

THE EXCAVATION OF A LATE MEDIEVAL HOUSE AND CELLAR IN VÁC

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Vác, located on the left bank of the Danube, has been an episcopal see since the 11th century. The town, a church property, had its own market area in the Late Middle Ages, and was a significant settlement surrounded with walls, divided into several administrative units. However, due to the wars of the Ottoman period and the later town-plannings and conflagrations, most of the built heritage of the medieval period was destroyed. Nevertheless, a great number of cellars belonging to the houses of the time have survived.¹ Their location gives help to the reconstruction of the late medieval townscape and plot system. By superposing the medieval cellars on the appended map of the so-called 1718 Althmann cadastral register it was found that they exactly match the apportionment, and are usually positioned on the northern border of the plots, perpendicularly to the streets. So, the medieval network of streets and the structure of plots corresponded to the present-day ones, and have survived nearly unchanged to date. In the downtown of Vác several preliminary excavations have been carried out on large expanses in the past decade.² The excavation at Káptalan Street offered the chance to a full research of a medieval urban plot, which did not only bring to light the traces of a 16th-century stone house together with its rich material of relics, but fragments of residential buildings from the preceding centuries too.

The excavation of the plot belonging to the German part of medieval Vác was carried out in 2009–2010, in several phases, parallel to the construction work of the block of condominiums equipped with an underground garage. The late medieval walls were unearthed near the street front at the northern edge of the plot, the intact medieval cellar was situated in the extension of the house. During the Late Middle Ages – just like in the most recent times – the rear of the plot must have been used as a vegetable garden. The spelt pits containing a thick fill of grape seeds testify to grape processing. Vine-growing and viticulture were popular occupations of people in medieval towns. The place name “Pincevölgy” (Cellar Valley) still existing among the hills near the town appeared first in written sources in 1457.

The garden was evenly covered with archaeological features, but the fills dated with the help of coins appeared only around the central part of the plot, while stone buildings were only found at the end of the plot near the street front. The cellar itself has not been remodeled since the Middle Ages, the only alteration on the original architectural

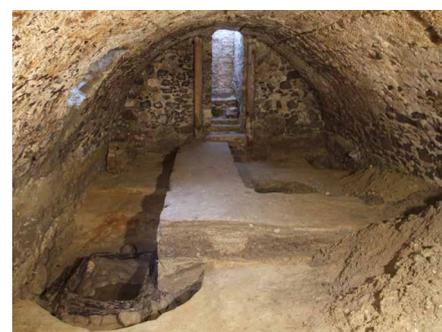


Fig. 1: The excavation of the late medieval cellar, with well No. 4 in the foreground

¹ Zsuzsa Miklós published the data of eighty-four cellars in her monograph, having pursued test excavations in some of them. During the course of the excavations at Széchenyi Street she unearthed an entire cellar. Miklós, Zsuzsa: *Vác középkori pincéi* (Medieval Cellars in Vác). Váci Könyvek 9. Új sorozat (Vác: Tragor Ignác Múzeum, 1996).

² Tettamanti, Sarolta Dr. – Batizi, Zoltán: *Térből térre. A Szent Mihály-templom régészeti kutatásának eredményei* (Results of the Archaeological Research of Saint Michael Church) (Vác: Vác Város Önkormányzata, 2006); Mészáros, Orsolya: *Fapince a váci német hospes-település területén* (Timber framed cellar in the area of the German hospes settlement in Vác). In: *Évkönyv és jelentés a Kulturális Örökségvédelmi Szakszolgálat 2008. évi feltárásairól* (Field Service for Cultural Heritage 2008 Yearbook and Review of Archaeological Investigations), ed. Kvassay, Judit (Budapest: Kulturális Örökségvédelmi Szakszolgálat, 2010), 177–196.

