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"PEASANT CASTLES" IN POLAND
AS A DEFENCE AGAINST TARTARS (13TH–17TH CENTURIES)

From the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, the south-eastern parts of Poland were constantly being threatened by Tartar invasions. In the thirteenth century, the armed raids reached as far as Silesia (the Battle of Legnica, 1241). From the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, they spread over a vast territory bordering on the mouth of the Dniester and the Dnieper, the Black Sea (the so-called Wild Fields, near the Crimea, present Ukraine) and the frontiers of the districts of Przemysl and even Cracow (!).

Tartar people, nomads from the Mongol steppe of Tien Shan, had been united by Temüjin, who assumed the name of Genghis Khan in the year 1206. Their aggressiveness, numerous army, extremely effective military organization and splendid logistics allowed the them to conquer a great part of Asia. In 1237, the nomads invaded Russia and their plundering attacks became a menace to Poland and Hungary. The Battle of Legnica meant the end of such faraway expeditions. However, the invaders managed to reach Cracow as early as in the years 1259 and 1287. In the fifteenth century the Tartars became subdued by Turkey. The Tartar State (the Golden Horde) disappeared to be replaced by separate
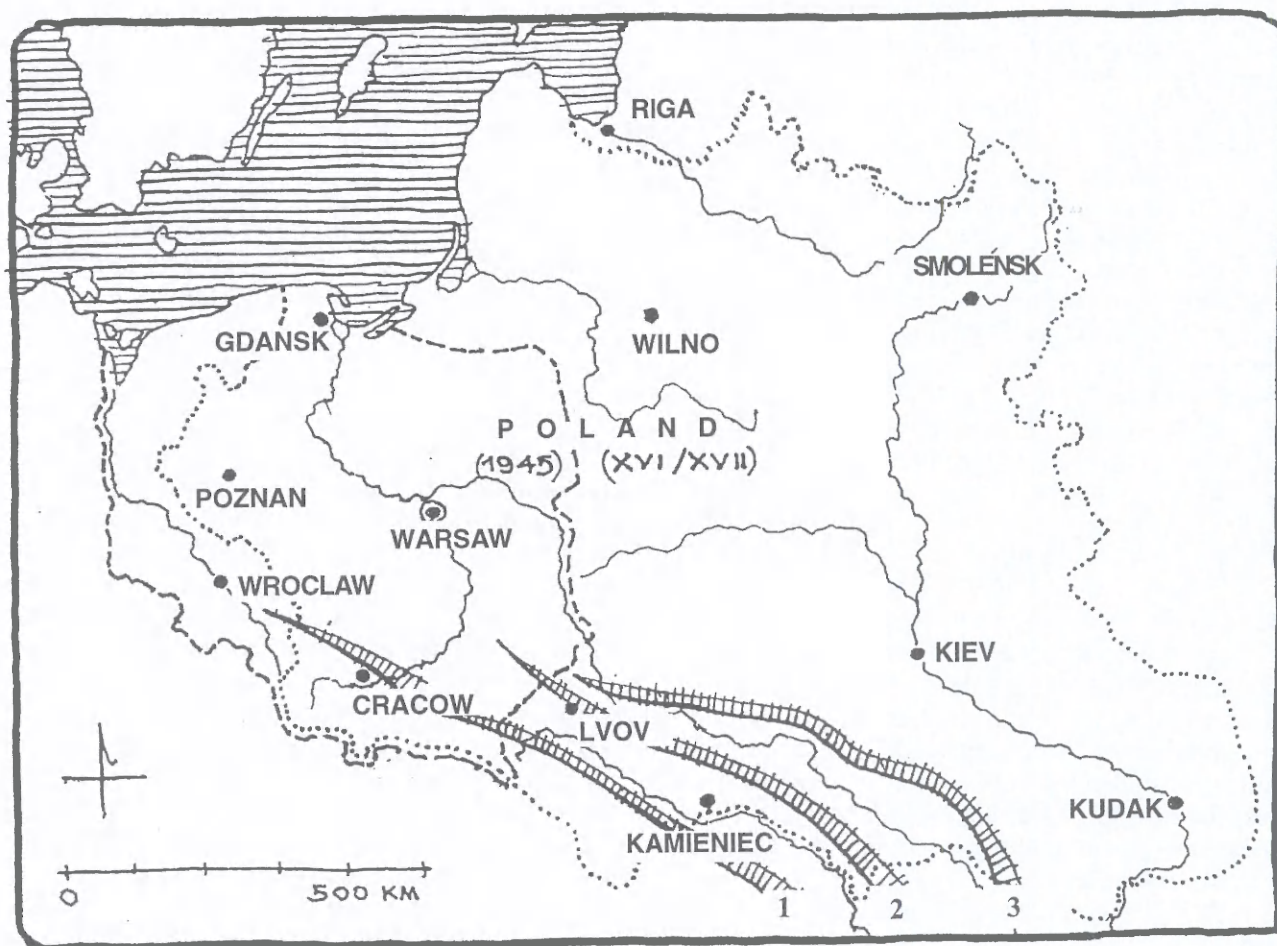

