

## THE AMPHITHEATRE OF AQUINCUM, NAGYSZOMBAT STREET: RECONSTRUCTIONS AND THEIR PRESENTATION

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Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 11. (2022), Issue 3, pp. 10–15. <https://doi.org/10.36338/ha.2022.3.2>

In 2021, the local government of District III of Budapest had three information boards installed as a contribution to the project entitled “Complex touristic development of the Roman *limes* at Óbuda-Aquincum” (VEKOP-4.1.2-17-2018-00001). Two of these were set up in the area between Nagyszombat Street, Pacsirtamező Street and Zápor Street, near the amphitheatre of the military town, while the third one was installed at the ruins near Kórház Street, in front of the east gate of the one-time legionary camp. Reconstruction drawings of the monument, prepared by the author, have also been put on display at both sites, who shares, in the present paper, some background information about the boards, and discusses the questions of theo-retical and actual reconstructions and their presentation<sup>2</sup>

**Keywords:** Aquincum, amphitheatre, Nagyszombat Street, reconstruction drawing

### EXCAVATIONS AND EARLY RECONSTRUCTIONS

The amphitheatre of the military town (Fig. 1) was excavated between 1935 and 1940 (SZILÁGYI 1956, 9), and the conservation of the ruins and a partial restoration of the building began subsequently (GERŐ 1941, 316). The amphitheatre has *opus caementicium* walls (“Roman concrete”; the wall core was built of a mixture of mortar, gravel or stones, and rubble, and faced with stones on both sides) and had a relatively simple structure (Fig. 2). The space between the ring wall surrounding the arena (A) and the external ring wall (B)

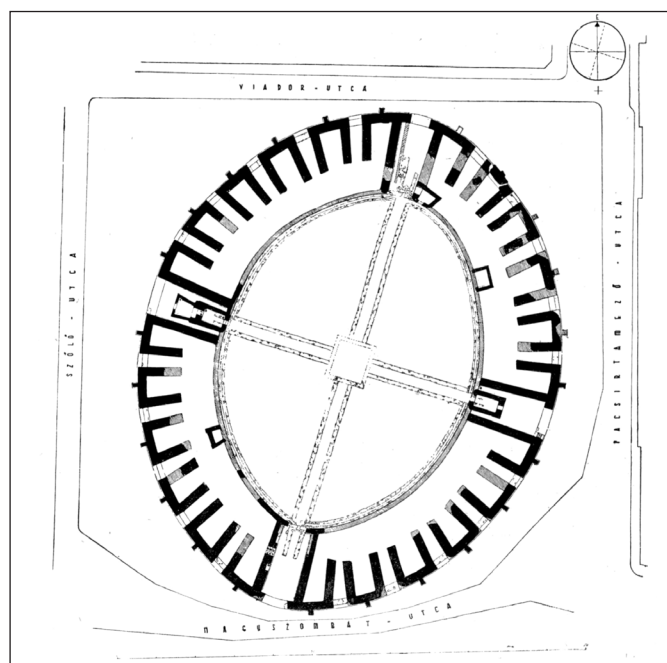


Fig. 1. Ground plan of the Nagyszombat Street amphitheatre of the military town (after GERŐ 1941, 317, Fig. 2)