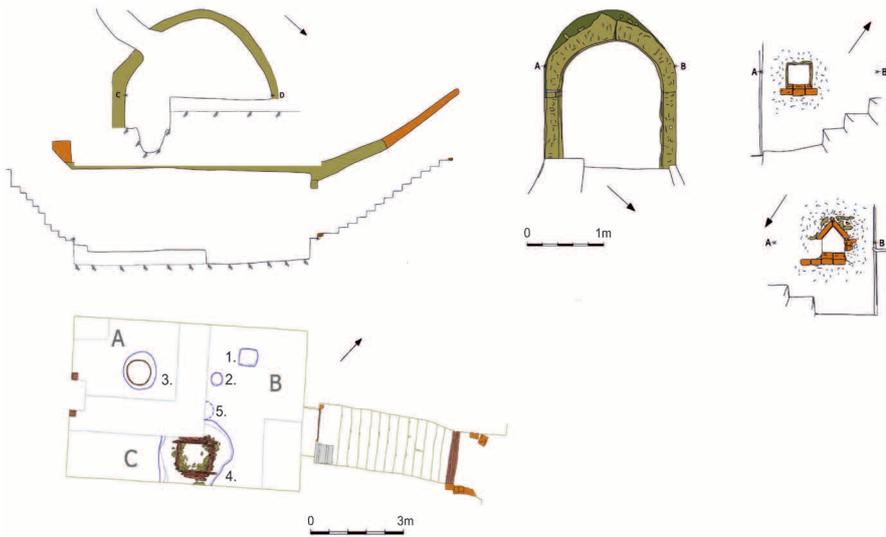


Fig. 2: Ground plan and cross sections of the cellar after unearthing, together with the stone frames of the freight hatchway and the candle holders made of brick on both sides at the bottom of the stairs

unit was the walling of the hatchway. The cellar has remained available and usable to the present day through the freight hatchway opening in the back of the plot. Its wall and vault was built from undressed stones, partly basalt, partly sandstone, with their smooth parts turned inside.

The vault built with the help of shuttering moulded with hard, grey mortar, the walls were built into a precise, stable construction. The wide outer hatchway was suitable for letting down barrels, and was separated from the cellar with a carved stone frame. Its width was the same as that of the barrels of the time. The medieval surface structure and closure of the freight hatchway is, due to the later additions, unknown.

Owing to the lengthy use the fill of the cellar has been formed of several strata. One inch thick modern-age and current ground levels, trodden hard, were on the top. These, after a levelling layer, were followed by a 40–50-cm-thick grey, late medieval fill with flakes of soot and crumbs of daub. Near the hatchway, under the grey layer a black-dark brown clay-filled stratum, the medieval ground level was observable. The fragments of glass and pottery found in the grey stratum dated the cellar to the 16th century. From the top

Fig. 3: Well No. 3 is contemporary with the building of the cellar, buried some time in the 17th century. A perfectly intact grey jug and a 16th–17th-century coin were found in it



Fig. 4: Large fragments of vessels from the 13th–14th century were unearthened from the bottom of well No. 4



Fig. 5: No walls or corbels were found above the external arch of the vault, which could have supported the ground-floor boarding of a possible residential building

part of the same layer several coins from the 17th century, mostly those of Leopold I (1657–1705) were unearthed. Some of the coins were foreign mints, for instance Olmutz ones.

Altogether five sites were excavated in the interior: two wells and three pits. The fill of well No. 3 was identical with the grey layer containing soot flakes filling the cellar in most part. 50 cm lower than its level of occurrence the circle of lining formed of vertically set planks was found. The planks were found in good condition and were bound with a wooden hoop on their external surface. Well No. 4 was older than the cellar, its fill visibly reached under the foundation of the wall. The bottom and side of the deep set, bowl-shaped, round pit was set with rough stones up to a 1-meter height, the rectangular beam lining was built on it later. The spouted vessels unearthed from its fill are do not only yield a novelty in the Vác finds, but can be considered as rarities throughout Hungary. Similar pieces have only been known from urban environments.

The cellar was built outside, at the end of the house. The connection to the house was made by a narrow hatchway opening at the middle of the outer wall. The wall connected the outer wall of the cellar in a truss indicating that they were built at the same time. It was the most



Fig. 6: The hatchway was walled up with bricks in modern times, after the medieval house had been destroyed



Fig. 7: Only the foundations of the medieval house survived, but several stones were removed from it at many places

