

PILIS: CHANGING SETTLEMENTS IN A HUNGARIAN FOREST IN THE MIDDLE AGES¹

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Pilis is a still visible forest in the heart of historical Hungary, covering an area of approximately fifty-five thousand hectares. In the Middle Ages, it was surrounded by the most significant lay and ecclesiastical centres of the Hungarian Kingdom: Esztergom, where one of the archbishops of Hungary is based; Buda, the most important royal centre from the thirteenth century on; and Visegrád, a royal castle of primary importance. Including a fourth town (Fehérvár) at a relatively small distance, the territory was called *medium regni* in the Middle Ages. Although the history of the four towns has been studied often and from many points of view,² not much has been said about the territory that lies among them: the Pilis forest.

The region comprises two separate mountains, one is called Pilis, the other one Visegrádi mountain. Nevertheless, the traditional usage is to refer to the whole area as Pilis. To the north and east, its boundary is the Danube, whereas to the southwest the border-line is the valley of Pilisvörösvár, enclosing a triangularly shaped territory, with the three castles on the edges.

Before one attempts to examine the settlement structure of Pilis, some preliminary remarks on the history of the area are inevitable. The most important fact is that Pilis was a royal forest all through the Middle Ages, which means that it was under deliberate protection and control of the royal family, and also served as a most favoured hunting preserve. The second significant element in the history of the region was the strong presence of two monastic orders: the Cistercians and the Paulines, with one and three monasteries, respectively. These orders, although formed on different bases and for different purposes, both had a somewhat similar relation towards the Pilis forest, namely that they exploited rather than cleared it.³

The time scope of this paper covers approximately five centuries, starting from about 1000, that is from the formation of the kingdom of Hungary and ending around the middle of the sixteenth century with the Ottoman invasion, which basically destroyed the whole medieval settlement structure of the territory.

¹ This paper was presented at the *International Medieval Congress*, July 13–16, 1998, in Leeds.

² On the subject as a whole, see *Medium Regni: Középkori magyar királyi székhelyek* (Medium Regni: medieval hungarian royal residences) (Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 1996).

³ On the subject of the royal forest, the monastic orders in Pilis, and on other issues of this cultural landscape, see my MA thesis, submitted to the Department of Medieval Studies at the CEU in 1998, entitled *Pilis: A Hungarian Forest in the Middle Ages*.

The source base I have consulted is twofold. The written sources I have used are charters of various origins, but mostly royal ones; and perambulations, mainly from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The archaeological evidence was collected into two volumes of the *Archaeological Topography of Hungary*.⁴ Evidence in this case means dated potsherds collected during extensive field surveys, by the help of which Hungarian archaeologists established the locations of as many sites and settlements as possible. Here, I do not intend to go into a detailed discussion of the limitations of fieldwalking techniques, but I would like to emphasize that fieldwalking is barely possible and thus is hardly ever carried out in wooded areas, which is yet another consideration when drawing conclusions about the settlement structure of Pilis.

