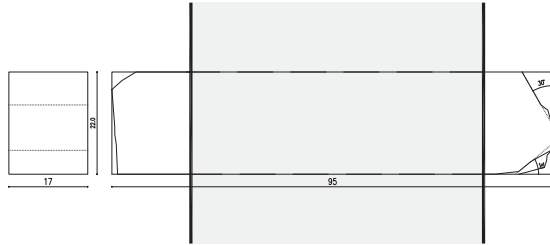
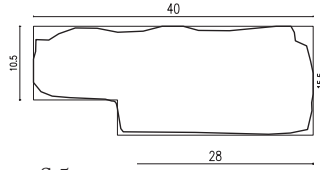


Fig. 7/2 Simple *spolia* S.2.



S.5

Fig. 7/4 Simple *spolia* S.5.



Fig. 8 The collapse of the southern façade. Photo: November 29th, 2010.



One notes that the dimensions corresponding to the width of the inventoried items is constant (17 cm). This element can be an indicator of the building the items came from. Also, the detailed analysis of all items visible in the structure of the castle and the formulation of certain hypotheses on the nature of the original monument remain open for a future detailed study.

The existence of *spolia* in the structure of this castle testify both to the known period of referring ruins as stone quarries, as well to the nobles' mentality of the leaning towards Antiquity, who searched for incorporating testimonies of the Antique world to "enrich" the noble residence.

The generalized degradation of many noble castles built during the sixteenth through the eighteenth century could be a source of knowledge both on the migration of Roman lithic material in Transylvania and on the formation of a more complex image of the interest towards antiquities of Transylvanian noble families.

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