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Medieval fortifications of Czech towns

Vladislav Razím, *Středověká opevnění českých měst*.
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The monumental catalog of medieval fortifications of cities and towns from the present-day Czech Republic terrain, which is the subject of this study (*Středověká opevnění českých měst* [Medieval fortifications of Czech towns]), has been published in parts in Prague under the auspices of the Národní Památkový Ústav (NPU) [National Institute for Monument Protection] since 2019. This catalog was conceived as a work consisting of three complementary parts. The first part, still being edited, will be a synthesis of issues related to the architecture of defensive walls, towers and town gates, in their defensive function, changes in form, and in the European context. The so far published parts – the second and the third – appeared in 2020 and 2019, respectively, i.e., in reverse order, and contain – part two: catalog of town fortifications from the area of historical Bohemia (vol. 1 – cities beginning from B to O; vol. 2 – from P to Ž), and the third part: catalog of town fortifications from the area of historical Moravia and the Czech part of Silesia (in one volume). In total, the defensive districts of 172 towns from the Czech Republic and 88 towns from Silesia and Moravia were cataloged. These are the cities with preserved, at least partially, walls

and defensive devices, but also the cities where gates are visible today only, because during the Middle Ages they were not fully fortified or the old defensive walls were demolished in the 19th and 20th centuries. The cities such as royal town Most, which ceased to exist in the 1970s, are also discussed although they completely disappeared. We learn about the latter on the basis of written sources, cadastral maps and iconography, as well as the results of archaeological research. Whilst the list of the former can be considered complete, in the latter case, we are dealing with a selection of city fortifications which illustrate a broader important research problem, useful in the synthetic volume being prepared.

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The author of the catalog is Vladislav Razím PhD, a Czech historian, conservator and editor of the most important scientific journals in the field of protection and research of monuments¹ and the author of a number of articles and monographs on fortified districts of towns and castles such as Křivoklát and Křivoklátska Land [1], early Gothic Vizmburk [2], castles Hasištejn, Pürglitz, Jagd, Wald and Zbořený Kostelec [3]–[5]. The author is, above all, a well-known and respected field researcher of medieval architecture, in particular defensive architecture [6], [7], to which he devoted 40 years of his professional work at the Národní Památkový Ústav, in the Územní odborné pracoviště středních Čech [Specialist Local Workshop of Central Bohemia]. One of the goals of publishing the volumes in question in such a monumental form was a desire to compensate for the disproportion between the research effort and the length of time necessary to read the entirety of construction transformations in defensive structures in the field and all the accompanying cognitive contexts, and the short length of records usually devoted to reporting the obtained results.

The large volume and richness of illustrations of individual catalog entries enabled a complete and substantive presentation of the contents provided. Their structure, on the other hand, was subordinated to the needs of the future synthetic first part of the discussed work.

The first subchapter of each entry contains a brief description of the history of cities up to the 1st third or the 1st half of the 16th century inclusive. The author placed special emphasis on the political and defensive context, looking for grounds for dating the beginnings of the construction of fortified districts and gates in the particular cities, as well as their further changes and extensions. The same purpose was also served by quoting source texts referring to privileges granted to cities or excerpts from city registers.

The second subchapter of each entry presents the urban characteristics of cities with particular emphasis on their topography, geomorphology and course of routes as a determinant of decisions about the shape of the city walls as well as the location of main gates and towers in them.

