

ALBINAS KUNCEVIČIUS

FIRST INVESTIGATION RECORDS ABOUT THE LOWER CASTLE PALACE OF VILNIUS ERECTED BY VYTAUTAS, THE GRAND DUKE OF LITHUANIA

The information about the oldest castles of Vilnius is scarce. Duke Gediminas' letters to the Pope and the Hanse Towns of A.D. 1323¹ constitute the first reliable source in which the city of Vilnius is mentioned. Since then Vilnius has been the capital of Lithuania and its sovereign is the sovereign of the whole country. On August 15th, 1365 the castles of Vilnius appeared for the first time in a written record, i.e. in the description of the Crusaders onslaught². However, the above mentioned record, as well as some later ones, neither describe the castles themselves nor point to their location. In the summer of 1390 the Crusaders' Order onslaughted Vilnius. The town had three castles at that time. During the onslaught the timber castle called Kreivoji (Curved) or Aukščiausioji (Highest) used for the defence of the townspeople was taken over and burned down. It was never rebuilt. This castle is supposed to have been erected north-east of Gediminas Castle Hill on the highest point of Vilnius. The two other castles, the residences of the Grand Duke of Lithuania, were built of brick. One of the castles called Aukštutine (Upper) was situated on Gediminas Castle Hill, the other one called Žemutine (Lower) was located north-west of this hill³. Neither the above mentioned source nor the later ones of the 14th century give a description of the Lower Castle.

The Lower Castle is a complex of buildings surrounded by a wall. It occupies a relatively big area of about 4 ha at the confluence of the Neris and the Vilnius rivers (fig. 1).

In the iconography the false idea that the Lower Castle Palace of Vilnius had been a timber one up to the very end of the 15th century seems to be the predominant one. While speaking about the Lower Castle of Vilnius of the Vytautas' period, at least two records are usually mentioned. In the years 1413-1414 the French knight Ghillebert de Lannoy travelled across Lithuania as an envoy and described the castles of Vilnius. According to him, at that time the castle was "erected on a very high sandy hill, reinforced with stones, earthwork and brickwork". He adds that "It is wooden inside. The courtyard spreads over the hillslopes. There are quite a

number of houses in the courtyard, which is surrounded by a brick wall. The above mentioned Duke Vytautas, the sovereign of Lithuania, usually stays inside the castle or in the courtyard. He has his palace and the residence there. A river flows down to the town, not far from the castle. It is called Vilni ..." ⁴. The above description points to the fact that the Tower Castle of Vilnius was the place where Vytautas' palace was located. It was situated on a sandy cape near Gediminas Castle Hill. Ghillebert de Lannoy does not describe the Castle Palace itself. Only the brick wall that the castle was surrounded with and "quite a number of houses in the courtyard" are mentioned here. According to me, the phrase "It is wooden inside" refers to the interior of the Upper Castle. The other source is the Commander of Daugavpils' report written for the Master of Livonia saying that on March 17th, 1419 Vytautas' Castle Palace and the Upper Castle were burned down. The damage amounted to 60 000 silver pieces⁵. Also in this case, the Upper Castle and the Ducal Palace are clearly distinguished. Before long the castles were reconstructed.



Fig. 1. 16th and 17th c. plans of the castles of Vilnius.
I - The Upper Castle, II - Residential Palace of the Lower Castle, III - The Cathedral and the Cathedral Square, IV - The palace garden, V - The Arsenal.

¹ *Gedimino laišakai*, Vilnius 1966.

² *Lietuvos pilys*, Vilnius 1971, p. 26.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

⁴ J. Leluwel, *Gilbert de Lannoy i jego podróże*, Poznań 1844, pp. 39-47.

⁵ N. Kitkauskas, *Vilniaus pilys*, Vilnius 1989, p. 19.