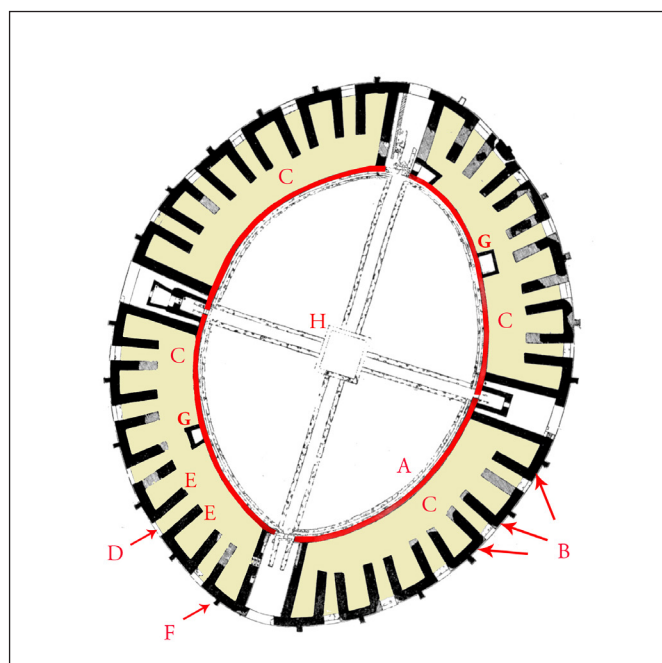
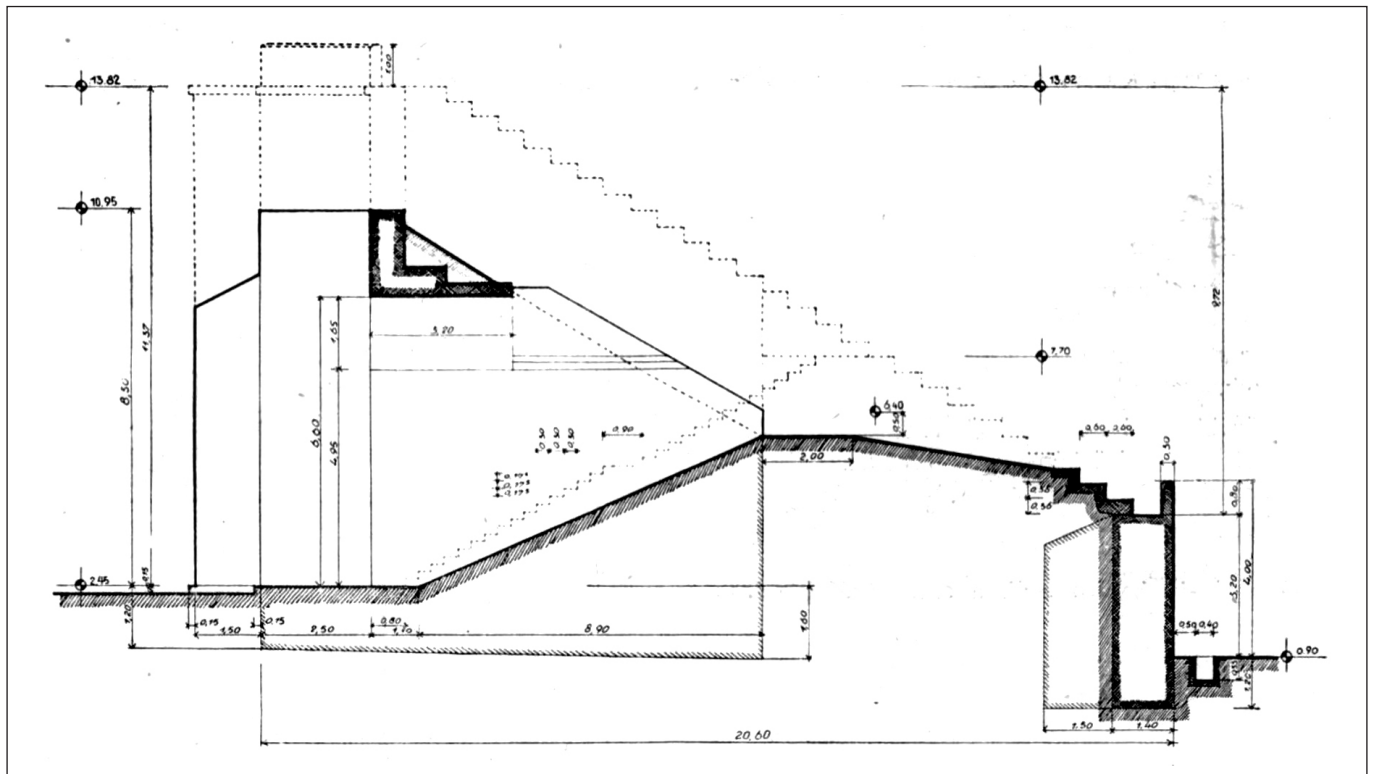


Fig. 2. Main parts of the amphitheatre (see text for legend; by L. Timár; based on Fig. 1)

