

A KERESDI BETHLEN-KASTÉLYKERT A 19-20. SZÁZAD FORDULÓJÁN

A történeti képanyag elemzése

THE BETHLEN CASTLE GARDEN IN KERESD AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY

An analysis of the historical pictures

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ABSZTRAKT

A keresdi várkastély és kert együttes az erdélyi reneszánsz egyik legfontosabb öröksége. A legtöbb fellelhető emlék ezen a helyszínen azonban a 18. és 19. században megjelenő tájképi kertről és főként annak historizáló kerti elemeiről maradt ránk. Korabeli levéltári adatok, feljegyzések, fényképes emlékek és számos tárgyi (terepi) emlék, valamint adatközlők szóbeli információi alapján körvonalozódnak a kert egykori állapota. Jelen tanulmány szerzői a keresdi kerttörténetet az elmúlt években diplomamunka, illetve kerttörténeti tanulmány keretében is feldolgozták. A tanulmány továbbiakban ezeket a kutatásokat használja fel, szintetizálva azokat és így részletezve a keresdi kerttörténetet, kifejezve annak relevanciáját egy meghatározott, néhány évtizedes időszakra vonatkoztatva. Jelen munka elsősorban a leíró jellegű történelmi források, a történeti térképek, a grafikai és művészeti ábrázolások, valamint a fennmaradt történeti fotók kutatásán és elemzésén alapul. Ezt a történeti kutatást a helyszínen végzett felmérések egészítik ki, amelyekhez társulnak a kert egyes területein végzett régészeti feltárások és geofizikai mérések eredményei. A levéltári anyagok közt fellelhető leltárak és összeírások, a hivatalos levelezések

és gazdasági iratok egyértelműen rávilágítanak a helyszínen erdélyi viszonylatban kiemelkedő kerttörténeti értékeire és fontosságára, amely főként a Bethlen család tekintélyes pozíciójának, politikai és gazdasági kapcsolatainak tulajdonítható.

A kutatás célja a 19-20. század fordulójára jellemző kerti funkciók és elemek azonosítása, amely alapul szolgálhat a helyszínen örökségvédelmi jelentőségének elismeréséhez, valamint egy jövőbeni kertmegújításhoz.

Kulcsszavak: erdélyi reneszánsz, tájképi kert, filagória, kerti tó, historizáló kerti elemek

ABSTRACT

The Bethlen Castle and Garden in Keresd represent one of the most important heritage sites of the Transylvanian Renaissance. The landscape garden and its historicising garden elements from the 18th and 19th centuries are preserved partially on this site. Evidence from contemporary archival sources, records, photographs, field artifacts and oral accounts from witnesses appears to provide a clear picture of the garden's previous state. The authors of this study have been engaged in researching the garden's history in recent years, both in the context of a thesis and a garden history study. This paper will apply the research findings to present a comprehensive history of Keresd Castle Garden, highlighting its significance during a specific time period spanning a few decades. This work is based primarily on research and analysis of descriptive historical sources, historical maps, artistic representations and historical photographs. The historical research is enhanced by on-site surveys, along with the findings from archaeological excavations and geophysical measurements in particular sections of the garden. The inventories and censuses, official correspondence and economic documents found in the archives clearly show the outstanding historical value and importance of the site in Transylvania, mainly due to the prestigious position and political and economic connections of the Bethlen family.

The research aims to identify defining garden features from the late 1800s-early 1900s, to help determine the site's heritage value and guide future garden renovations.

Keywords: Transylvanian Renaissance, landscape garden, philagoria, garden pond, historicising garden elements

INTRODUCTION

The Bethlen Castle Gardens in Keresd are among the most important and relatively well-preserved historical gardens in Transylvania. The fortified noble residence, which came into its current form at the close of the 18th century, is recognised as one of the most well-preserved examples of Transylvanian Renaissance-style architecture. Together with its garden, it is a heritage site of national importance, protected as a monument (West wing: MS-II-m-A-15639.01.; East wing: MS-II-m-A-15639.02.; Fortress: MS-II-m-A-15639.03.; Garden and crypts: MS-II-m-A-15639.04.). The castle, located in the heart of Keresd

on a plateau, is encircled by a 19th-century landscaped garden that conforms to the contemporary fashion. The garden, which occupies the hill surrounding the castle, was once a significant and well-maintained area, as evidenced by written records, images and remaining garden elements on the site.