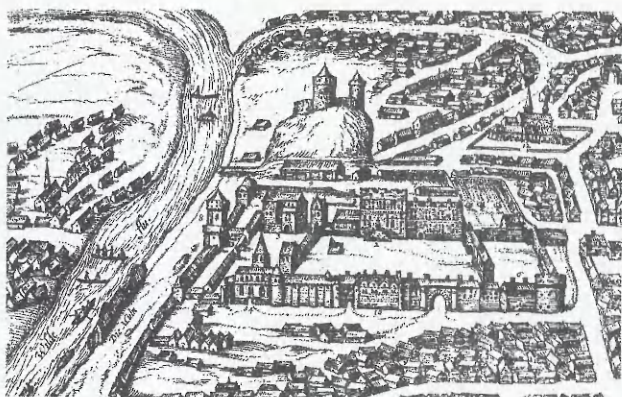


Fig. 2. Part of the panorama of Vilnius — the castles. Plan from the atlas by G. Braunn and F. Hohenberg (Lithuanian Art Museum).

In A.D. 1422 Vytautas sent a letter from Vilnius to the Archbishop of Riga and received the Pope's legate here⁶. Besides, in 1430 it was decided that Vytautas' coronation would take place in Vilnius, which required the renovation of the Cathedral and the magnificent palace with a ceremony hall and premises for Vytautas' noble guests.

The iconographic material does not offer any information, either. The view of the Vilnius Lower Castle can be seen in Braunn's atlas, but it is inexact. The drawing is supposed to have been made in 1545 after Žygimantas the Old had carried out the reconstruction. The atlas was composed in Köln only about 1575⁷ (fig. 2). The configuration of the palace and its buildings is inexactly presented here. Other plans of Vilnius dating from the 16th-18th c. and the drawings of the Lower Castle Palace of the late 18th century help us to reconstruct the view of the Renaissance (or Manerism) palace, the location and the view of its particular buildings⁸. Therefore all the suppositions concerning the dating and the "builder" of the Lower Castle Palace of Vilnius can be confirmed or denied only on the basis of archaeological and architectural investigations. The investigations have been constantly carried out since 1988. The archaeologists V. Urbanavičius (the leader of the group), A. Tautavičius and A. Kuncevičius and the specialist on the history of architecture, the architect N. Kitkauskas are the members of the research group. Up to now the whole of the eastern building, approximately a half of the southern building of the Renaissance palace and a small part of the inner and outer courtyards have been researched (fig. 3). Data concerning the Vilnius Lower Castle Palace of the Vytautas' period as well as some other interesting material have already been gathered. A short presentation of this data is the aim of the present article.

⁶ Lietuvos pilys, p. 29.

⁷ V. Dremas, *Ad fontes, cives*, Krantai 1989, No. 4, p. 24.

⁸ N. Kitkauskas, *op. cit.*, p. 13-65.

Some archaeological investigations, though on a smaller scale, have been carried out on this territory before. The area between Gediminas Castle Hill and the Cathedral was dug across for the first time in 1964 by a heat-engineering ditch. The works were supervised by archaeologists and A. Tautavičius was the leader of the investigations⁹. It was then that the foundations of the western building of the Renaissance palace and a massive brick wall with counterforts by the former Pioneers' Palace were discovered. The wall was found to have been built by the use of the Baltic brick bond and was dated to the 13th century. As only the southern wall was excavated, it was assumed to be a part of a 13th c. building. The building was believed to have been a large one with nervuric vaults. Such a building is described and sometimes represented in the retrospective drawings of the 11th century castles of Vilnius published by architects¹⁰. The following archaeological investigations of 1988 refuted the supposition that till the early 15th century there had been a building North of the excavated wall. In the years 1974-1985 the Institute of Monument Preservation investigated a part of the basement of the Renaissance palace's western building, where air conditioners for the Picture Gallery were being installed. During the investigations the remnants of brickworks dating from different periods were discovered, but the archaeological material was never published. In 1987 the same institute cleared the basement of the eastern