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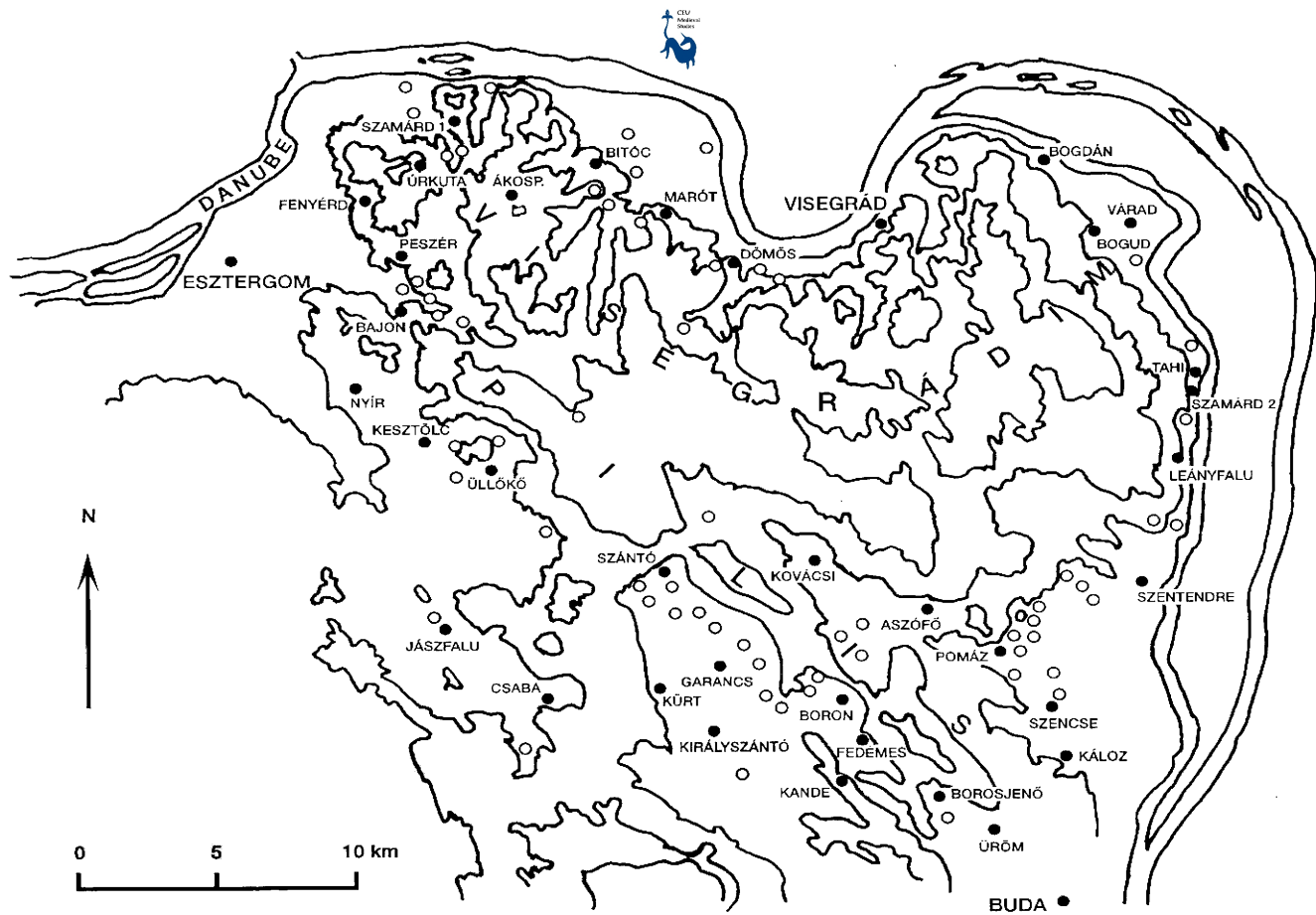
The settlements that appeared in documents were in most cases connected to archaeological sites, with the single exception of Dersülése.⁵ Altogether thirty-seven settlements were mentioned in documents, written from 1009 up to the Ottoman invasion (from 1526 onwards) and beyond.⁶ It is worth taking a look at the first and last appearances of these settlements in the charters, supposing that most of them existed in between the two. (*Figure 1* – black lines)

The shape of this chart would suggest that the number of settlements was constantly growing in the Pilis area. If we compare the year 1100 with three settlements mentioned with the year 1500 with twenty-eight, the growth seems striking. However, the value of such a chart is highly questionable, considering the fact that the number of written documents that survive today shows the same numerical development. In other words, this chart may well be taken as an illustration of the growing production and survival of charters during the Middle Ages in Hungary.

⁴ *Magyarország régészeti topográfiája* (The archaeological topography of Hungary), vol. 5, *Komárom megye régészeti topográfiája: Az esztergomi és dorogi járás* (The archaeological topography of county Komárom: the Esztergom and Dorog districts), ed. István Torma (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1979) and vol. 7, *Pest megye régészeti topográfiája: A budai és szentendrei járás* (The Archaeological Topography of County Pest: the Buda and Szentendre Districts), ed. István Torma (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1986). Hereafter referred to as *MRT-5* and *MRT-7*. In addition, I will not cite the page number (with the one exception of Dersülése, where it was necessary), but the internal reference numbers of the books, which makes any inquiry easier.