During the 19th century, it is likely that the landscaped garden was established by Gábor Bethlen (1811-1872), who served as the notary of Marosszék. Subsequently, the estate passed to Count Gábor Bethlen (1836-1897), who held positions as the government commissioner of Upper-Fehér county in Transylvania starting in 1865, followed by roles as the government commissioner of Kis-Küküllő in 1875, and then as the government commissioner of Nagy-Küküllő county from the following year until 1890. The count did not establish a family, as stated in the description [1] (pp. 563-564). The photo album "Details of Count Gábor Bethlen's Keresd Castle and Garden" [2], published in 1912 after his death, suggests that Count Gábor Bethlen significantly contributed to the development of the landscape garden during his time at home and added various historicising elements that defined its former appearance. The album provides a visual record of the garden's evolution and the count's influence on its design. The castle and garden hold historical significance and are part of the rich cultural heritage of the region.

The next owner, Bálint Bethlen (1887-1946), was the owner of Keresd and Kerlés, and is referred to in the descriptions as an active participant in the life of the Transylvanian Reformed Church and the Hungarian community [1] (p. 561.). Between the two world wars, Bálint's brother Béla Bethlen (1888-1979) and his wife Klára Kornis, their daughter Ágnes and their uncle Ödön Bethlen continued to live on the estate until the eviction order of 3 March 1949, when the entire castle was emptied in two days. Thereafter, the condition of the ensemble gradually deteriorated [3] (p. 314.), [4] (p. 74.).

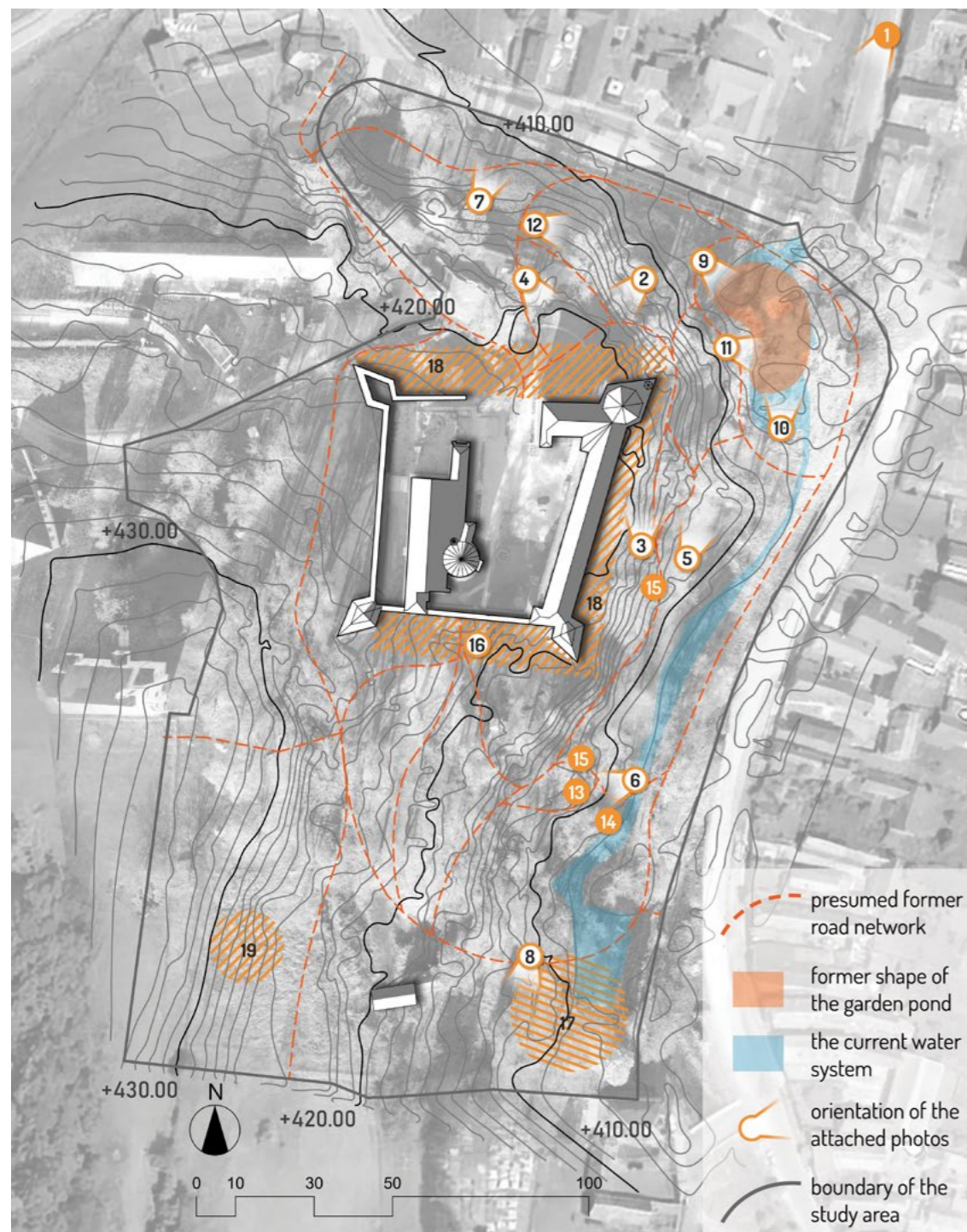
The condition of the landscape garden deteriorated significantly during the socialist era, as did most historic gardens in Transylvania. Of the other nationalised residences, the one in Keresd was fortunate, however, as the Romanian State returned it to the Bethlen family in June 2007 after a long lawsuit [5] (p. 169.).




