

THE 16TH CENTURY RECONSTRUCTION AND VAULT OF THE CHURCH OF THE BENEDICTINE ABBEY AT SOMOGYVÁR

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The largest and most prestigious Benedictine abbey in Hungary was founded at Somogyvár by King Ladislas I, who invited monks from the Saint-Gilles abbey in southern France. The spacious three-nave basilica with wooden ceiling, a triple apse and a pair of western towers was erected in the earlier 12th century. The church was adorned with elaborate carvings during the 12th century: the carved stones from the mid-12th century had perhaps been made for the reliquary tomb in the middle of the church, while the reliefs from the later 12th century had probably been part of the rood screen. The abbey was enlarged in the early 13th century with a large arcaded cloister. Studies on this monument have generally focused on the Árpáadian Age relics and have tended to neglect the abbey's late medieval architectural history, even though there is ample evidence that new building activity was undertaken in the earlier 16th century.¹ A closer look at the late Gothic–Renaissance architectural period sheds light on the political and artistic dimensions of the period's most important Benedictine reform movement and the display of wealth of Hungarian nobles as reflected in ecclesiastic architecture in late medieval Hungary.

During his excavation of the site in the late 19th century, Péter Gerecze had found several late Gothic and Renaissance carvings among the ruins of Somogyvár Abbey, suggesting a major late Gothic–Renaissance build-



Fig. 1. The ruins of Somogyvár Abbey

¹ The significance of the abbey's late medieval reconstruction and of the church's net vault was first noted by Szilárd Papp: Papp, Szilárd: Pannonhalma és Somogyvár. Bencés reform és építészet a 15–16. század fordulóján. In: *Paradisum Plantavit. Bencés monostorok a középkori Magyarországon. Kiállítási katalógus*. Ed. Takács, Imre (Pannonhalma: Pannonhalmi Bencés Főapátság, 2001), 289–315, 299–312. Following his pioneering work, I too devoted two studies to the reconstruction of the vault: Buzás, Gergely: A somogyvári bencés apátsági templom boltozata a 16. század első negyedéből. In: *Reneszánsz látványtár; Virtuális utazás a múltba*. Ed. Buzás, Gergely – Orosz, Krisztina – Vasáros, Zsolt (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, 2009), 418–425; Buzás Gergely: A szekszárdi apátság temploma a középkorban. In: *Építészet a középkori Dél-Magyarországon*. Ed. Kollár, Tibor (Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 2010), 554–603, 592–599). I decided to return to this subject because Kornél Bakay's recently published monograph contains a wealth of new data on the late medieval reconstruction of Somogyvár Abbey. See Bakay, Kornél: *Somogyvár; Szent Egyed monostor. A somogyvári bencés apátság és védműveinek régészeti feltárása* (Budapest: Műemlékek Nemzeti Gondnoksága, 2011). I would here like to thank Balázs Szőke for calling my attention to several important analogies to the vault.

