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The Conservation History, Problems and the Rehabilitation of Lithuanian Medieval Castles

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Abstract

The paper discusses the conservation practices and methods of the Lithuanian medieval castles. Since 19th century there was a lot of attention for the medieval castles in Lithuania, which later transformed into the search for the identity. As a result, in the middle of the 20th century, medieval castles and their parts began to be restored and rebuilt. But the Vilnius Upper Castle has escaped these trends, thanks to the difficult geological conditions in its area. The conservation works of the Vilnius Upper Castle were gradual and included small reconstructions of its walls and other architectural elements. Referring to the history of the Vilnius Upper Castle, this paper examines the evolution and challenges of the medieval heritage conservation and rehabilitation works, namely of the objects constructed from stone- and/or brick-walls’.

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1. Introduction

The history of the conservation and rehabilitation of the medieval castles within the current territory of Lithuania is very diverse and complex. Already in the 19th century, when Lithuania was occupied by the Russian Empire, some of the defensive sites (castles, forts, walls, etc.) were documented (including their descriptions and measurements) and some heritage preservation works were implemented. Under the law and orders of the Tsarist Russian Empire, the medieval castles, were partially preserved / conserved, abandoned or even destroyed. The research on the medieval castles intensified around 1900 as the result of the changing approach to the heritage objects, but scientific works became more widespread and impactful only after the First World War, when Lithuania regained its independence even though Vilnius and its surrounding were soon occupied by Poland. After the Second World War and occupation of Lithuania by the Soviet Union, the medieval castles began to be reconstructed / restored and these

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works were mostly based on the stylistic restoration principles. And today it is important to revise conservation and recovery practices of the medieval castles and assess both the positive and negative aspects of the historic works so that the past mistakes can be avoided.

It is important to note that every heritage object has its own history that associates with its owners, tenants, investigators, other personalities, theoretical background of people leading conservation works as well as with the institutional and political will. In Lithuania as well as in other countries that experienced multiple occupations and government changes, there was no consistent development of heritage preservation ideas neither in theory nor in practice – as the result there conservation works lack of integrity over time. To tackle and illustrate the latter, the article will focus on the Vilnius Upper Castle case analysis. There are several reasons for taking this castle as the main axis of this article:

First, the Vilnius Upper Castle was one of the first medieval castles that attracted attention of architectural heritage researchers. Thus, its analysis reveals the earliest architectural conservation practices and theories within the current Lithuanian territory.

Second, the authentic masonries of this castle were partly preserved, thanks to the fact that the castle's ruins were incorporated into the construction plans of Vilnius Fortress by the Russian Tsar Nicholas I.

Third, due to the difficult geological structure of the Castle's hill, during the whole 20th century the Upper Castle has escaped greater defective heritage works such as large-scale restoration or reconstruction, even though from time to time reconstruction ideas were discussed.

Fourth, today the discussion is again very active and relevant on how and based on which principles should the Upper Vilnius Castle be managed: should the castle's remains be preserved in the form of ruins or should the castle's silhouette be reconstructed using light "openwork" constructions.

This report will provide a detailed overview of the archival documents related to the Vilnius Upper Castle preservation projects, methods, and problems in the context of the conservation history of the Lithuanian medieval castles. The prospects for the conservation and rehabilitation of the Vilnius Upper Castle and similar objects of the architectural medieval heritage will also be discussed.

2. Research Design and methods

The paper will first go through the historic changes of the conservation concepts and challenges, and then will discuss which of the previous practices and theories continue to be relevant today. Despite of the fast development of the technology and increased awareness of the value of cultural heritage, when new projects for conservation are developed, it is often forgotten to refer to the important past experiences, discussions and projects, which could help to avoid doing the same mistakes of the past again. The analysis of the Vilnius Upper Castle case will help illustrate the great variety of possible conservation challenges. Earlier conservation works as well as reflections of different heritage experts on various conservation possibilities and methods will also be re-evaluated.

The analysis of practical and theoretical works will facilitate formulation of new non-destructive conservation recommendations for the medieval castles. Historiographical analysis of the Vilnius Upper Castle reveals some of the important positive conservation practices, but also shows that it was mainly due to the passive non-interference policy and lack of financing that this castle has escaped the large-scale invasive reconstruction works of its missing parts, differently than in the case of some other important medieval castles. For example, during the 6th and 7th decades of the 20th century, the Trakai Island Castle was stylistically restored and reconstructed, while at the same time Vilnius Upper Castle's remained preserved and just one of its defensive towers was restored and adapted for the museum.

The study will be limited to the Vilnius Upper Castle conservation and reconstruction projects' analysis, complementing it with some general heritage management trends of Lithuanian medieval castles.

The study is impeded by the widely scattered archival documents that were deposited in the different archives within the three countries (Lithuania, Poland and Russia) as a consequence of multiple occupations in Lithuanian history. Additionally, many resources are missing or are very fragmented and incomplete due to the migration or disappearance of some distinct heritage experts during the periods of war and political insecurity.

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