The ownership of the estate has shifted, and responsibility for maintaining the castle-garden complex has been transferred to the St. Francis of Deva Foundation for



◀◀ **Figure 1:** Historical photographs illustrated on a map
AUTHOR'S FIGURE

Table 1: Elements of the historicist garden style period of the Bethlen Castle in Keresd



-  Garden features that no longer exist in the area, known only from descriptions, contemporary photographs or the accounts of living witnesses
-  Heritage features that still exist in the area, in whole or in part
-  Heritage features that no longer exist on the site but can be clearly identified from descriptions and contemporary photographs

Object nr.	Designation	Existing features (good or deteriorated condition)	No longer existing features
1.	View of the castle hill from the north	X	
2.	Banana tree and palm tree in the castle garden		X
3.	Garden path parallel to the eastern wall, with banana tree and Sophora spp. tree		X
4.	Backrest bench and planter with decorative stone pedestal		X
5.	Ornamental pool with fountain		X
6.	Circular ornamental pool with stone statue in the middle		X
7.	Arabesque / Moorish garden pavilion		X
8.	Oriental-style music pavilion		X
9.	Original shape of the garden pond with island and rock garden		X
10.	Garden pond – "Ochsenhorn" visual axis		X
11.	Garden pond – eastern hillside visual axis		X
12.	North slope – eastern hillside visual axis		X
13.	Tomb of the Bethlen family (Figure 9)	X	
14.	Rustic log cabin (Figure 10)		X
15.	Garden stairs / steps	(3)	
16.	Carved decorative stone vessels at the southern entrance		X
17.	Antique sculptures in the southern part of the garden		X
18.	Exotic plants around the fortress		X
19.	Greenhouse / glasshouse		X