⁵ *MRT-7*, p. 205.

⁶ Peszér, Fenyérd, Úrkuta, Bajon, Nyír, Ákospalotája, Szamárd 1, Marót, Bitóc, Dömös, Kesztlőc, Üllőkő, Bogud, Várad, Bogdán, Tah, Szamárd 2, Leányfalu, Kékes, Szentendre, Szencse, Pomáz, Aszófő, Dersülése, Kovácsai, Szántó, Boron, Kandé, Fedémes, Káloz, Borosjenő, Üröm, Garancs, Kürt, and Királysántó. For further data and references, see the Database attached to my MA thesis, which was too lengthy to be included in this paper.



Map of the Pilis region

- Settlements mentioned in written documents
- Settlements with archaeological evidence only

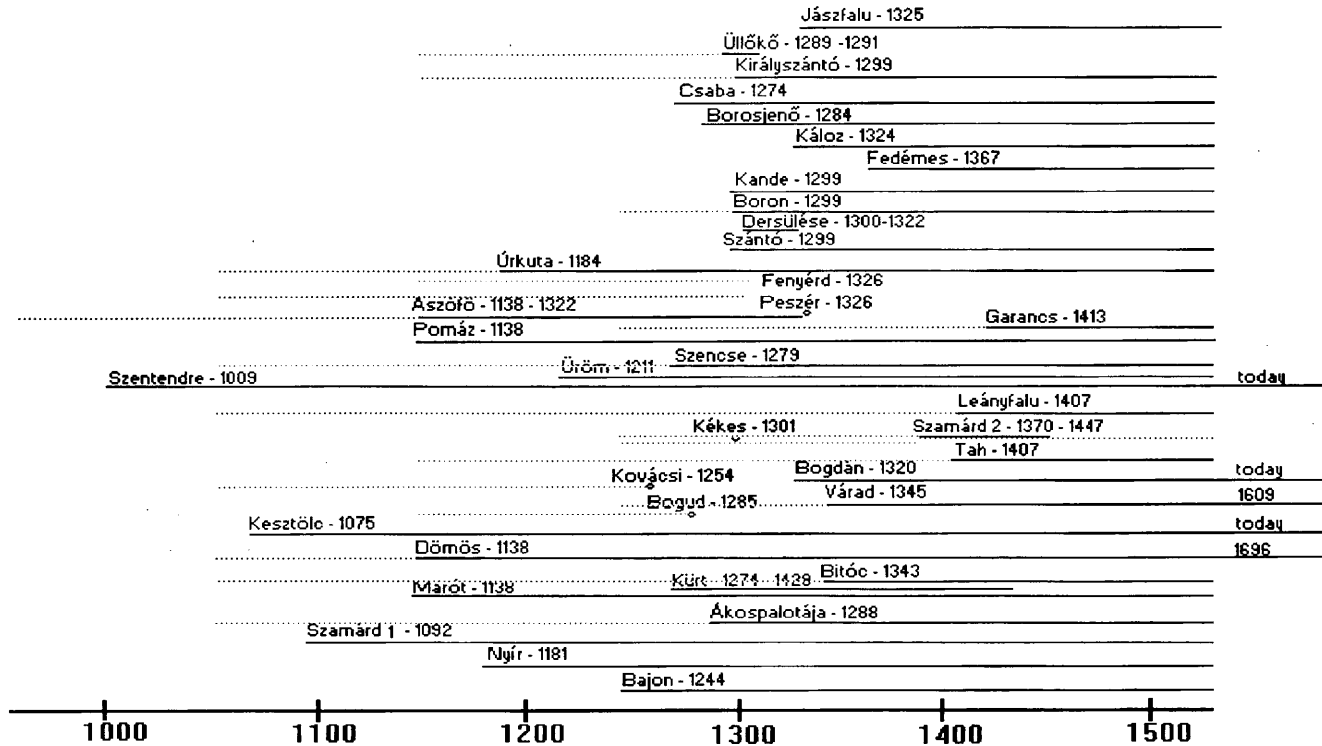


Figure 1. Settlements recorded in written documents. The dotted lines indicate archaeological dating. The settlements ceased to exist during the Ottoman invasion, unless indicated otherwise.