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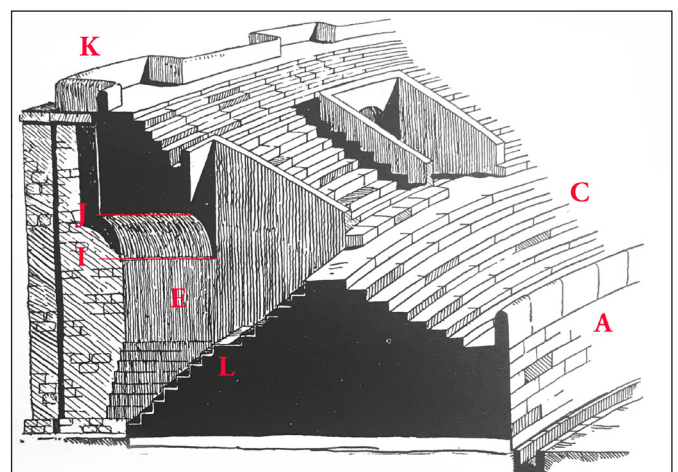
<sup>2</sup> The scope of the present study does not permit a detailed analysis of the remains and architectural parallels of the amphitheatre, so only a few main questions are discussed.



*Fig. 3. Reconstructed cross section of the amphitheatre according to L. Gerő (GERŐ 1941, 319, Fig. 7)*

was filled up with compacted soil and the gallery (C) was built on top of that. There were regular openings (D) in the external wall, lined by radial wall sections on both sides (E). According to the interpretation of the archaeologists who excavated the amphitheatre, visitors could access the seatings by taking the stairs in these openings, and the uppermost rows in the gallery for spectators were supported by the radial wall segments (GERÖ 1941, 321). There was a protruding part in the middle of each wall section in the external wall (F). Small rooms adjoined the arena (G), and an aqueduct system of considerable size (H) was also built.

László Gerő prepared the first reconstruction plans and also published a brief article on the restoration of the monument. The detailed monography of the excavation, however, was never published (although Gerő referred to it in a footnote), and the field documents have also been lost. Therefore, it is difficult to obtain information other than what is yielded by the partly restored ruins. During the reconstruction of the monument, it was certainly a priority to adhere to the budget allocated for the task, therefore, only the most damaged corner of the building was rebuilt (GERŐ 1941, 319). The reconstructed part of the building comprises only three rows of seats, and both the flight of stairs leading outside and the backfill under the gallery for spectators (*maenium*) were built lower than they should have been according to Gerő's hypothetical cross section (Fig. 3, GERŐ 1941, 318–321). The vault of the cells (*carcer*) adjoining the arena was preserved up to springing height (GERŐ 1941, 318; NAGY 1943, 370, Fig. 15), thus the reconstructed headroom is probably correct. However, it is impossible to estimate the headroom between the stairs and the vault due to the lack of preserved remains.



*Fig. 4. Reconstructed cross section according to János Schauschek, with the major parts highlighted (see text for legend, after SZILÁGYI 1956, 21, Fig. 12)*



*Fig. 5. The “best preserved quarter”, panorama photo compiled of several images (GERŐ 1941, 318, Fig. 3). A protruding stonework segment is visible in the foreground, probably in its restored state. The relief on the wall behind it is thought to feature the building inscription of the amphitheatre, discovered in 1927 during the construction of a house at 8 Viador Street (currently in the collection of the Aquincum Museum, inv. no. 63.10.28; a copy is on display in the underpass at Flórián Square)*

All other reconstruction drawings (by János Szilágyi and János Schauschek: SZILÁGYI 1956, 21, Fig. 12; by Gyula Hajnóczy: HAJNÓCZI 1971, 189, Fig. 3; HAJNÓCZI et al. 1995, 67) are based on Gerő's hypotheses (Fig. 4). The height of the ring wall surrounding the arena (A) was more-or-less given, while the height of the external ring wall can be calculated from the inclination of the gallery (C). The steepness of the flights of stairs also depends on that of the gallery, while it also defines the height of the vault's springing<sup>3</sup> (I) (provided that the ceiling comprised of horizontal vaults, which Gerő was unable to clarify; GERŐ 1941, 322). The springing line (J) of the vault supported by the radial walls (E) could not have been higher than the row of seats on top of it, so the height of the amphitheatre's external walls is defined by the inclination of the gallery. The reconstruction drawing shows a low wall at the perimeter of the gallery (K), and it was assumed that the rows of seats continued above the flights of stairs. Therefore, the headroom above the stairs is more-or-less limited. Upon reconstructing the building's cross-section, a problem arose: as the steep gallery could only be accessed through a similarly steep staircase, the headroom above the stairs would not have been sufficient. The reconstructions solved this problem by inserting different-size landings (L) into the entrance staircase. The amphitheatre's 1940s reconstruction became a cornerstone for all later interpretations.