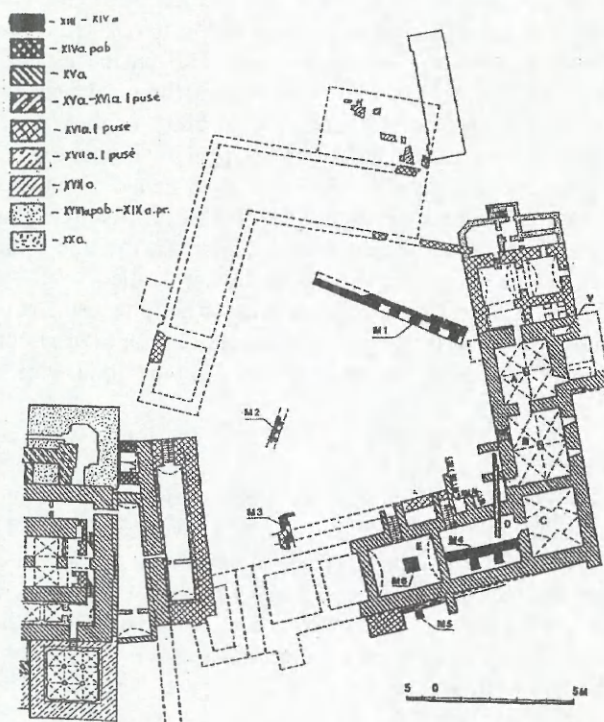


Fig. 3. Plan of the palace (16th and 17th c.).

⁹ *Vilniaus Žemutinės pilies rūmai. 1988 metu tyrimai*, Vilnius 1989, p. 6.

¹⁰ N. Kitkauskas, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

building of the Lower Castle Palace in order to found a museum in the former Pioneers' Palace (the investigations were led by V. Raškauskas and G. Stankevičius)¹¹. During the works the area of 550 m² was researched, the basement of the eastern building was unearthed, the location of the northern building was established and a lot of material dating from the 15th-18th c. was found. Recent investigations allow us to determine the building stages of the construction and, what seems to be of importance to the present subject, the form of the palace during the reign of Vytautas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania.

The territory of the Lower Castle Palace of Vilnius till the early 15th century

The archaeological and geological investigations have confirmed the hints found in the written sources according to which till the 14th century the Lower Castle Palace had occupied the natural sand cape stretching westwards from Gediminas Castle Hill to the Cathedral. The cape is a hillock of sand with clay insertions. It is about 40 m wide at the base and the slopes, about 7 m high, slope southwards and northwards towards the Vilnele and the Neris rivers. The southern slope seems to have been more gentle, presumably with a terrace, and the northern one was steeper. The top of the hillock, which became the inner courtyard of the Gothic and later of the Renaissance palace, was destroyed during later reconstructions. Nonetheless, the remains of the cultural layer, especially on the southern slope, point to the fact that the hillock was inhabited during the entire first millennium A.D. In the late 13th or the early 14th c. the wall with counterforts was erected on the northern edge of the hill. The researched area to the North of this wall allows us to make the supposition that it was the defensive wall of the palace. It is located about 0.5 m beneath the ground level and its foundation is about 3 m wide. The southern side of the wall is equipped with massive quadrangular counterforts. The architectural investigations — brick proportions, the way it is laid, as well as the analysis of mortar — allow us to date the construction to the end of the 13th - the beginning of the 14th c. Up to now about 30 m of the wall stretching east-westwards have been unearthed. On the turn of the 14th century a small wall, which eventually broke off and fell down the hill, was added at the northern side. The northern slope of the hillock, North of the wall with counterforts, was about 7 m high and quite steep. Though it was wet and peaty at the foot of it, the hillock had been inhabited at least since the first centuries A.D. The 13th-14th c. saw the most intensive building works. It was then that timber houses were constructed. During this period a 4 m thick layer of peat abounding in organic remains: chips of wood, logs, animal bones, was formed at the foot of the hillock. Some pottery, metal and glass objects were found there. At the beginning of the

15th century there was a timber homestead not far from the northern wall with counterforts. It is supposed to have belonged to the Duke's courtiers. Fragments of a timber house, a wooden pavement and a fence made of vertical boards have remained. The homestead was demolished at the beginning of the 15th c. At least 10 massive quadrangular and round poles were dug into the ground at the foot of the slope. They seem to have been arranged in three rows and, most probably, supported a 5-6 m wide wooden bridge leading to the gate in the wall with counterforts. At the beginning of the 15th c. the courtyard was situated South of the wall, 3.5-4 m above the foot of the hillock, which was raised to the level of the inner courtyard only at the beginning of the 16th century during the construction of the Renaissance palace.