Fig. 1. The Polish Commonwealth in the 16th/17th century and the main routes of the Tartar invasions from the 13th century onwards:
1. The Walachian Route, 2. The Kuchmansky Route, 3. The Black Route (drawing by J. Bogdanowski).

khanates. Relations between Poland and later on Lithuania, which united with the Polish Kingdom to form the State of the Two Nations, and the Tartars were dominated by the Khanate of the Crimea., which was ruled by the Girai dynasty. In the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, this group of Tartar warriors were constantly ravaging the south-eastern Polish borderland. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the mutual relations turned unbalanced and changeable. The Tartars either allied themselves with Moscow and the Cossacks or became the allies of Poland (e.g. against the Swedish invasion of 1656). With the passage of time, a number of Tartars settled down on the territory of the contemporary Polish Commonwealth as the so-called *Lipkowie*. They still live in Bialystok province and have preserved their Islamic religion.

Tartars troops were characterized by a unique way of fighting. Although Polish warriors were perfectly aware of this, they could not work out an effective defence system. Tartars were masters of sudden, unexpected attacks made by numerous armies on horseback called *tumans* (fog). Tartar advanced detachments were hundreds of kilometers deep. They could instantly split up into smaller groups (chambuls) attacking in different directions. The warriors would rob a territory, take captives (yasir), and then quickly withdraw and retreat to the Crimea with their loot.

The tempo of those raids rendered any defence almost impossible or at least very difficult. Nonetheless, as early as in the fourteenth century a new defence system developed in Poland. At first it was a passive technique, based on a network of fortified sites and on so-called mobile borderland defence troops, which could now be described as "task forces". This was the way a concrete defence system came into being. The system became still more effective as the very terrain and river system made Tartars follow the same war "channels". There existed three main routes from the Crimea to Poland:

■ the southern "Walachian Route" – alongside the Dniester River near Chocim to Przemysl,

■ the central "Kuchmansky Route" – alongside the uplands between the tributaries of the Dniester and the Boh, leading to Lvov, and

■ its variant the "Black Route" – between the Boh and the Dniester, which also led to Lvov.

In order to stop the enemy armies, a number of "obstacles" were built across their routes. They consisted of numerous state fortresses such as Kamieniec Podolski and Halicz and hundreds of strongholds, military installations, castles and fortified monasteries, for example Buczacz, Wisniowiec, Jaroslaw. These lines running along the routes and obstacles erected across them

■ ruled out the possibility of a sudden armed raid,

■ put up first resistance and forced the attackers to change the direction of an attack, as well as impeded their retreat,

■ and finally, allowed the mobile borderland defence troops to counter-attack the enemy, which seems to have been of paramount importance.