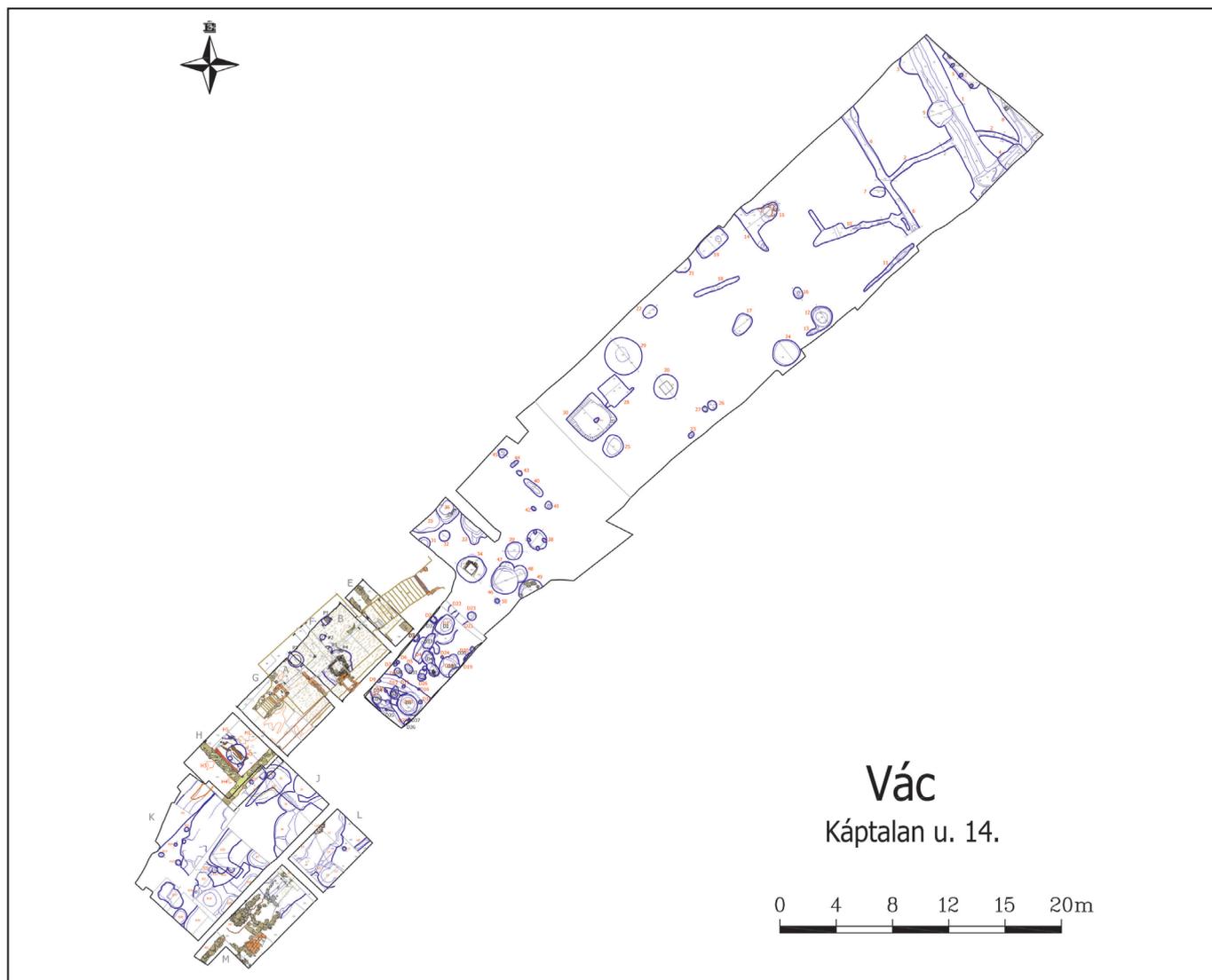


Fig. 8: The plan of the plot

clearly observable here that the outer wall had got detached from the vault. The stairs of the hatchway must have been built from wood. Sadly, they were either destroyed, or removed at the walling up. Rectangular wall-plates were formed in the walling at each step, on the surface below the beams grey mortar was spread to maintain a greater stability and horizontality. The stone wall and the cellar can be dated to the 16th century. The house was built first, than, after putting it into use it was completed with the cellar. The latter, as compared with the base wall, represent a higher technical standard. The building of the cellar started with the digging of a large pit, followed by the building of the side walls and the vault. The outer walls and hatchways were built in the last phase of the work.