The third subchapter brought a full description of the city fortifications with descriptions of individual buildings from the material, workshop, aesthetic and, of course, defensive side. Each time it began with an analysis of all

relevant written sources and literature. Subsequently, successive “layers” of the research, i.e. an architectural, historical and stylistic, as well as spatial context, were carried out by the author according to the methodology and standards consistently developed in the Czech Republic since the last decades of the 20th century, in the course of dealing with the numerous preserved monuments of medieval, modern, and contemporary construction [8]–[12]. It will not be exaggerated to say that it is the most perfect methodology among those currently used in Europe, in terms of logic, detail, and consistency in dealing with the monument [13, pp. 12–14]. As the research progressed, this argument was enriched with data from the analyses of representatives of related specialties – archaeologists, dendro-chronologists, art historians, etc. Thus, all classical methods of conducting historical and architectural research were used, and the so-called modern methods, such as LIDAR aerial scanning or building digital models of objects using photos taken from a drone, were omitted. Perhaps at this point, it is worth posing a question whether the latter methods really do not contribute anything important to the cognitive base and can be completely ignored without the risk of losing any important information. It should be emphasized, however, that the final effect of the author’s work resulted in the fundamental findings relating to individual defense works, which will be summarized in the interpretative first part of the work which is currently being developed.

As the author points out, the importance of the city defensive walls in the Middle Ages had a double dimension – practical and symbolic. The former was important in times of unrest and wars because it provided inhabitants with a sense of security. The other dimension was visible in the massiveness of the “toothed” defensive walls, the number and height of towers, the power of city gates and the depth of moats. Fortifications of “cities within the walls” through their lofty form created the most characteristic image of a medieval city viewed from the outside by merchants, wanderers and potential enemies. This image, although distorted as a result of the destruction and changes over the centuries, is also attractive to us, i.e. specialists, researchers, and enthusiasts of architecture of the past centuries. Vladislav Razím’s work brings it back and fits perfectly into the list of monumental Czech monographs devoted to such architectural phenomena as castles [14], folk architecture [15], or diamond vaults [16].

¹ Such as “Zprávy památkové péče”, “Průzkumy památek”, „Památky středních Čech”, “Svorník”, “Castellologica Bohemica”.

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Abstract

Medieval fortifications of Czech towns

The review contains the discussion on the monumental catalog of medieval fortifications of cities and towns in the present-day Czech Republic by Vladislav Razím. The catalog has been published in parts by Národní Památkový Ústav in Prague since 2019. So far, parts two and three were published, which are devoted respectively to: part 2, in two volumes – to cities from the historic territory of Bohemia and Moravia, and part 3 – to the Czech part of Silesia. The first part – interpretative, will be a synthesis of the issues of urban medieval defensive architecture. Noteworthy are both the volume of the work, which includes a total of 260 catalog entries, as well as the capacity and length of the texts of individual entries, richly illustrated with the material from historical and architectural research – inventory, iconographic, and photographic. What is most important is the methodology of the research conducted, which was consistently applied in all of the developed defense objects, guaranteeing an in-depth recognition of their origins, architectural changes, functions, and spatial context. Summing up, it can be said that the literature on medieval Czech defense architecture has been enriched with an exceptionally valuable position.