Peasant fortresses constituted an additional element of the above-described defence system. The information gathered by contemporary travellers and chroniclers suggests that every village was somehow fortified, that is surrounded by a ditch, a palisade or earthworks, constituting a *refugium*. Tartars had to act quickly. They would not lay siege to a place and waste their time. As evidenced by numerous historical incidents the peasant castles played an important part in the logistics, because they made it impossible for Tartar troops to attack suddenly and provided the defenders with temporary shelter. We shall not discuss here the passive form of defence, which was frequently used at that time and included hiding in a forest, a ravine or even behind a hedge. As far as the active forms of defence are concerned seven successive systems can be found in iconographic sources and natural conditions. These are the wall, recess, tower, flanking tower, artillery tower, bastion and tenaille systems. They were all in use, but the first three were the simplest and therefore the most widely used structures in peasant castles until the seventeenth century. The other four appeared mostly in the sixteenth century and became parts of *refugia* such as churches (e.g. Gnojnik, 14th century; Posada Rybotycka, 16th century) and especially monasteries (e.g. Berdyczów, 16th/17th century; Trembowla, 16th century), which were characteristic of this period. All the systems are discussed below.

1. **The wall system** is the oldest and simplest form of defence, used from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century. It consisted in surrounding a settlement with only an obstacle or an active, but not flanking, defensive circle. Even trees and bushes surrounding the site could be used as a hindrance. Another variant of this defence system was the abatis, that is an obstacle formed by felled trees. A ditch with a bank or fence, a palisade and a hoarding could be considered positions. Sometimes it was an earthen-timber bank composed of two fences or palisades filled with earth or of dovetailed wooden boxes filled with the same material. This kind of defensive structure is mentioned in many sources. It was written about by Lassota in the sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century Verdum says, "wies otoczona czestokolem, na tyle, by dac obrone przed Tatarami" ("the village is surrounded by a palisade so as to defend itself against Tartars"). Some detailed descriptions of villages fortified with hoardings have survived too (e.g Swilcza and Woliczka,, beginning of the 17th century). Sometimes it was an entrenchment *refugia* (e.g. Wzgórze Parasol near Krosno).