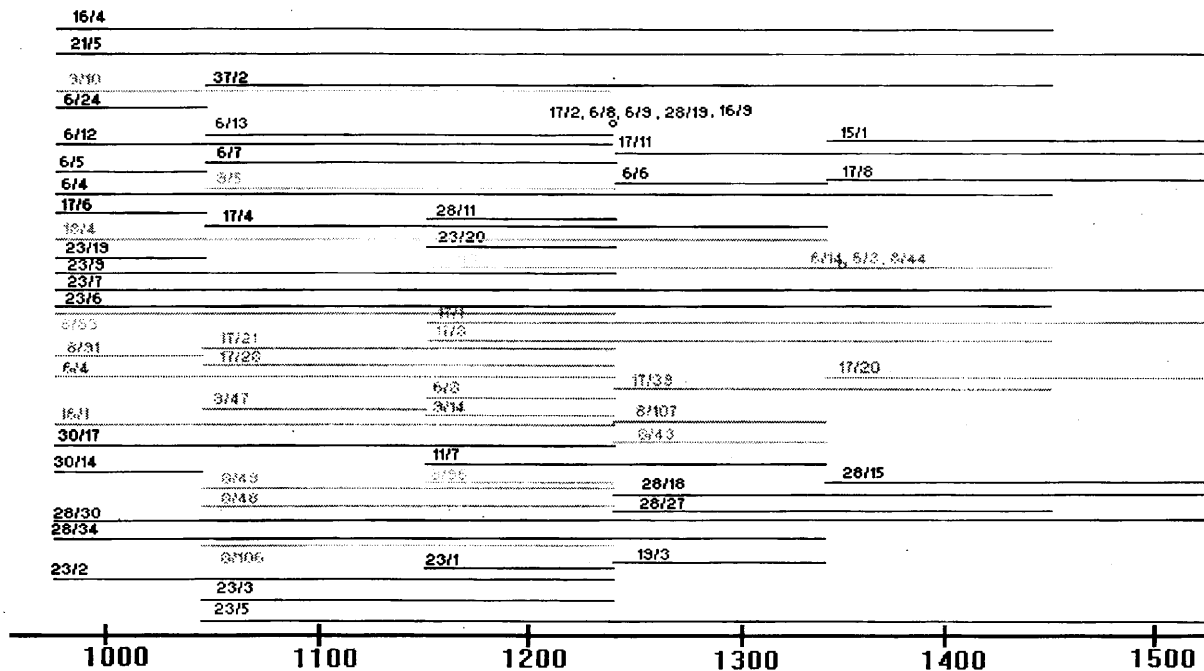


Figure 2. Settlements not mentioned in written sources.

Dotted lines – MRT-5; Black lines – MRT-7.

The archaeological finds in many cases prove that a particular settlement had existed long before its first appearance in written documents. (*Figure 1* – dotted lines) Out of the thirty-seven settlements in the Pilis region, eighteen can be antedated in this way. In five settlements no information is available due to the fact that they lie in an area which is inaccessible to archaeology (Bajon, Nyír, Bogdán, Kande, and Fedémes). The above mentioned Dersülése cannot be located, which leaves eighteen alterations out of thirty cases, precisely sixty percent. Nevertheless, the distribution does not change. One can still find twenty-seven settlements in 1500 but only twelve in 1100. However, the number of villages existing in 1100 can be multiplied by four when archaeological evidence is included. The overall picture was also modified by adding archaeological evidence to the written one. As illustrated in *Figure 1*, after a smaller number of settlements there was a sudden “boom” in the thirteenth century, and then the number remained basically the same until the Ottoman invasion of the sixteenth century.