Some brick buildings had stood on the southern slope of the cape, about 6-7 m high, at least since the early 14th c. They were all demolished while the southern building of the Gothic palace was being erected. As only some fragments of this palace have remained and only a part of its southern building and the inner courtyard have been unearthed so far, it is difficult to reconstruct its system and the purpose of its construction. In basement D of the Gothic palace, parallel to the southern wall, 15 m long and about 2.2 m wide foundations of an older wall have been preserved. The wall was demolished to the floor-level of former basement D. It had been built of large boulders and bricks and the Baltic brick bond had been used. The brick proportions, the way it was laid, as well as the mortar allow us to date the remains of the wall to the 13th-14th c. Therefore they may be contemporary with the wall with counterforts erected in the northern part of the cape. In basement E of the Gothic palace the remnants of some earlier buildings have been discovered as well: a stonework, 2.4 x 2.4 m, found in the middle of basement E and a quadrangular stone construction, about 2.5 x 2.9 m, which came to light in the south-western part of this basement. It has a 2.65 x 7 m stone counterfort at its southern side. These stoneworks are not connected with each other, but they were both demolished to the floor-level of later basement. Some remains of a stonework older than the Gothic palace have been found South of basement E, too. During the construction of the southern wall of the palace small stone walls resembling counterforts were demolished or used in some other places. The remnants of these walls can be seen on the edges of basements D and E and in the middle of basement E. The first counterfort is 1.86 m long. Its width cannot be determined as the investigations have not been completed yet. The second one is 3.5 m long and 1.4 m wide. The former is linked to the southern wall of the Gothic palace, the latter has been demolished.

In 1990 during the investigations of the inner courtyard of the Lower Castle situated to the North of basement F of the southern building the remains of a brick building were discovered. Up to now only the eastern part and the north-eastern corner of this construction ha-

¹¹ *Vilniaus Žemutines ...*, p. 7.

ve been unearthed. It used to be a magnificent building, stretching south-northwards, with a staircase on its eastern side. The southern wall was demolished while the Gothic palace was being erected. The whole building, which had been 11.5 m long, was demolished to the inner courtyard-level of the new palace. The inner wall is 1.35 m thick. It has two niches 1.4 m wide and 0.86 m deep on the inner face of the wall. The width of the northern wall of the building is about 1.86 m with only 5.5 m unearthed. The staircase is 1.78 m wide. It has six steps covered with bricks. The inside of the building is 7.8 m long. The floor is made of stones and bricks. There is no doubt that the building is older than the Gothic palace, though the exact dating as well as the purpose of its construction will become clear as soon as it has been completely unearthed. The preserved walls (about 1 m high) display the Baltic brick bond i.e. they are laid of two stretchers and a header interchangeably. The bricks differ from the Gothic ones: they have no strokes and their proportions are different. The staircase was found to have been filled up with 14th century rubble. About 50 thick smooth bricks and about 40 thin and broad ones with strokes (3.5 x 15 x 5.5 cm) were found in the rubble. About 70 floor tiles measuring 17x17x6 cm covered with greenish, blueish or brown glaze, about 30 trough-shaped tiles characteristic of the 14th-15th c., as well as pieces of painted plaster (red, green, blue and black) were found there, too. The material we have at our disposal as well as the building's stratigraphy allow us to form the hypothesis that the building dates back to the 14th century i. e. to the era of Vytautas and Gedyminas.