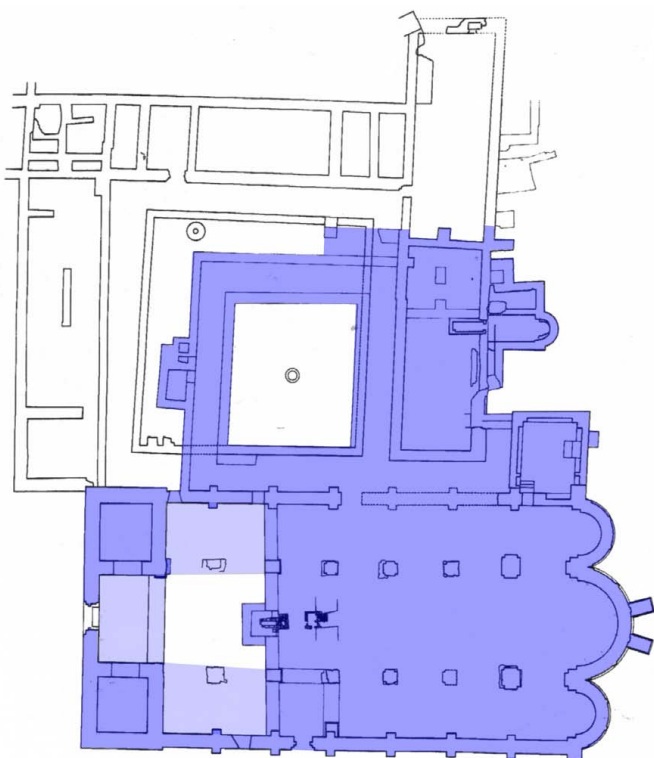


Fig. 2. Groundplan of Somogyvár Abbey in the 1520s

ding activity.² Kornél Bakay's investigations in the 20th century enriched our knowledge of the abbey's late medieval architectural history.³ His excavations furnished evidence that in addition to constructing a new vault in the abbey, the church and the monastery were also rebuilt. The 13th century cloister was demolished and a new, smaller cloister was built along the eastern wing and the church,⁴ indicating that the old northern and western wings of the abbey were abandoned.

Major renovations were also undertaken in the church. The pillars and the upper part of the main nave's walls were dismantled and rebuilt. The floor of the apse was raised twice in the late Middle Ages and was first paved with brick and, later, with stone. A choir with a stone floor raised two steps was built in front of the apse.⁵ The apse was buttressed with two pillars, but it is unclear with which architectural phase this should be associated.

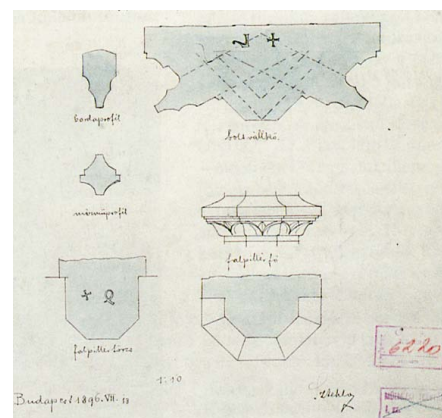


Fig. 3. Late Gothic vault elements brought to light during Péter Gerecze's excavations at Somogyvár

² Papp Szilárd: Pannonhalma és Somogyvár. Bencés reform és építészet a 15–16. század fordulóján. In: *Paradisum Plantavit. Bencés monostorok a középkori Magyarországon. Kiállítási katalógus*. Ed. Takács, Imre, (Pannonhalma: Pannonhalmi Bencés Főapátság, 2001), 305, 306, and Fig. 19.

³ For a detailed overview of the site's excavation, see Bakay, Kornél: *Somogyvár; Szent Egyed monostor. A somogyvári bencés apátság és védműveinek régészeti feltárása* (Budapest: Műemlékek Nemzeti Gondnoksága, 2011).

⁴ Papp, Szilárd: Pannonhalma és Somogyvár. Bencés reform és építészet a 15–16. század fordulóján. In: *Paradisum Plantavit. Bencés monostorok a középkori Magyarországon. Kiállítási katalógus*. Ed. Takács, Imre (Pannonhalma: Pannonhalmi Bencés Főapátság, 2001), 301.

⁵ Bakay, Kornél: *Somogyvár; Szent Egyed monostor. A somogyvári bencés apátság és védműveinek régészeti feltárása* (Budapest: Műemlékek Nemzeti Gondnoksága, 2011), 166.