When we take a look at the chart which shows the settlements of the region attested only by archaeological evidence (*Figure 2.*) we see a different picture. This chart, although it is similarly structured to the previous one, cannot be interpreted in the same clear way, for example by counting the settlements in a certain year. It shows tendencies only. But the tendency is clearly the opposite to that seen in *Figure 1*. There are many settlements in the eleventh century, another peak in the thirteenth century, and then the number decreases. At this point the two basic questions that emerge are whether this discordance between the charts is specific to the Pilis region, and if so, what are the reasons for this.

All that I have written so far is related to the general problem of medieval Hungarian settlement structure and its changes through time. The most influential historian in this field is István Szabó, who published two books entitled *A falurendszer kialakulása Magyarországon. X.–XV. század* (The formation of the village-system in Hungary: X.–XV. centuries) and *A középkori magyar falu* (Hungarian villages in the Middle Ages).⁷ In the former volume, he presented his view concerning changes in the settlement system of medieval Hungary, a view now commonly accepted. It may be summarized as follows: After the Conquest of the country, the Hungarians settled down, and a fairly stabile settlement structure⁸ was set up during the eleventh century. The twelfth, thirteenth, and early fourteenth

⁷ István Szabó, *A falurendszer kialakulása Magyarországon. X.–XV. század* (The formation of the village-system in Hungary: X.–XV. centuries) (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1966); idem, *A középkori magyar falu* (Hungarian villages in the Middle Ages) (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1969).

⁸ I am using the word “settlement”, instead of “village”, which is used all through Szabó’s book. My intention is to be very careful with using the term “village”.

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centuries were the period that Szabó called the time of “excessive disintegration and spread”, that is, the settlements became smaller and more numerous. In the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries this process was reversed, and many settlements disappeared, either by becoming parts of a bigger village, or deserted. The reasons behind their disappearance are manifold: economic, social, the change in the agrarian structure of the country, wars, poor living conditions of the peasantry, natural catastrophes, and epidemics. This process was a general European phenomenon, Szabó claims, in accordance with the population decrease of the continent in the same period.¹⁰

Bearing in mind Szabó’s theory, we can see that the settlements of the Pilis region (especially those without written documents) do not present an exception to the general medieval Hungarian trend. However, one may observe that the settlements with written documentation increase in number, which does not fit Szabó’s pattern.

One cannot assume that every single settlement that was recorded in writing was necessarily bigger or more significant than those that survive only in archaeological finds, but in general this seems to be the case. In other words, these were the settlements that formed the “backbone” of the settlement structure of the Pilis region; they were the solid ground in the tumultuous appearance and disappearance of smaller settlements. The stability of the settlements recorded in writing is reinforced by the contributions of linguistics. Miklós Kázmér, in his book—*A “falu” a magyar helynevekben* (“Falu” in Hungarian place-names)¹¹—established that the word “falu” (“village” in Hungarian) was first used to describe settlements of the country in the early thirteenth century.¹² Prior to that, most names of settlements derived from pure personal names, because this was the most practical technique to denote moving settlements. When “the previously moving settlements took root, they kept their original name.”¹³ Thus when the Hungarians settled down, they did not change their settlement names rapidly, and for a long time the old (personal name based) type was used. However, this type became less and less suitable for the new settlements, thus many of these were given the name “falu”, as a sign of the structural changes. Consequently, a high number of the settlements that were named “village” do not actually represent the larger nucleated settlements that would be called villages nowadays, because they came into being

⁹ Szabó, *A falurendszer kialakulása*, 186. Translation by the author of this paper.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Miklós Kázmér, *A “falu” a magyar helynevekben. XIII–XIX. század* (“Falu” in Hungarian place-names: 13–19. Centuries) (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1970).

¹² *Ibid.*, 56.

¹³ *Ibid.* Translation by the author of this paper.

during a time (thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries) when the number of settlements was rapidly increasing, although they decreased in size.