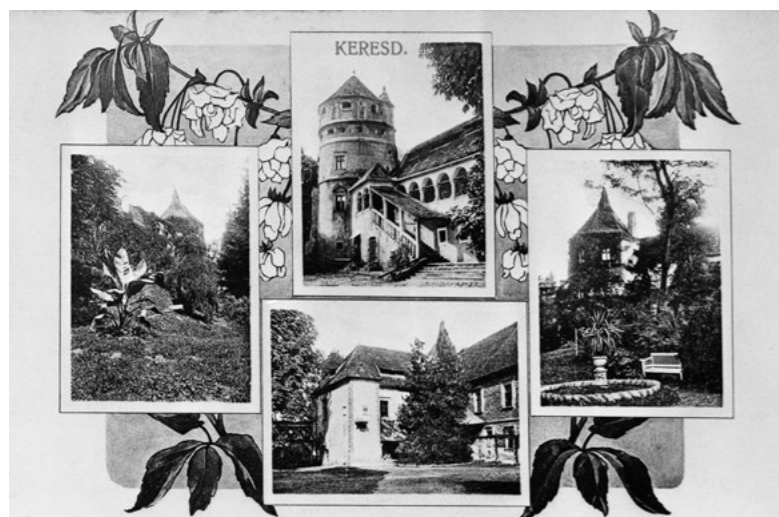
the period from 2016 to 2064. This change has established a more conducive economic environment for preserving and developing the castle-garden complex. The Foundation's primary focus is on the building's development, with plans for the castle's surroundings to be addressed in the long term. The garden's restoration is a secondary priority.

To create the development programme, a landscape architectural study was carried out, based on the garden history research conducted by Dr. Albert Fekete, a garden history expert, as part of Dániel Komes's diploma thesis [6]. The current condition survey, including a tree inventory, was carried out by Absis Landscape Studio Ltd [7]. The study examines written and pictorial sources to identify different garden style periods. Research findings indicate that the garden's peak period was at the turn of the 20th century, when the landscape garden

structure was enhanced with historicising elements, a time well documented by rich photographic illustrations. The goal of this synthesis study is to present the historicising period of the castle of Keresd's gardens.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Several sources are available on the English Landscape Garden period of the Bethlen Castle Garden in Keresd, its heyday and decline. Photographic documentations from 1912 to 1971, such as the photo album "Details of the Castle and Garden of Count Gábor Bethlen of Keresd" (1912) [2], family photo albums from 1928 and 1929, and additional material from the KÖH [8] Photographic Archives, provide a rich source of research material. These sources offer insights into the garden's development, peak period and eventual decline, making them valuable resources for studying the history of this historic garden.



◀◀ **Figure 2a-b:** A painting, possibly from the 19th century, and the same view today

SOURCE: KÖH – LTSZ.:003.509 N; IMAGE BY AUTHORS, 2023.02.

◀◀ **Figure 3:** A postcard from the early 20th century

SOURCE: KÖH PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES - LTSZ.:147.877 N

◀◀ **Figure 4:** Banana tree and date palms in the castle garden

SOURCE: DMI PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES, 1912

Figure 5a-c: Garden path parallel to the eastern wall, with banana tree and Japanese pagoda tree

SOURCE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: DMI PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES – 1912;

AUTHOR'S IMAGE 2016 AND 2023



The castle attracted the interest of the Romanian heritage protection authorities [9] and was frequently photographed after 1949, so photo albums up to 1971 are available, and provide photographs that document the destruction of the complex.

The primary research method involves analysing the garden sections depicted in historical photographs and then identifying their exact locations during site visits. The photographic material is complemented by archival documents and Transylvanian and Hungarian analogies, which help to understand the development processes, stylistic features and historical and economic context of the former garden. This information is presented in the study as a supplement to the thematic description of contemporary records, providing a comprehensive understanding of the garden's history and evolution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pictorial sources become really important from the 19th century onwards. In particular, the photographs taken between 1912 and 1929 make it possible to identify details of the garden, the visual axes and views, which can help reconstruct the former garden structure. In keeping with its landscape style and the expectations of the period, the gardens include decorative pools with water features, carved stone statues and stone vessels, garden pavilions and other leisure structures, rock gardens, flower beds, exotic woody and herbaceous plants, ornate garden furniture and a greenhouse. The topography of the site has allowed for a spatial composition in which visual axes to the garden and the surrounding landscape play a decisive role. Traces of the garden's heyday can still be seen today. Figure 1. illustrates a map representation of the discovered

components of the garden's historicising period, categorised into three groups:

1. Garden features that no longer exist in the area, known only from descriptions, contemporary photographs or the accounts of living witnesses
2. Heritage features that still exist in the area, in whole or in part
3. Heritage features that no longer exist on the site but can be clearly identified from descriptions and contemporary photographs

Table 1. shows elements of the historicising period for the castle garden, most of which are illustrated by photographs in this paper. It also summarises the results of the research, which show that some elements or garden compositions are still to be found, but may be in a deteriorated state, or have disappeared.