2. **The recess system** was a variant of the above-discussed structure. It was additionally equipped with concave recesses, which were usually situated near the gate and made local flanking possible. It was
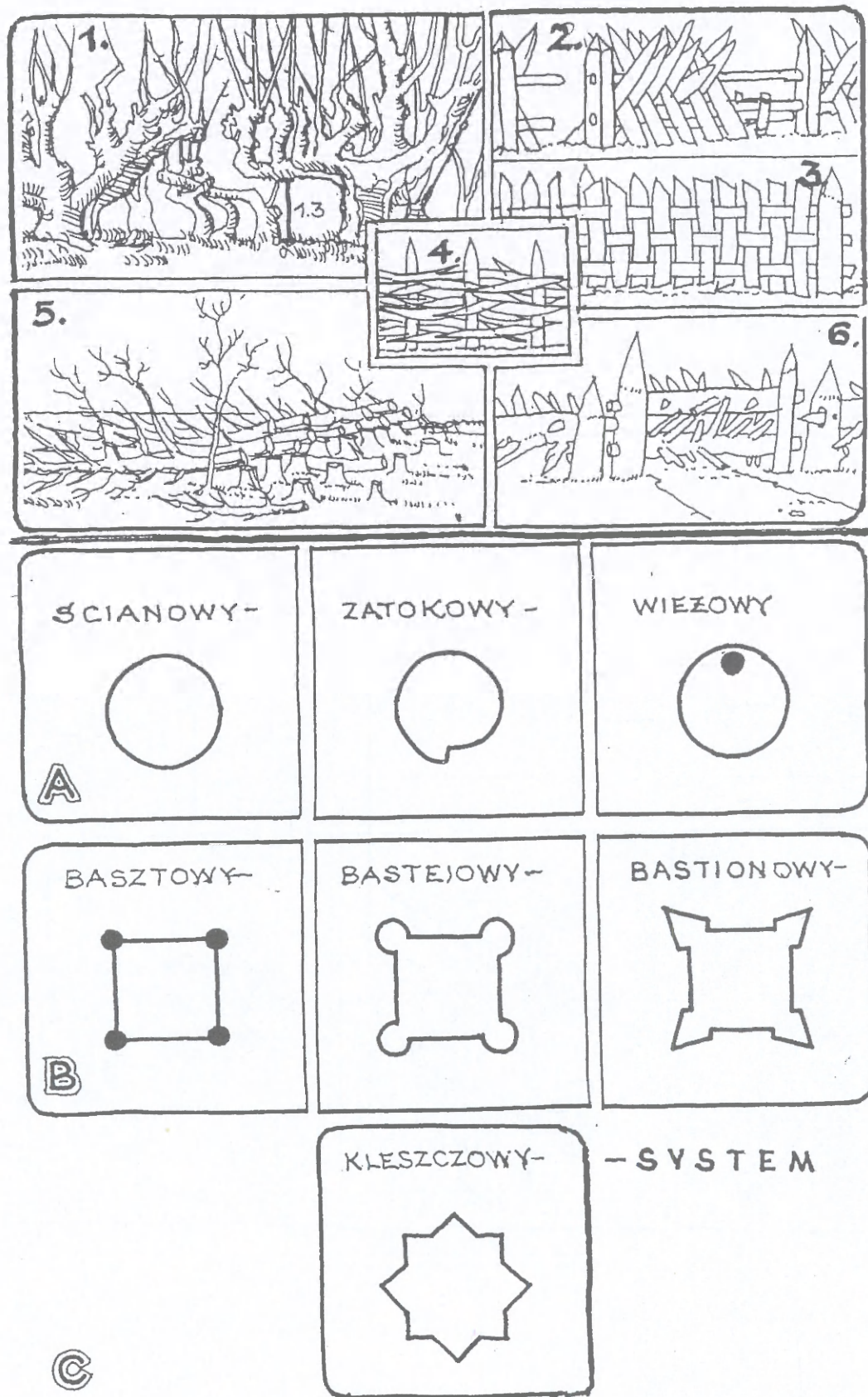
Fig. 2. Above: Different kinds of simple fortifications: the hedge (1), the palisade (2), the woven fence (3), the Polish fence (4), the abatis (5), the hedge (6). Below: the defensive systems used: A. requently: the circular system, the recess system, the tower system (13th - 17th centuries); B. less frequently: the flanking tower system, the artillery tower system, the bastion system (16th - 17th centuries); C. rarely: the tenaille system (17th century).
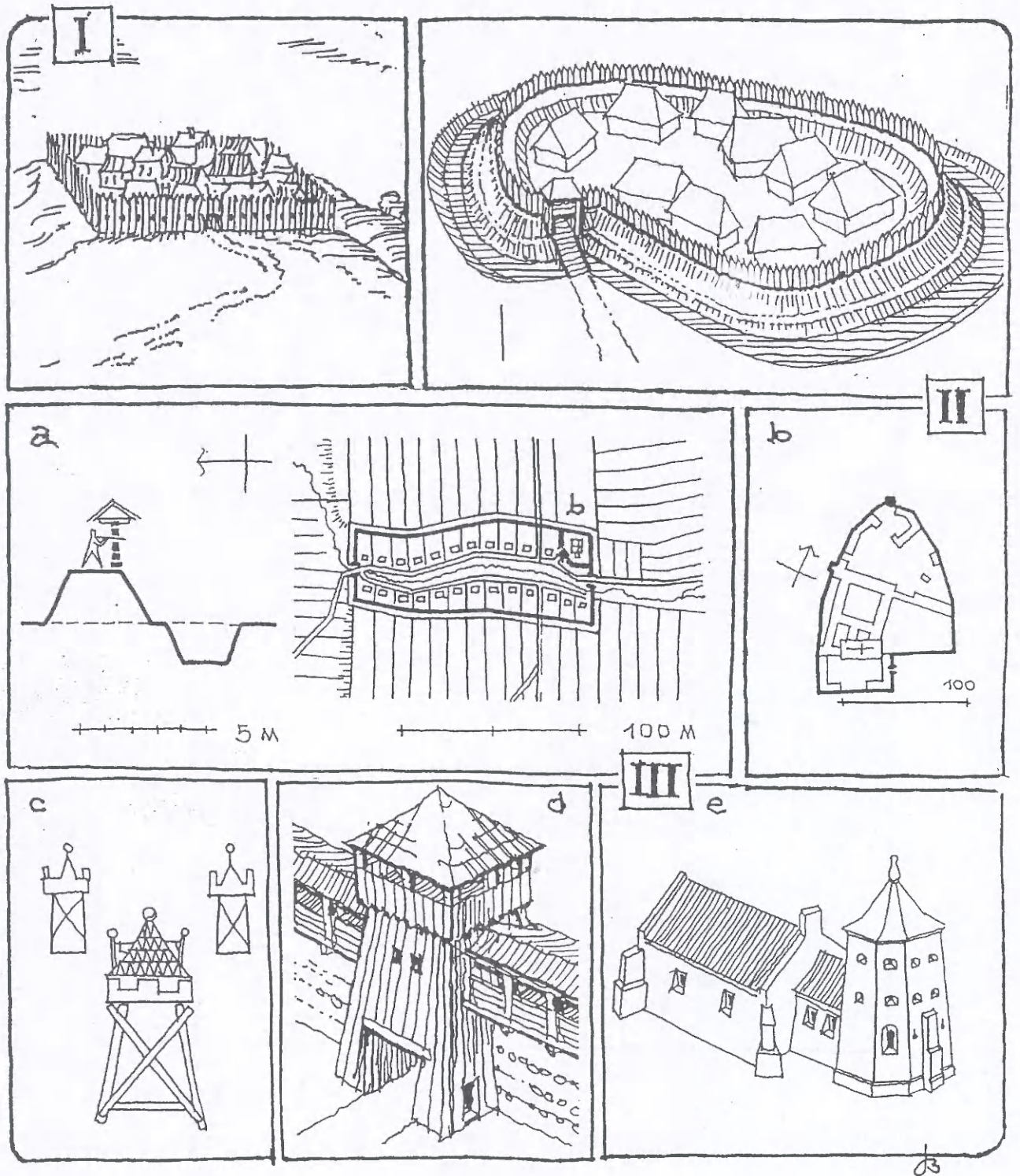
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Fig. 3. Examples of various defensive systems used: I. the wall system (the palisade), after