Twelve out of the thirty-seven settlement-names in the Pilis region originate from pure personal names.¹⁴ This would suggest that they came into existence in the early period of the Hungarian Middle Ages, and did not change their names.¹⁵ In fact, out of these twelve settlements, Bogdán seems to have been settled at the latest date (1320), but in this case we can only rely upon written documents, as archaeologists could not examine the territory for signs of a possible earlier habitation. The majority of the twelve settlements were established at least as early as the eleventh-twelfth centuries. But the other side of the coin is that many settlements recorded in writing can be dated to the thirteenth century, and after that the number of settlements with written documents remains approximately the same. The year 1300 sees thirty of those settlements with written documents in existence, there are also thirty settlements in 1400, and twenty-seven in 1500. If we compare this with the information available about the settlements without written documents (a decreasing number in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries), it is again suggested that the settlements with written documents were more stable than the ones about which we have archaeological evidence only. During the turmoil of the Late Middle Ages, settlements with written documents belonged to the type that did not disappear, but formed the centre of a region, “joined” by many smaller settlements.

The settlements that do not appear in charters and perambulations are more problematic. First of all, their dating can only be imprecise. Secondly, one always has to be cautious about the size and significance of these settlements. The biggest mistake would be to call all of them villages, but in many cases even the term *settlement* needs further explanation. As illustrated in *Figure 2*, the largest number of these archaeological sites can be dated to the Árpád age (from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries.) What János Makkay wrote about late medieval County Békés applies to the Pilis region as well: “The stray finds and the sites referring to smaller settlements are almost entirely missing.”¹⁶ As a result, I will focus on the settlements

¹⁴ See Database to my MA thesis. The categories with the second and third most settlements are the ones referring to geographical features and the ones referring to the occupation of the inhabitants, with six and five settlements, respectively. In addition, three more villages are combinations of pure personal names and common nouns.

¹⁵ However, the fact that place names based on pure personal names were formed in the early Árpád age has been questioned. Kristó claimed that such precision in dating is not possible. Gyula Kristó, “Szempontok korai helyneveink történeti tipológiájához” (Aspects of the historical typology of our early place names), *Acta Universitatis Szegediensis de Attila József nominatae. Acta Historica* 55 (1976): 38.

¹⁶ János Makkay, introduction to *Magyarország régészeti topográfiája* (The archaeological topography of Hungary), vol. 8, *Békés megye régészeti topográfiája*. (The archaeological topography of county Békés), ed. László Gerevich (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1989), 31. Translation by the author of this paper.



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of the Árpád age. Within these settlements, we can distinguish two major types.¹⁷ “Village settlements”¹⁸ are ones with rich find material, often the remains of a church, covering a larger territory. In other words, these settlements resemble the majority of ones with written documents. The other type is “habitation-like settlements,”¹⁹ usually situated over a smaller area, with a few sherds. At present it is difficult even to decide whether they were parts of a bigger community or independent. Jankovich suggested the following possibilities: They were 1. part of a spacious village with loose structure, 2. straggling germs of villages 3. dwellings (a. summer dwellings, b. dwellings of herdsmen, c. dwellings of nomads.)²⁰ Similar options were presented by József Laszlovszky in 1986, who, in addition, described a characteristic feature of these smaller settlements, namely that they were often situated in a chain along rivers and streams, which was also typical of the Pilis region.²¹ All three options are possible in each case, and one has to investigate and decide for every individual site, as I tried to do in the Database. But let me stress again that the Pilis region (and its forests) were not an exception to the general rule that these settlements were characteristic of the Árpád age.

If we observe the location of all possible settlements, we can conclude that along the Danube their distribution seems even, and they seem not to have entered the depth of the Pilis forest. However, as we have already seen, this may well be the result of the fieldwalking technique applied in the Pilis area. This drawback would not affect the settlements that have written documents, because charters and their survival do not depend upon geographical features, forested lands in this case. Nevertheless, the settlements that have charter evidence basically surrounded the Pilis forest. Out of the thirty-seven settlements, a maximum of ten may be considered to be within the area of the Visegrádi and Pilis mountains.²² It appears that the people at more stable settlements preferred to stay outside of the forest, or vice versa, that those settlements that managed to survive longer were the ones that were not within the Pilis forest.