A photographic negative in the Photographic Archives of the Cultural Heritage Protection Office reproduces a painting, possibly from the 19th century, that showcases a view of the castle from the north-east (Figure 2, object 1). The painting depicts an English landscape garden with mature vegetation framing the castle building, while the Keresd stream flows in the foreground, with a wooden bridge leading to the castle park, which is enclosed by a high wall. The north-east tower is connected to a wall with a gate, from which footpaths run along the castle's eastern wall and lead down to the garden below. Behind the fence by the stream are three poplar trees (*Populus nigra* 'Italica'), a characteristic species commonly found in landscape gardens.

At the turn of the 20th century, rare Mediterranean plants were planted around the building [10]. A postcard from that era (Figure 3) provides a glimpse of this

Figure 6a-c: A circular flower bed featuring a pedestal flowerpot at its centre, accompanied by a yucca and a bench

SOURCE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: DMI PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES – 1912;
IMAGE BY AUTHORS 2023

►► **Figure 7a-c:** Arched, stone-carved ornamental pool with a fountain at its centre

SOURCE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: DMI PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES – 1912;
BETHLEN FAMILY'S PHOTO ALBUM – 1929; IMAGE BY AUTHORS – 2023

►► **Figure 8a-b:** A stone-carved sculpture in the centre of a circular ornamental pool

SOURCE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: DMI PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES – 1912;
IMAGE BY AUTHORS – 2023

►► **Figure 9a-b:** The Bethlen family's crypt-like burial site with carved tombstones. Works of stone carver Elias Nicolai from 1631

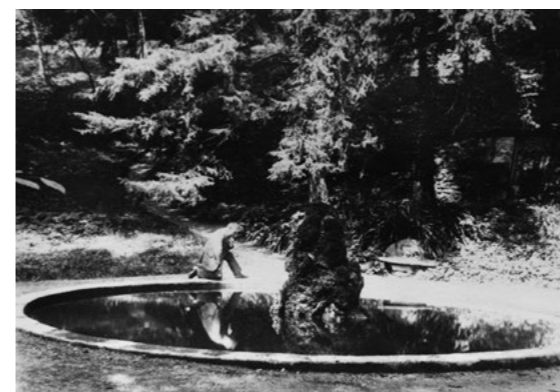
SOURCE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: DMI PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES – 1912;
IMAGE BY AUTHORS – 2023



setting. Other sections of the garden also feature a variety of exotic plants, like bananas (*Musa ssp*), date palms (*Phoenix dactylifera*) and more (Figure 4, object 2). Historical records indicate that significant efforts were made to enhance and maintain the castle park in Keresd during this period. Alongside the diverse plant life captured in contemporary photographs, written documentation reveals that ornamental plants were frequently sourced from foreign nurseries, particularly Dutch and German, to enrich the garden's botanical diversity [11,12].

Photographs capturing the garden in front of the eastern castle wall feature a weeping Japanese pagoda tree (*Styphnolobium japonicum* 'Pendula'), a specimen that remains present in the castle garden (Figure 5, object 3). This tree, along with other exotic species, signifies the establishment of a dendrological collection garden in Keresd, a trend that gained popularity as a landscape

garden feature in the early 19th century. Such gardens embody the landscape ideal, emphasising the natural beauty of plant species as the primary decorative element. The proliferation of exotic species reflects a growing interest in plant diversity, evident not only in Keresd but also across the region. Historical photographs and the current tree population composition highlight the enthusiasm for botanical collections in Keresd. In addition to exotic plants depicted in historical records, the castle gardens in Keresd also host various tree species typical of Transylvanian castle gardens, some of which have endured and can still be observed on the premises. The eastern slope boasts the highest concentration of exotic species, interspersed with a mix of mature and young vegetation, providing a nurturing environment for these species, predominantly deciduous trees. These are the most prized plant species in the gardens of Keresd



and are all characteristic exotic species (dendrological value) of castle gardens. They include: *Ginkgo biloba*, *Styphnolobium japonicum* 'Pendula', *Quercus robur* 'Pyramidalis', *Aesculus hippocastanum*, *Platanus hispanica*, *Fagus sylvatica* 'Atropunicea', *Liriodendron tulipifera*, *Gymnocladus dioicus*, *Taxodium distichum*, *Gleditsia triacanthos* and *Abies alba*.