All these stone- and brickworks point to the fact that there had been a few smaller brick and stone buildings on this site before the new palace was erected in the first decades of the 15th century. The buildings are supposed to have been surrounded by a brick wall. This hypothesis seems to be confirmed by Ghillebert de Lannoy's account. After the fire of 1419 the new palace was constructed by Vytautas, the Duke of Lithuania.

The Lower Castle Palace of Vilnius during the reign of Vytautas

Recent data allows us to state that the northern part of the palace erected in the third decade of the 15th c. bordered upon the wall with counterforts. One end of the wall leant against the corner of the eastern building erected in the Gothic style at the base of the hill slope. The eastern building was about 40 m long and 10 m wide. It had three basements: basement A (10.5 x 9.6 m), basement B (12 x 9.5 m), basement C, a trapezium in plan, (10.2 x 11.4 x 9.5 m). The outer walls of this building, i.e. the eastern and the western ones, were 2.5 m thick. The inner walls were thinner, about 1.8-1.9 m thick. The walls were built of Gothic bricks with rows of boulders. The bricks are characteristic of the 14th and the 15th c. "They show the proportions analogues to those of the Ducal Palace of the Upper Castle, the Vil-

nius Cathedral erected after the fire of 1419 and the third floor of the round section of the Cathedral's Bell Tower"¹². Basements A and B were covered with four-ribbed grain. The door in the back wall of the building led to basement A. Basement C had only one entrance from adjacent basement D. The window holes of basements A and B have been preserved. They are situated on the eastern wall i.e. they open into the inner courtyard. The floor of the Gothic palace was either a dirt or a wooden one. The basements are 4 m high. The thickness of the outer and partition walls suggests that the Gothic palace could be a two- or three-storey building. The examination of the 19th century building constructed on the northern part of the eastern building provides some information concerning the ground floors of the structure. The excavation works conducted in basement C, which was filled up with the rubble of the floors and vaults of the ground, first and second floors, which collapsed after the fire in the 17th century, prove that the ground and the first floor had been built in the Gothic style. The premises were 5 m high (from the level of the ground floor tiles to the level of the first floor's floor) and crowned with a cross vaulting. The floors of the ground and the first floors were covered with red unglazed quadrangular plates (15 x 15 cm or 16 x 16 cm). Some of the plates were covered with green, brown or yellowish glaze. The fades of the Gothic palace were built of red bricks and unplastered. In the northern wall of the north-eastern corner of the eastern building, which is about 3 m thick, a vertical shaft was found at a depth of about 5-5.5 m below the ground floor. It is a rectangle (3.15 x 1.60 m). The inner walls of the shaft are smooth and unplastered. A niche (1.05 x 0.9 m) covered with a barrel vault was revealed in the eastern wall of the shaft about 1.3 m below the floor level. The niche is 0.6 m deep and the end of it is walled up with bricks. It had been used till the 17th century. The purpose of its construction is not clear yet. It is supposed to have been a lavatory or a prison.

The eastern and the southern buildings of the palace seem to be contemporary. The latter has not been comprehensively researched yet. Only a half of it has been excavated. The area which has already been researched stretches up to a small tower represented in the 18th century drawings. The southern building was erected on the slope of the cape. The basement windows of the southern wall were opened during the Gothic period. As it has already been mentioned, during the construction of the southern building some older brick- and stone-works, as well as the building which had been erected on this site before were demolished. The eastern building was built before the southern one, which was added to the older structure. The brick-projections visible on the western wall of the eastern building used to join the buildings can be the evidence here. It is still unclear why only the northern wall of the southern building was moved southwards by the thickness of the wall. The pre-

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 53.