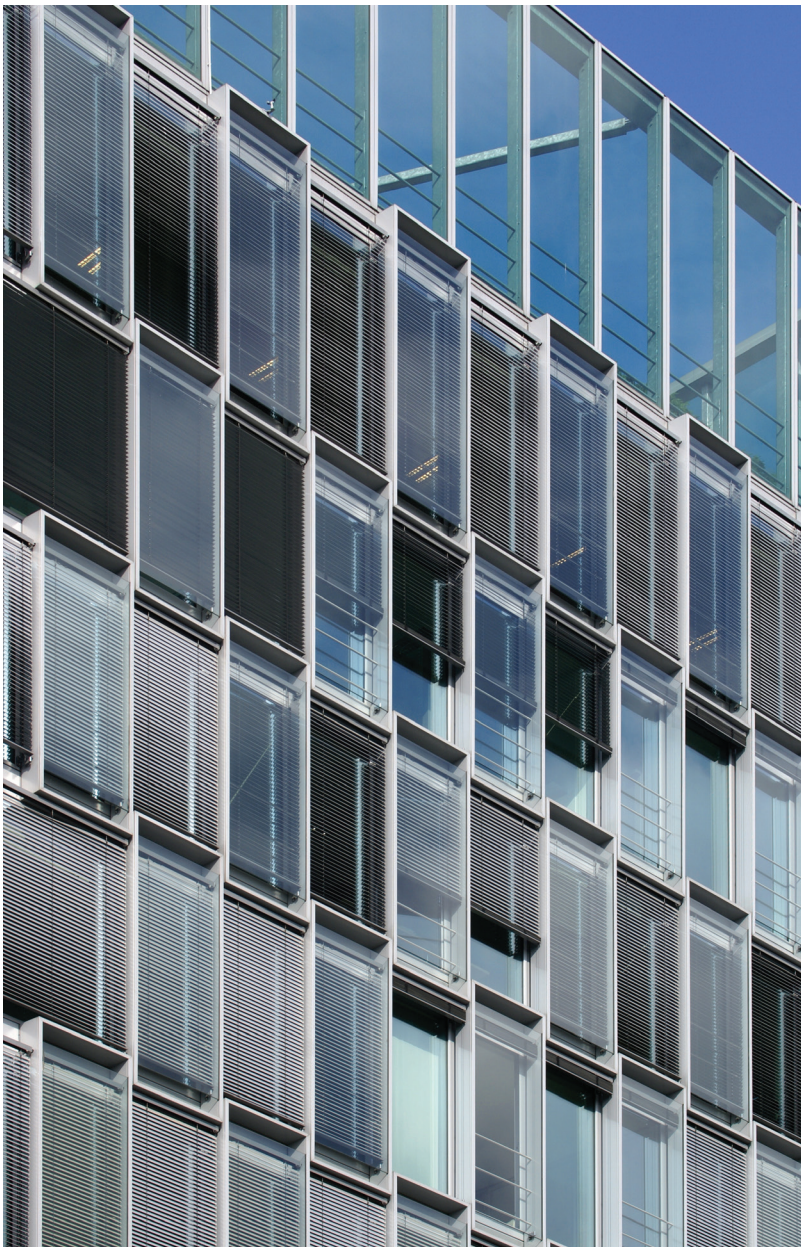
Key words: town fortifications, Middle Ages, Czech Republic, Moravia, Bohemian Silesia

Streszczenie

Średniowieczne obwarowania miast czeskich

W recenzji omówiono monumentalny katalog obwarowań średniowiecznych miast i miasteczek z terenu obecnej Republiki Czeskiej, autorstwa Vladislava Razíma, wydawany od 2019 r. przez Národní Památkový Ústav w Pradze. Dotychczas ukazały się część druga i trzecia, poświęcone odpowiednio: część 2, w dwóch tomach – miastom z terenu historycznych Czech i Moraw, a część 3 – czeskiej części Śląska. Pierwsza część – interpretacyjna – będzie stanowił syntezę zagadnień miejskiej średniowiecznej architektury obronnej. Na uwagę zasługują zarówno objętość pracy obejmującej w sumie 260 haseł katalogowych, jak i pojemność oraz długość tekstów poszczególnych haseł, bogato zilustrowanych materiałem pochodzącym z badań historyczno-architektonicznych – inwentaryzacyjnym, ikonograficznym i fotograficznym. To, co najważniejsze, to metodyka przeprowadzonych badań, konsekwentnie zastosowana we wszystkich opracowywanych obiektach obronnych, dająca gwarancję dogłębnego rozpoznania ich metryki, przemian architektonicznych, funkcji i kontekstu przestrzennego. Podsumowując, można powiedzieć, że literatura poświęcona średniowiecznej architekturze obronnej Czech została wzbogacona o wyjątkowo cenną pozycję.

Słowa kluczowe: obwarowania miast, średniowiecze, Czechy, Morawy, czeski Śląsk



Office Building Kap am Südkai, Cologne
(arch. KSP Engel und Zimmermann,
Architekten, photo by M. Brzezicki)
Biurowiec Kap am Südkai, Kolonia
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Architekten, fot. M. Brzezicki)