Naranowicz-Naronski, first half of 17th century; Right: system usage sketch, II. the recess system: a. the village of Wislica c. 1620, reconstruction,; b. the monastery in Stary Sącz, III. the tower system: c. drawings of timber towers on a seal, 14th century, after Thullie; d. theoretical reconstruction of a gate tower equipped with hourds; e. the church with a defensive presbytery in Tarnogóra, 16th / 17th century. (drawing J. Bogdanowski)
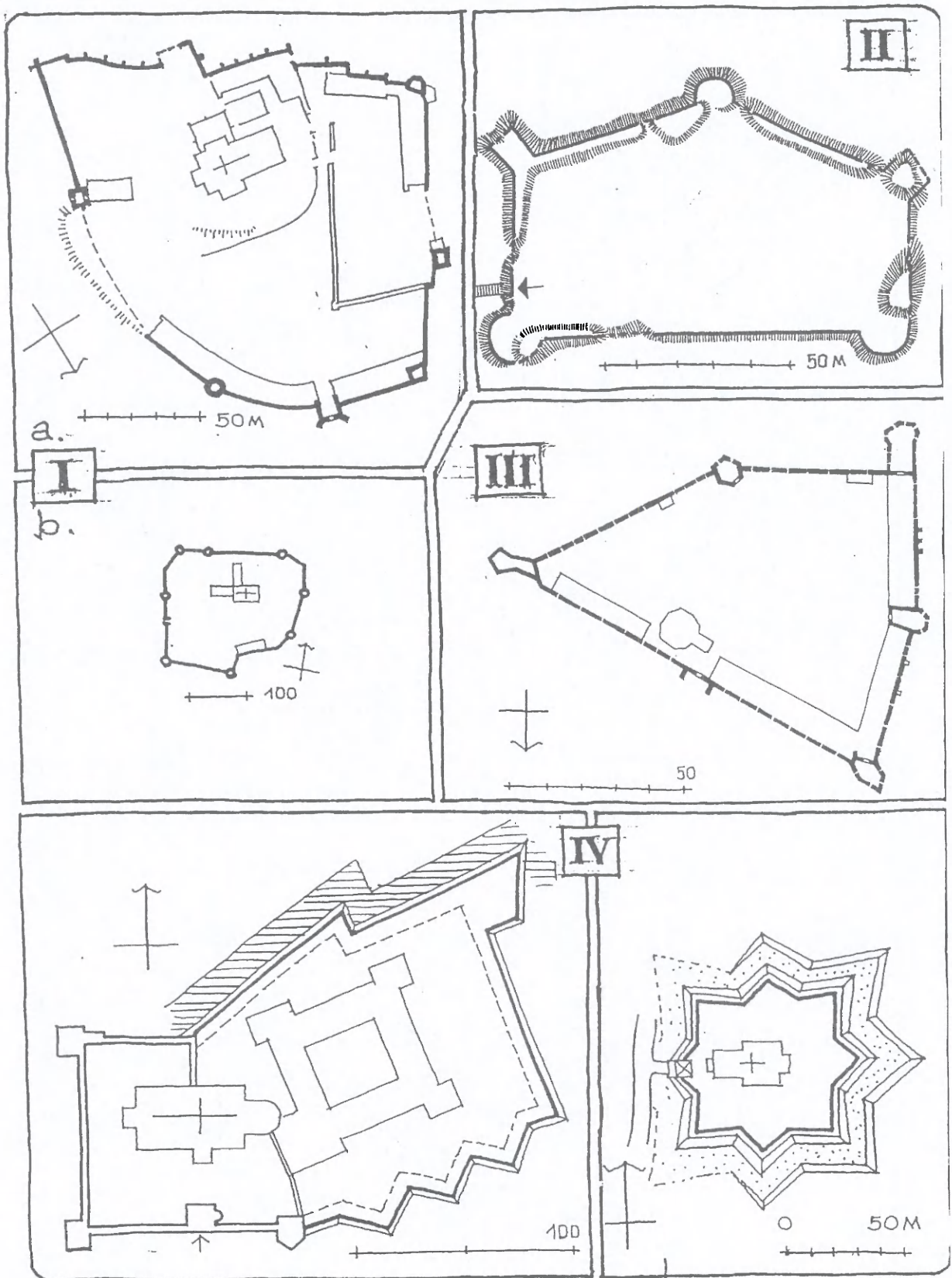
Fig. 4. Examples of various defensive systems used in *refugial* installations: I. the flanking tower system: a. Sulejów, Cistercian monastery, 12th - 15th centuries; b. Jaroslaw, Benedictine nuns' monastery, 16th / 17th century; II. the artillery tower system: Lipsko, *refugium*, first half of 16th century; III. The bastion system, "puntone" (an early variant), the castle - *refugium* in Stare Siolo, 16th / 17th