A massive, north to south cross-wall was erected in line with the fifth pair of pillars. The area east of the wall was paved with stone, but the western part was not provided with a floor.⁶

A gallery supported by three pillars and the wall buttresses was built against the eastern inner face of the cross-wall. One of the pillars cut through the early reliquary tomb in the axis of the church, indicating that the tomb had lost its function by that time.⁷ A small rectangular room was built above the reliquary tomb against the outer western face of the cross-wall, in front of the small opening created when the wall was built.⁸ This small room probably had nothing to do with the tomb, which had lost its importance by that time, but should rather be associated with the gallery and most likely functioned as its stairway. A gallery was also built for the southern side nave, in line with the western gallery.⁹ The constructions up to this time indicate that the building complex had still functioned as a church and abbey. Later, at the time of the Turkish wars, economic buildings were created in the western part of the church and the church entrance was walled up.¹⁰ The net vault was probably created as part of the late medieval construction work, probably at the time the church was “shortened”.

The net vault rested on semi-octagonal wall pillars¹¹ with Renaissance abacus.¹² The vaulting could be reconstructed from the two surviving springers¹³ and several bosses.¹⁴

The curvature of the ribs indicated that the vault had spanned a fairly large space and that it had probably covered the church’s main

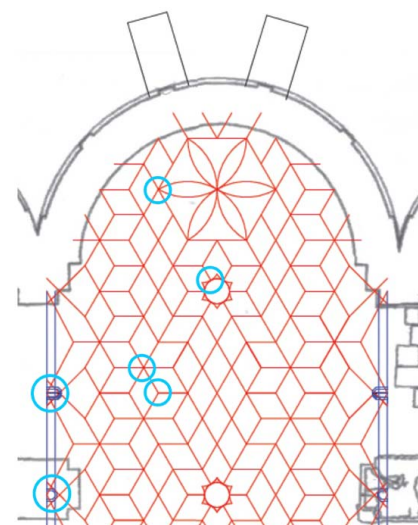


Fig. 4. Reconstruction of the sanctuary's vault showing the position of the surviving bosses



Fig. 5. Reconstruction of the abbey church's interior in the 16th century

⁶ Bakay, *op. cit.*, 159–160.

⁷ Bakay, *op. cit.*, 162.

⁸ Bakay, *op. cit.*, 159–160.

⁹ Bakay, *op. cit.*, 163.

¹⁰ Bakay, *op. cit.*, 120–121, 146–151, 127–143, 156–157.

¹¹ Papp, *op. cit.*, 307, Fig. 22.

¹² Papp, *op. cit.*, 305, 307, Figs 19 and 23.

¹³ Papp, *op. cit.*, 305, 307, 308, Figs 19 and 25.

¹⁴ Papp, *op. cit.*, 309–311, Figs 27–30.