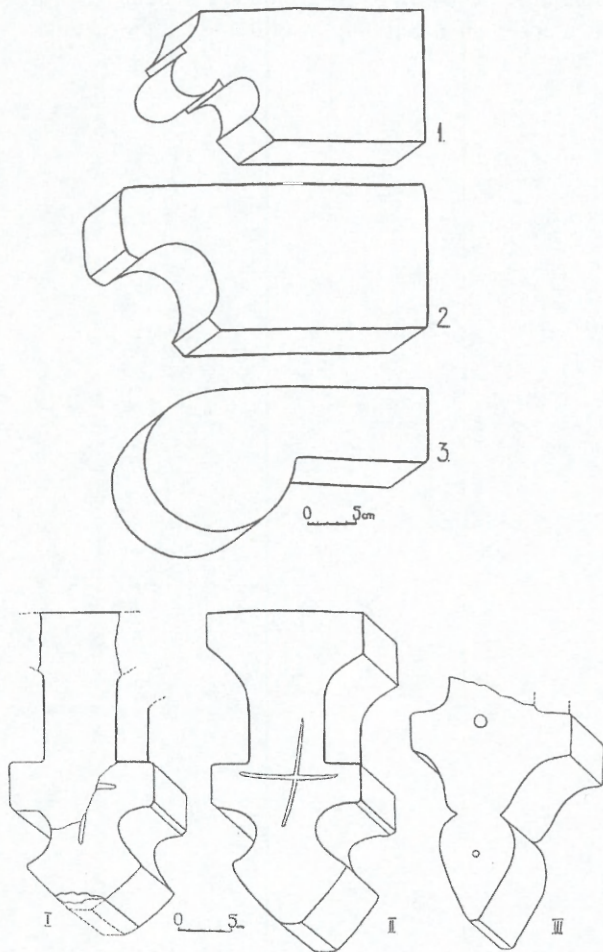


Fig. 4-5. Profiled nervuric bricks.

misses might have been narrowed so as to arch a cross vault at the same height as in the eastern building. 3.5 m west of the edge of the eastern building the northern wall of the southern building is moved southwards and the southern wall of the same building protrudes northwards by the full length of basement D. The above observations indicate that there must have been a plan or model of the palace. There is nothing extraordinary about an error made while the direction of the southern building foundation was being established. It was the case with the Lyda Castle, where the builders abandoned the foundation of its eastern wall¹³.

The outer wall of the southern building appears to be quite thick. It is about 3.5 m wide at the foundation level, which points to its defensive purposes. Besides, the wall was built on an extremely wet slope. That is why

the southern wall was laid on wooden logs. At the bottom there are vertical poles, about 20 cm in diameter, and pine logs are placed transversely and longitudinally above them. The logs are stripped off, about 15-20 cm in diameter. The wall is built of bricks and stones. There are 5 steps at intervals of 0.4-0.6 m on its southern side, South of basement E. They are 20-25 cm wide.

Basement D was as large as 13.3 x 8.8 m. It was arched with a barrel vaulting with deep lunettes and it had a dirt-floor. The entrance was from the inner courtyard. As there was a door to basement C from this basement, both the basements might have been of the same height. Basement E, about 12.3 x 8.8 m, had a barrel vault, two windows on its southern wall and a dirt-floor. There was a timber partition wall made of poles, which was demolished at the end of the 16th c. The basement floor was raised in the late 15th and the early 16th c. The stoves were pulled down and the debris was put into the liquid mass that the basement was made of. A collection of over 2000 Dutch tiles from that period was found there, which indirectly leads to the conclusion that the basement was used throughout the 15th century.

During the construction of the southern wall of the palace a small rampart was made. It was 5 m wide at the bottom and 2 m high. Similar ramparts were found in other 14th century Lithuanian castles (Kaunas, Medininkai, Lyda), too. The basement's floors were about 1 m above the level of the outer courtyard.

The length of the southern building will not be known until the excavation works have been completed. Most probably, this building coincided with the building of the later Renaissance palace i.e. it stretched up to the Cathedral. The investigations seem to prove that the late 18th and the early 19th c. drawings of the palace were faithful to reality. The arrangement of windows represented in the drawings corresponds to the size of the excavated basements and consequently to the size of the premises.