There are two places where “purely archaeological” settlements largely outnumbered the documented ones. One of them is in the region of today’s Pomáz, the other is the valley between the middle part of the Pilis mountain and the

¹⁷ Ibid.; B. Dénes Jankovich, “Archaeological Topography: Theoretical and Practical Lessons,” *Mitteilungen des Archäologischen Instituts der Ungarischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 14 (1985): 285–7.

¹⁸ Ibid., 286.

¹⁹ Ibid., 285.

²⁰ Ibid., 286.

²¹ József Laszlovszky, “Tanyaszerű települések az Árpád-korban” (Farm-steads in the Árpádian Age), in *Falvak, mezővárosok az Alföldön* (Villages and Towns in the Hungarian Plain), ed. László Novák and László Selmeczi (Nagykőrös: Arany János Múzeum, 1986), 137–8.

²² *MRT-5*, 9/7, 8/59, 8/63, 8/116; *MRT-7*, 20/1, 23/13, 23/26, 6/10, 6/26, 17/9.

southeastern end of it together with the northern part of the valley of Pilisvörösvár, which is on the southwestern side of Hosszúhegy. Both of these locations are on the very edge of the forested areas. In the Pilis region, the general tendency of the settlements to break down into more numerous and smaller units was directed towards the forested areas. This phenomenon suggests that people tried to “conquer” the forest, but their attempt was temporary. Most finds end in the thirteenth century, which means that in these two regions, in accordance with the general Hungarian trend, many smaller settlements were formed in the Árpád age, which had ceased to exist in the Late Middle Ages. However, this does not mean that the population of the area became smaller. Most probably the bigger villages²³ took over the functions and population of the smaller settlements. In the Pomáz and southern Pilis regions this resulted in two possible models. One of them was created when a settlement, previously formed along with many others in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries “took the lead,” and became the most important village of the territory, as in the case of Szántó (*MRT-7*, 17/9) or Boron (*MRT-7*, 6/10.) The other model is represented by Szencse (*MRT-7*, 23/8) or *MRT-7* sites 6/4 and 23/5, where an early settlement survived the “latecomers.”

I also have to try and answer the question of whether there is anything specific to the Pilis region in terms of the disappearance of settlements in the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries. Since no precise information is available, I can only speculate about possible causes. One may have been the Mongol invasion of Hungary (1241). Since the Pilis forest is situated in a highly important geographical region (surrounded by three of the most significant towns in the kingdom), the invaders necessarily had to cross it. It was the main army, lead by Batu khan that conquered the region.²⁴ However, although it may be true that some settlements became deserted and were never repopulated, it would be dangerous to attribute too many of the changes in the settlement structure of the Pilis region to the Mongols. Firstly, the effect of the Mongol invasion on the settlement system of Hungary is considered to be less significant than in previous historiography.²⁵ The other objection to this view comes from the very fact that the Pilis region was largely forested. In times of temporary trouble (and the Mongols spent only a few years in Hungary marching up and down ravaging the countryside) the forest was the best hiding place for the

²³ *MRT-7*, 7/9, 6/10, 23/8, and from the “purely archaeological” settlements 6/4, 23/5, 23/7.

²⁴ *Magyarország története. Előzmények és magyar történet 1242-ig* (The history of Hungary. Antecedents and Hungarian history up to 1242), ed. György Székely (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1987), 1425–40.

²⁵ Szabó, *A falurendszer kialakulása*, 177–80.



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locals. Jenő Szűcs claimed that the “devastation in forested mountains was around ten percent, or even less.”²⁶

It is reasonable to propose at this point that the Pilis region with its mountains and forests was not an exception to the general patterns of change in the medieval Hungarian settlement structure. The process had some local colour because the disintegration and spread of the settlements was directed towards the forest. As I suggested, in the Pilis region the Mongol invasion of the mid-thirteenth century did not destroy the settlement structure. The forest most likely protected the people so there must have been other reasons for these changes. The fact that many settlements disappeared in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is a general feature of Hungary, but the reasons must have always been local.

²⁶ Jenő Szűcs, *Az utolsó Árpádok* (The last Árpáds) (Budapest: História and MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 1993), 5. Translation by the author of this paper.