As mentioned above, there was a small protruding piece of masonry in the middle of each external ring wall segment (Fig. 2, F). These were rebuilt as buttresses when the building was partly reconstructed. The published excavation photos (Fig. 5) suggest that none of these stonework segments was preserved at a height sufficient for a full reconstruction, and, with the excavation documents now lost, it cannot be decided anymore whether they were buttresses indeed or supported half-columns. It is also uncertain whether the present ground plan is complete and if there was an additional row of pillars outside the external wall. Besides, the excavations brought to light further architectural elements of the military town's amphitheatre (SZILÁGYI 1956, 13; NAGY 1943, 374), but these also proved insufficient to clarify the façade's structure. In his paper, Gerő provides a detailed description of the hypothesis he used when reconstructing the openings in the façade (GERŐ 1941, 321–322), but his assumptions lack a firm basis.

## THEORETICAL RECONSTRUCTION

The reconstruction built based on Gerő's hypothesis represents the smallest possible building volume. In our opinion, it cannot be excluded that the amphitheatre in the military town was much more massive and big, with a steeper gallery for spectators, higher façade openings, and rising barrel vaults above the flights of stairs.<sup>4</sup> However, the building had to be presented on the information boards in a way that corresponds the existing, conserved ruins (Fig. 6). Therefore, we had to find a compromise to not to confuse the visi-

<sup>3</sup> Springing point: the level where an arch or vault rises from a support. Crown line: the line linking the highest points of a vault.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, this hypothesis needs a thorough discussion; a detailed analysis of the remains and the architectural analogies is also necessary, as well as a debate of the new theoretical reconstruction.



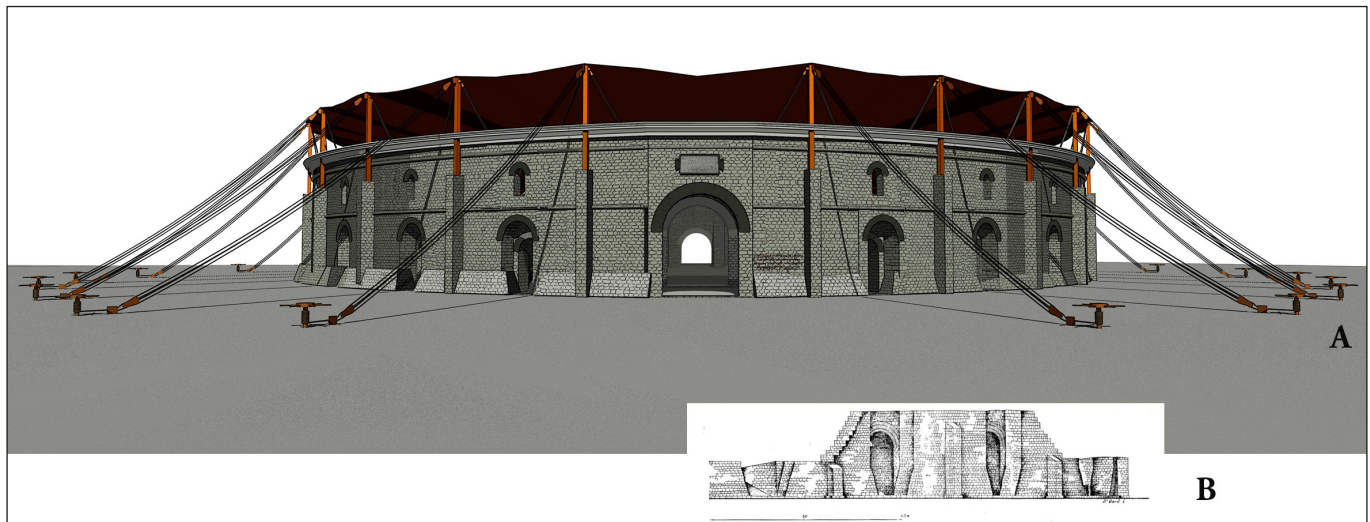


Fig. 6. The reconstruction shown on the boards (A – by L. Timár) and a drawing of the currently visible, restored building part (B – by L. Gerő, GERŐ 1941, 322, Fig. 10)

tors by displaying a reconstruction drawing that fundamentally differs from the exhibited ruins, even if the assumptions that served as a basis for earlier reconstructions are highly debatable.