As it has already been mentioned above, the excavated palace was built in the Gothic style. It is later than the Baltic style buildings dating from the 13th-14th c., but older than the second floor built or rebuilt in the Renaissance style at the beginning of the 16th century. There is no doubt that the eastern and southern Gothic buildings come from the 15th century. The finds, though scarce, enable us to date them more precisely. The majority of finds were found at the foot of the slope, North of the wall with counterforts. Some architectural details of the interior of the palace dating from the 15th century were found there, too. A number of figure bricks analogous to those used in the castle of Trakai Island, the House of Perkunas in Kaunas and St. Michael's Church in Vilnius (fig. 4-5) were discovered in the southern and eastern buildings of the palace. On the basis of the above analogies the bricks can be dated to the 14th-15th c. Numerous painted plaster pieces were also revealed, which leads to the conclusion that there were fresques in some premises of the palace. A piece of plaster with a man's hand depicted was found in 1987. On the basis of

¹³ A. Trusa, *Staradaunih murou adradgenie*, Minsk 1990, p. 11.

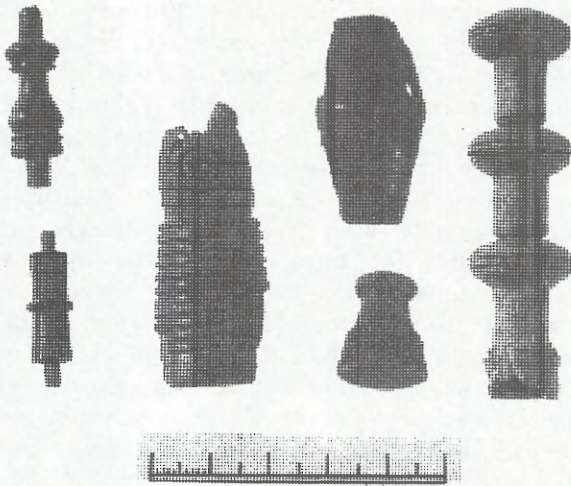


Fig. 6. Bone artifacts: chessmen, fragment of a needle-case.

some other pieces we can state that colours such as blue, red, black and others were used.

Some analogues plastered and decorated premises were found in the castle of Trakai Island erected by Vytautas and in the tower of the Kreva Castle investigated by Byelorussian archaeologists. The vaulting and the window niches were also painted there, which is illustrated by the fragments of figure bricks and painted plaster. In basement C and by the wall with counterforts some glazed and ornamented plates were revealed. Some of them are about 14.5 x 14.5 cm big and about 2 cm thick, others only 10 x ? cm big and about 1.5 cm thick, decorated with mystical beings and coats of arms. These plates, characteristic of the early 15th c., were used to form the interior trim. The ground and the first floor plates bear analogies to those found in the Cathedral erected by Vytautas. A rich collection of 14th-15th c. tiles was found there. The Dutch tiles are among the well dated finds. About 150 fragments of plate Dutch tiles characteristic of the early 15th c. were discovered. They are decorated with coats of arms and some mystical beings. One Dutch tile has been completely restored. About 2000 fragments of pot-like Dutch tiles dating from the turn of the 14th century were also found. The bone chess pieces, characteristic of the 14th-15th c. (fig. 6), are believed to come from the palace dating from this period. They are similar to those found in the Trakai Castle.

To conclude, we would like to say that, according to us, the Lower Castle Palace of Vilnius was erected by Vytautas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania. It was most probably constructed after the fire of 1419 and elaborately decorated before the planned coronation ceremony. The palace consisted of at least two buildings located on the same site as the Renaissance palace known to us from drawings and plans. Duke Vytautas' palace occupied the whole natural cape between Gediminas Castle Hill and the Cathedral. It was surrounded by the wall with counterforts — the defensive wall of the palace — from the

North. Both this wall and the wall at the foot of the southern slope were built in the 13th-14th c. These walls may have enclosed the Ducal Palace consisting of a few buildings, as described by Ghillebert de Lannoy. A fragment of such a building was found in the autumn of 1990.