Period photographs reveal several flower arrangements emblematic of the historicist era. In front of the northern defensive wall of the castle, near the main entrance, a circular flowerbed is visible, featuring a pedestal flowerpot at its centre, accompanied by a yucca and a bench. In the background of Figure 6, object 4, roses bloom in the clearing in front of the aforementioned flowerbed, with a notable presence of pine trees surrounding the area. This section of the garden remains discernible today.

Besides the garden pond, two decorative pools were present in the castle garden. The first is a rectangular, arched stone-carved ornamental pool, approximately three metres in diameter, with a fountain at its centre (Figure 7, object 5). Although the pool itself has been destroyed, its former location is still distinguishable by the landforms. The second pool, located along the eastern rampart, is a circular, sunken stone basin in the lower third of the slope of the castle hill, featuring a stone carving at its centre. This once formed a harmonious ensemble with the crypt-like burial place of the Bethlen family, shaded by spruces (Figure 8, object 6).

The family's crypt-like burial site is identified by multiple gravestones (Figure 9), the earliest dating back to 1631. Among these are works by Elias Nicolai, a stonemason from Hermannstadt (Nagyszeben / Sibiu), who crafted the tomb of Mrs. Ferenc Bethlen and her children, as well

Figure 10: Rustic wooden huts to the southeast from the circular ornamental pool

SOURCE: DMI PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES – 1912

Figure 11: The pavilion, known as the 'Moorish house' with ornamental facade

SOURCE: PRIVATE ARCHIVE OF SANDRU VASILE CORNEL, RESIDENT, EXACT DATING UNKNOWN

►► **Figure 12:** Oriental-style music pavilion

SOURCE: DMI PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES – 1912

►► **Figure 13a-b:** A bowling alley and a "fachwerk" dwarf house situated on the banks of the garden pond. A rock garden was situated along the lakeshore, between the water surface and the buildings.

SOURCE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: PRIVATE ARCHIVE OF SANDRU VASILE CORNEL, RESIDENT, EXACT DATING UNKNOWN; IMAGE BY AUTHORS - 2023

►► **Figure 14a-b:** View towards "Ochsenhorn" hill

SOURCE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: BETHLEN FAMILY'S PHOTO ALBUM – 1929; IMAGE BY AUTHORS – 2023



as the tombstone of Zsuzsanna Kamuthy (daughter of Farkas Kamuthy [13]) and her two daughters (Borbála and Elisabeth Bethlen) [14] (p. 142.) [15] (p.122). The inscription on the latter reads "A(nn)O 1631 DIE 19 IAN/ELIAS NICOLAI S" [16] (p. 203.)." The original condition of the two carved stone tablets is known from the photo album of 1912, as only one of them has survived.

Garden gazebos have always been a beloved leisure feature in gardens. In the castle gardens of Keresd, rustic wooden huts (Figure 10) and ornate pavilions were also discovered. One of these pavilions exhibits carved gable ornamentation and the garden lattice entrance terrace design, reminiscent of 19th-century holiday villas. The façade's detailed, delicate and lace-like decoration even incorporates Moorish architectural references (Fig. 11, object 7). The pavilion's architectural style and the tall roses adorning the entrance suggest its purpose as a

representational and leisure garden feature. This pavilion, known as the 'Moorish house', was likely situated near the northern entrance to the castle, at the foot of the northern slope [17].

The other pavilion is even more elaborate, featuring an open, philagoria-like design with airy, open-worked sides, evoking a slightly Chinese, oriental aesthetic. This was the garden's music pavilion, located in the south-eastern part and surrounded by antique sculptures and a flower arrangement. The inside of its decking was decorated with paintings. Before the 1990s, it was relocated to the municipal central park and later to the local Orthodox cemetery, from where it was soon transferred to Schäßburg (Segesvár / Sighișoara) and ultimately lost [17]. To determine the pavilion's former location in the garden, we have consulted local residents, photographs and archaeological traces in the landscaping. According to



these sources, the pavilion was situated on the south-eastern slope of the park (Figure 12, object 8).