During the course of the construction of the cellar pit, the preceding buildings had been completely destroyed with the exception of well No. 4, but outside it the strata sequences could be followed back in time to the 13th century. The stone wall had its foundation in the grey stratum with the flakes of soot. From the level of the foundation a glazed jug with a spherical body and narrow neck was unearthed. A coin of Maximilian (1564–1576) was found 60 cm from to the jug. In the same depth a gold plated silver fibula was also found. The pile-structured building documented under the grey layer must have been the predecessor of the stone house. Under this, a one-meter-thick stratum from the 14th–15th century was found, below that the fill of a 13th–14th- century wooden house was excavated.

For statical reasons we only got access to the eastern side of the wooden house, its excavated ground-space was no bigger than 1.5 by 2 meters. Outside the residential building dug into the earth, crumbled, carbonized beams were found. Inside a panelling was found, at its bottom a charred plank floor and two deep pot-holes were observed. Behind the panelling, around the earth wall and the beams the yellow sand was red from burning, so the house must have been destroyed by fire. Its interior was filled up with a burnt rubble of clay. The surface of some of the larger pieces was smoothed, or bore the prints of beams or branches. The inner surface of the walls of the house were plastered with clay. Judging from the finds the house was built in the 13th century, and it was still in use in the 14th century. In the 13th-century housing habits of common people pit-houses were frequent. The beam house documented by us represents a transitional stage towards the houses built on the ground.

Besides the archaeological results three other historical sources could be well used for the reconstruction of the topography of medieval Vác: the military engineer's survey from around 1680, and the appended map of the aforementioned Althann cadastral register both mark Káptalan Street, the place of our excavation.³ The latter appears under the name of "Die Capitelgassen", but the medieval name of the street is unknown. The data of the maps can be completed with the data of the house register recording houses according to town quarters. This derives from the 1570s, when Vác was under Ottoman rule.⁴ The western line of houses in Káptalan Street is usually classified as belonging to the Sáros Street quarter, "mahalle", its southern end to the Kosdi Street mahalle. Since the plot we excavated is located in the middle of the street, we are uncertain about where it belonged. 62 per cent of the owners of the Kosdi Street mahalle were muslims, while the inhabitants of the Sáros Street mahalle were Hungarian people. Only two stone houses were mentioned in each of these two quarters, the rest of the houses had wattle-and-daub or wattle walls. Almost all the stone houses, and many of the wattle-walled ones had cellars. The stone house and its cellar in Káptalan Street must have been owned by a wealthy, most probably German citizen.



Fig. 9: Late medieval walls were unearthed more than 2 meters away from the remains of the 13th-century wooden house

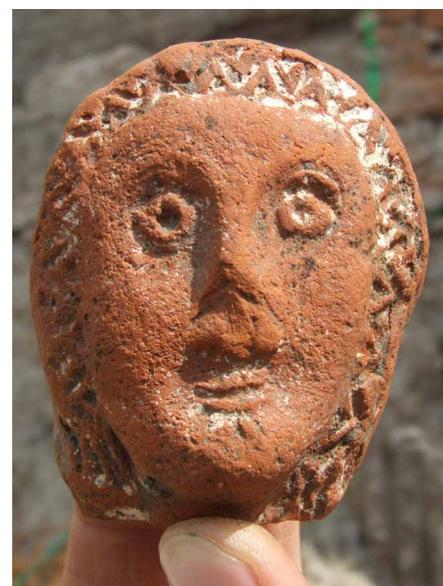


Fig. 10: Painted terracotta head of a doll from an Ottoman-period pit

³ Tragor, Ignác: *Vác vára és képei* (The Castle of Vác and its Images). Váci Könyvek 1 (Vác: Tragor Ignác Múzeum, 1906), 159–166.

⁴ Fekete, Lajos: *A törökkori Vác egy XVI. századi összeírás alapján* (Vác under the Ottomans based on a 16th-century Registry) (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1942); Balázs Sudár: Vác városának török házösszeírása 1570-ből (The Registry of Vác in 1570 under the Ottomans). *Századok* 139 (2005)/4, 791–853. The source lists the houses, gardens and other estates of the town divided into ten "mahalles" together with the names of their owners. He discusses the materials used at the building of the houses, the number of rooms, accessories (wells) and the neighbours.

RECOMMENDED READING

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