century; IV. the tenaille system: Lezajsk, Bernardine monastery, mid-17th century; Kosina, fortified church, second half of 17th century (drawing by J. Bogdanowski).
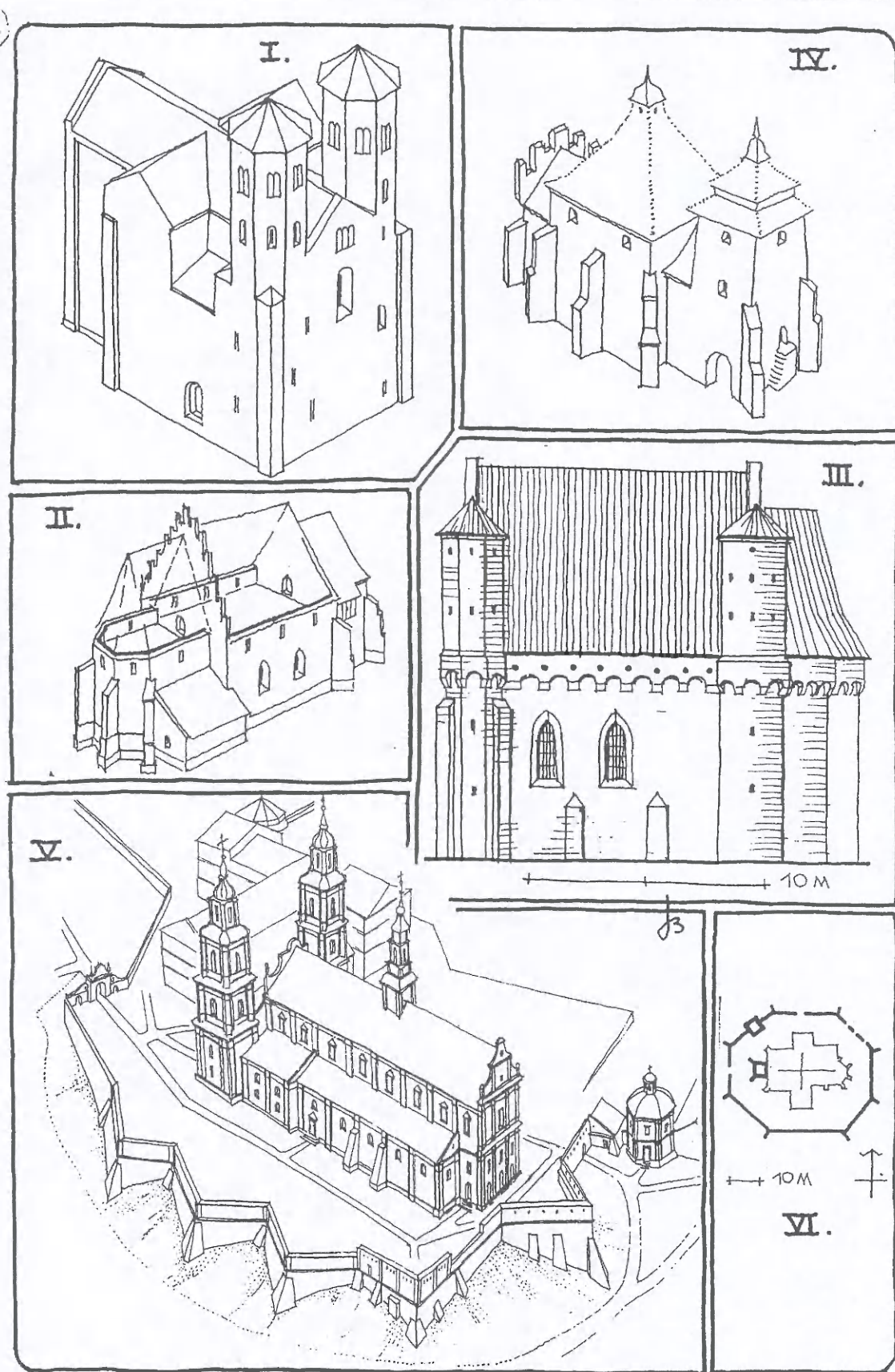
Fig. 5. Different types of fortified churches, 12th - 17th centuries. I. Cracow, , St Andrew's church in Okól, equipped with a massive work on the western side (so-called *westwerk*), tower system, 12th century; II. Gnojnik, church with defensive attics, recess system, 14th century; III. Synkowicze, defensive Orthodox church, flanking tower system, second half of 15th century; IV. Posada Rybotycka, defensive Orthodox church, tower system, first half of 16th century; V. Jaroslaw, Dominican monastery, *refugium*, tenaille system, design by Krzysztof Mieroszewski, after mid-17th century; VI. Niepolomice, fortified church, tower system, 14th - 17th centuries (drawing by J. Bogdanowski).