A notable trend in landscape gardens [18] involves the adoption of garden elements inspired by distant landscapes and cultures, particularly through garden pavilions that reflect unique architectural characteristics [19, 20]. These structures often draw inspiration from pagoda architecture, resulting in multistorey pavilions with distinctive roofs. The oriental influence evident in these garden pavilions, as seen in Keresd and in numerous examples throughout Hungary and Transylvania, showcases a fusion of distant stylistic elements with local design, creating a captivating blend of influences in garden architecture.

A 20th-century photograph reveals that the north-east corner of the garden once featured additional recreational structures: a bowling alley and a "fachwerk" dwarf house situated on the banks of the garden pond. An island with

a bridge was also present in the pond, accompanied by a rock garden along the lakeshore, between the water surface and the buildings (Figure 13, object 9).

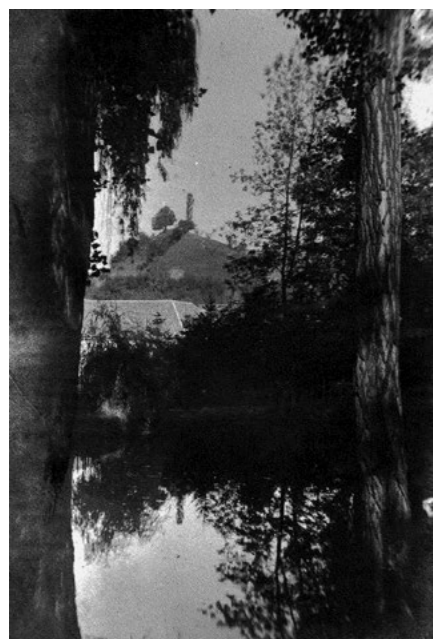
In the landscape garden, visual axes and vistas have been designed to showcase the garden's internal spatial system while incorporating the surrounding landscape and its unique features into the composition. These visual relationships can be discerned in photographs from the early 20th century. The elevated castle platform and castle building windows offer a breathtaking view of the garden and the surrounding landscape, while the varied topography of the surrounding area allows for views of the surrounding hillsides from the lake's shore at the garden's lowest point (Fig. 14, Object 10). A columnar poplar tree (*Populus nigra* 'Italica'), a species commonly used in landscape gardens, plays a significant compositional role, serving as an "eye-catcher" in the surrounding

Figure 15a-b: Visual axis, where the hilltop is reflected in the water of the garden pond

SOURCE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: BETHLEN FAMILY'S PHOTO ALBUM – 1929;
IMAGE BY AUTHORS – 2023

►► **Figure 16a-b:** The same hilltop from the area north of the castle

SOURCE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: DMI PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES – 1912;
IMAGE BY AUTHORS – 2023



landscape, drawing the observer's attention to the hilltop (Fig. 15, Object 11). The same hilltop is also highlighted by an ornamental garden detail in front of the farmyard, as seen in a contemporary photograph, likely featuring annual plantings and a stone fence (Figure 16, Object 12). An evergreen hedge is visible alongside the fence, accompanied by a tree with a weeping crown and a footpath on the right of the image.

CONCLUSIONS

The gardens of Bethlen Castle in Keresd boast a rich historical legacy and represent significant landscape architecture and stylistic values. The most significant period of the landscape garden was its heyday, spanning the 19th and first half of the 20th century, during which it evolved into a dendrological collection garden enriched by historicising garden elements. Early 20th-century photographs

depict an elaborate, meticulously maintained garden. Although many built and garden infrastructure elements have deteriorated or vanished over time, certain characteristic compositional and functional elements, such as visual axes, views, the balance of canopy to open space, the garden pond and its surroundings, and remnants of the former landscaping, remain discernible. The collection of photographs titled “Details of the Castle and Garden of Count Gábor Bethlen of Keresd”, dating from 1912, serves as an invaluable resource in the renovation process, offering insights through which to recreate the atmosphere of the former garden. ©



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