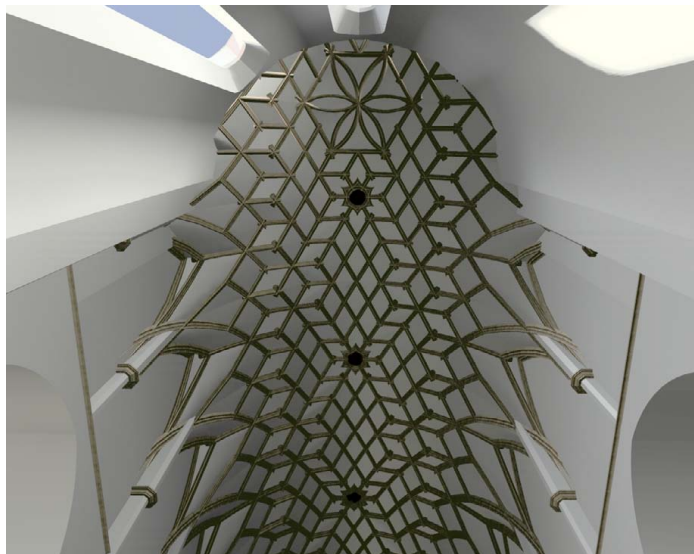


Fig. 6. Reconstruction of the sanctuary's vault

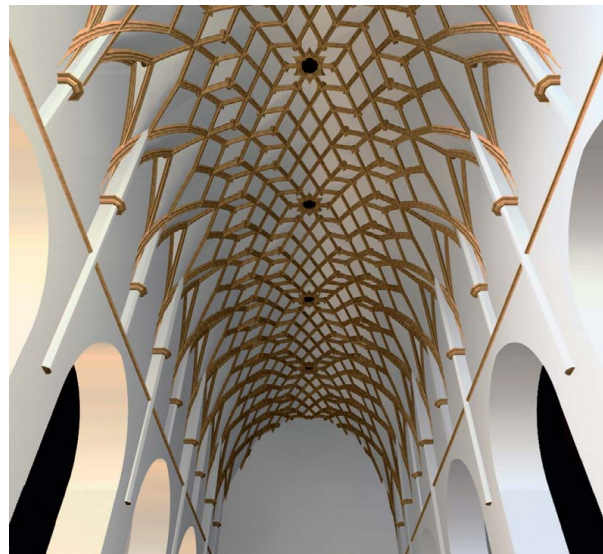


Fig. 7. Reconstruction of the nave's vault

nave. The bosses allowed the reconstruction of a dense lattice pattern with distorted diamonds at the springers. The vaulting of the main nave probably extended to the apse because the apse was reinforced with two late Gothic buttresses. This would imply that the apse was raised to the same height as the main nave and that it was not covered with a separate star vault, but with the continuation of the net vault over the main nave. It would appear that the six-petalled rosette reconstructed from the rib fragments had adorned this emphatic section of the vault.¹⁵

The closest parallel in space and time to the vault of Somogyvár Abbey is the sanctuary of the church consecrated in 1520 in Oberhaus, Styria,¹⁶ while the proportions and intricate design of the vault are best matched by the vault spanning the main nave of the Church of the Holy Cross in Schwäbisch Gmünd, constructed between 1491 and 1497.¹⁷

Somogyvár Abbey, founded by King St. Ladislas, was one of Hungary's most prestigious Benedictine abbeys and it thus played an important role in the order's early 16th century reforms initiated by Máté Tolnai, abbot of Pannonhalma. The monks of Somogyvár Abbey resented the fact that the Pannonhalma abbot tried to interfere in their affairs and in 1506, they drove away the monks sent there by Tolnai.¹⁸ This was perhaps one of the reasons that the visitators sent by Tolnai to inspect the abbey painted a rather dismal picture of the place after their visit on March 26, 1508.¹⁹ Their report, claiming that the beams of the church threatened to collapse, clearly suggests that the late Gothic vault had not been constructed at the time.²⁰ On 1512, Somogyvár Abbey joined the union of Benedictine abbeys in Hungary called to life by Máté Tolnai.²¹ However, this did not bring a reconciliation between the abbots who strove to maintain their independence, and the conflicts slowed down the order's reform.²² King Louis II bestowed the right of patronage to the

¹⁵ The main sanctuary in the Marienkirche at Pirna, Germany, built between 1502 and 1546, has a comparable vault over the main sanctuary: the net vault is cut by the polygon of the sanctuary of the side nave and the vault over the apse is similarly accentuated with curved ribs.

¹⁶ Brucher, Günter: *Gotische Baukunst in Österreich* (Salzburg-Wien: Residenz, 1990), 260–261, 261, Abb. 213.

¹⁷ Kissling, Hermann: *Das Münster in Schwäbisch Gmünd* (Schwäbisch Gmünd: W Jungmann, 1975), 76–79.

¹⁸ Mályusz Elemér: *Egyházi társadalom a középkori Magyarországon* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1971), 223.

¹⁹ Bakay, *op. cit.*, 103–104.

²⁰ *Trabes minantur casum non solum in ecclesia, sed eciam in ipso dormitorio* (Bakay, *op. cit.*, 104).

²¹ Mályusz, *op. cit.*, 225.

²² Mályusz, *op. cit.*, 226–227.