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also sometimes used on other, more endangered, sides. The system was very popular. It might be added that in order to block the entrance, tree trunks were dragged into the gate so that the attackers could not to pull them out. Similar tree trunks, called *kobyliny*, used to be placed across the gate. There were also capstans, which were mentioned in a handbook by Naronowicz-Naronski in the seventeenth century. The system was in widespread use. It was even copied in monastery *refugia*, for example in Nowe Zagórze.

3. **The tower system**. It is another most widespread installation. The fortifications of the structures described above were here enriched by an additional defensive tower. The Romanesque towers (*westwerk*) of St Andrew's church, which withstood the Tartar siege of 1259 as a *refugium*, mark the beginning of the military importance of this system. But it was not only the towers but the whole body of a church (e.g. the building in Gnojnik, 14th century) that functioned as a *refugium*. The military importance of such fortified churches lasted from the fifteenth (e.g Felsztyn) to the sixteenth (e.g. Posada Rybotycka) and the seventeenth century (e.g Gol¹b). Timber churches were also frequently surrounded by a wall or hoarding. A timber tower of this kind of pillared construction equipped with machicolations is a form typical of Poland. It used to be so characteristic that it could be found on medieval seals and coats of arms (14th-16th centuries). Such a structure is to be seen in, for instance, Nowosielce. The tower had survived until the eighteenth century as an echo of ancient defensive practices. Moreover, there also existed towers which were specially erected in villages (for instance in Krasne at the beginning of the seventeenth century). Light guns were placed on the floors of such buildings. Finally, according to Lassota, blockhouses with gun loops scattered over the fields were another variant of such installations. A blockhouse constituted a handy defensive structure in case of a sudden Tartar strike.