Palatine István Báthori.²³ Báthori, who acted as Palatine from 1519 until his death in 1530, had inherited several Somogy estates of the Marczali family, which died out in 1488, together with his two brothers, András, Master of the Treasury, and György, the Marshal.²⁴ The market town of Somogyvár was part of the inherited estates.²⁵ In 1535, not long after Báthori's death, the abbey came into the possession of Commendator Albert Peregi.²⁶ Between 1538 and 1541, the abbey was occupied by Bálint Török, who organised his headquarters in the fortified abbey.²⁷ Monastic life in the abbey came to an end in 1543 owing to the times of war.²⁸

The historical evidence strongly suggests that the rebuilding of the abbey took place between 1508 and 1530. The most likely period is the 1520s, when Báthori, the rich and powerful Palatine was the abbey's patron. His brother András probably rebuilt the parish church of St. George in Nyírbátor at roughly the same time. St. George's Church was roofed with a similarly proportioned magnificent vault.²⁹ After acquiring the right of patronage over the abbey and as the abbey's patron financing the reconstruction, Báthori undoubtedly followed the example of his predecessor, the Palatine Imre Perényi, who had established his family's residence in Siklós Castle. Between 1512 and 1516, Perényi had acquired the right of patronage from King Vladislas II over Szekszárd Abbey and Bába Abbey, both famed Benedictine abbeys in southern Transdanubia, and he financed the rebuilding of the church and the abbey buildings in the late Gothic style, involving the construction of elaborate net and stellar vaults in both abbeys.³⁰

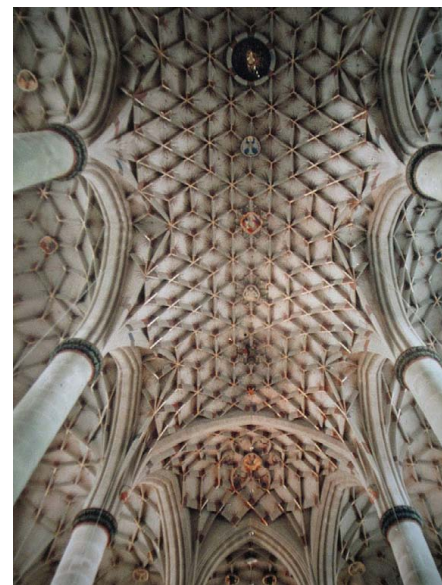


Fig. 8. The vault over the sanctuary of the Church of the Holy Cross in Schwäbisch Gmünd

²³ Hervay, F. Levente O.Cist.: A bencések és apátságai története a középkori Magyarországon. In: *Paradisum Plantavit. Bencés monostorok a középkori Magyarországon. Kiállítási katalógus*. Ed. Takács, Imre (Pannonhalma: Pannonhalmi Bencés Főapátság, 2001), 461–547, 510.

²⁴ Magyar, Kálmán: *Az ötvöskőnyi Báthori várkastély*. Somogyi Múzeumok Füzetek 18. (Kaposvár: Somogy Megyei Múzeumok Igazgatósága, 1974), 11.

²⁵ Bakay, *op. cit.*, 104–105.

²⁶ Hervay, *op. cit.*, 510.

²⁷ Bakay, *op. cit.*, 109.

²⁸ Hervay, *op. cit.*, 510; Bakay, *op. cit.*, 110–111.

²⁹ Buzás, Gergely – Farbak, Péter: A kora reneszánsz és a késő gótika vége, 1526–1541. In: *Pannon Enciklopédia. A magyar építészet története, kitekintéssel a Kárpát-medence egészére*. Ed. Deák Zoltán (Budapest: Urbis, 2009), 156–157.

³⁰ Buzás, Gergely: A szekszárdi apátság temploma a középkorban. In: *Építészet a középkori Dél-Magyarországon*. Ed. Kollár, Tibor (Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 2010), 591–592.; Buzás Gergely: Az egyházmegye építészeti emlékei. In: *A pécsi egyházmegye története I. A középkor évszázadai (1009–1543)*. Eds. Fedeles, Támás – Sarbak, Gábor – Sümegi, József (Pécs: Fény Kft., 2009), 611–713, 676–677.

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