4. **The flanking tower system** (15th - 16th centuries), with curtains flanked by corner flanking towers, is much less common. It is to be found mostly in fortified churches (for example, in Drohobycz the church is surrounded by a moat, a bank and timber flanking towers) and monasteries functioning as a *refugium* (e.g. in Jaroslaw). In such situations it was no longer the villagers but the rich founders who were responsible for building the fortifications, especially in the case of Bernardine monasteries, which were specifically characteristic of Polish fortified structures.

5. **The artillery tower system** (16th - 17th centuries) was very similar to the flanking tower installation and thus only sporadically present in peasant castles. It was, however, employed in the fortification structures surrounding village churches. The timber church in Nowosielce was surrounded by an earthen bank with such low artillery towers and equipped with light guns, which allowed the defenders to resist a Tartar attack in the year 1624.

6. **The bastion system** (16th - 17th centuries) with pentagonal quoins, which offered protection for the people living in the immediate environs and vicinity of the castle, is to be found almost exclusively in the *refugial* castles of eastern Poland. The disproportionately large courtyards provided comfortable shelter for the refugees. A few examples such as Stare Siolo with its tiny Old-Italian bastions and Czerniki, where New-Italian bastions were used, can be quoted here.

7. **The tenaille system** (17th - 18th centuries) was a new defensive structure too. It was easy to build, which became its great advantage. The interesting thing is that it was mainly erected in either semi-permanent or permanent monastery strongholds (e.g. the large *refugial* structures of Berdyczów, Lezajsk, Jaroslaw). A star-shaped entrenchment of this type was also built round the church in Kosin (the first part of the 17th century). This installation symbolically closes the tradition of peasant fortresses.

As has already been said, typical peasant castles are fortresses of the wall, recess or tower systems. They can function as the fortifications of a whole village (e.g. Swilcza, Woliczka), a separate entrenchment *refugium* (e.g. Harmatki) or fortified, frequently timber, church or Orthodox church (e.g. Nowosielce, Krechowice).

An important change starts to take place during the sixteenth century, when the great *refugium* of fortified monasteries and often *refugial* ancestral castles appear. This transformation, consisting in the introduction of modern fortification systems, was undoubtedly connected with an increased menace of invasion which resulted from the incorporation of the Tartars into the Turkish Empire in the sixteenth century. The consequence of this event was a change in the logistics. Casual raids were now reinforced with invasions mounted by a regular army. Therefore providing the inhabitants of nearby villages with shelter meant a greater number of defenders.

Many monuments dating from this period (i.e. the 13th - 17th centuries) have survived up to our times. Fewer structures date back to an earlier phase of Tartar attacks. Thus, St Andrew's church, the center of the settlement of Okól in former times, which is now located at the heart of Cracow, can be considered an example of a fortified Romanesque building. Traces of earthen and timber banks have survived in the form of mottes, for instance, in Tuliglowy, or mounds surrounding villages, for example, in Sokolów, Dynów, Lipsko. An echo of those times are the machiculations of timber churches and ditches which frequently surround the buildings (e.g. in Nowosielce and Kosina). A timber blockhouse surrounded by a moat could be found in Temeszów until very recently.

The second phase of fortifications seems to have been much more impressive. It was then that beside the ancient, simple commune or parish strongholds,

there appeared a castle (Pniów, Stare Siolo) and especially monastery *refugium* (Trembowla, Skit Haniawski, Lezajsk). An echo of this period is the monastery in Częstochowa and the castle in Janowiec. The size and construction of these complexes suggest that they were *refugial* in character. The structures were not, however, necessarily connected with the Tartar invasions.

This is the way the history of the distant past has become a distinctive element of the Polish countryside.

Translated by Zuzanna Poklewska-Parra