In the displayed reconstruction drawings, the façade of the amphitheatre has two stories and is much higher than in the earlier versions. It should be noted that the façades of amphitheatres were not uniform (see, e.g., the comparison between the amphitheatre in El Jem and the one in Verona: WILSON JONES 2000, 15–16, Fig. 0.23). In our current understanding, the Nagyszombat Street amphitheatre, of relatively simple structure and modest ornamentation, is unlikely to have had a façade adhering to the classical proportions defined by the Roman orders of architecture, as this was only typical for buildings with their façades ornated with (half-)columns.

The only vault that was rebuilt is the one above a flight of stairs. This was partly due to financial reasons, and partly because László Gerő was unable to say anything certain about the arches on the external walls (GERŐ 1941, 322, see also footnote). However, the reconstruction drawings display these hypothetical external arches, and windows were also added above the ground floor openings to visualize the height of the building. The walls in the drawings have small, thin cordons and cornices. In line with earlier interpretations, the protruding pieces of masonry were presented as buttresses and supports for the awning (*velarium*) that covered the gallery for spectators.

### THE INFORMATION BOARDS

Board A1-A2 has been installed beside the amphitheatre close to Pacsirtamező Road. The board consists of two large glass panels (90×200 cm and 90×240 cm in size, respectively). One of them shows silhouettes, the other a possible reconstruction of the amphitheatre. The two panels are 60 cm far from each other, so that they give the passer-by the illusion of movement, a bit like the once-popular floaty pens of the '70s and '80s. The amphitheatre is depicted with 120° field of view, facing the entrance that leads into the arena. Thus, a person passing by the image, viewing it from any angle has the impression of looking at the entrance from the front. Winches for setting up and extending the *velarium* have been drawn around the building. Their presence is mere speculation, but it was necessary to fill the space around the building (the amphitheatre itself takes up only ca. two-thirds of the image so that the necessary field of view can be applied). In fact, the representation has three layers: on the first panel, there are silhouettes, on the second, the drawing of the amphitheatre, and the third layer is the background itself, the built environment only dimly seen through the glass panels. As the viewer passes by the installation, the three layers 'move' in relation to each other, creating an almost holographic illusion (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Board A1-A2 from two different angles  
(by L. Timár)



Fig. 8. The reconstruction drawing on Board A3  
(by L. Zimár)

Board A3 is installed on the corner near the Square of the Katyń Martyrs, and shows the reconstruction of the building part that stands right in front of the board. The drawing is to be viewed together with the actual ruins, similarly to the installation at Heidendor in Carnuntum (Austria). There is, however, a significant difference between the two sites: the remains of Carnuntum stand isolated in a field, without modern structures around it, and the whole complex is visible from one spot.

Unfortunately, in the case of the Nagyszombat Street amphitheatre, the possible locations to install the board – and the viewpoint – were limited. The position of the sidewalk, the bike lane, the fire hydrant, and the associated pipelines, and the lines of underground cables all had to be taken into consideration. The board was fixed in place with soil screws, and only during the first installation attempt did we realise that there was rubble in the ground, which made it impossible to set it at the selected location. Therefore, we had to move the board to a place where one of the trees in front of the amphitheatre obstructs the view. The reconstruction drawing had to be adapted to this situation. The panel is transparent and shows the reconstruction of a flight of stairs right in front of the board. The proportions are visualized by human silhouettes, Roman graffiti and posters (Fig. 8).

We aimed to produce drawings that are not ‘sterile’ or purely technical; at the same time, it was important to communicate that the reconstructions do not represent past reality but only an abstract image of it. The reconstruction and cross-section drawings were relatively easy to create, because the ground plan had been published and online aerial photos made it possible to build a more-or-less accurate CAD model that served as the reconstruction’s basis. However, a thorough site survey was also necessary; only thus could the reconstruction drawing be made to complete the actual ruins when viewed together. In this case, it was sufficient to prepare a photogrammetry-based model to clarify details of the ground plan (Fig. 9). As mentioned above, the position of the board had to be changed during installment and it also had to be turned slightly due to unforeseen factors, but, thanks to the survey we made at the site, these changes were not difficult to implement.



This example illustrates that even a relatively simple reconstruction drawing raises countless questions. A drawing is often all that is put on display at heritage sites, in exhibition halls, and publications; however, it is also crucial to document and communicate the considerations that influenced its creation. In the course of preparing the information boards about the ruins and their reconstruction, we concluded that the available data needs to be reviewed in a more detailed study, and it is necessary to revise our existing interpretation of the amphitheatre in Nagyszombat Street.

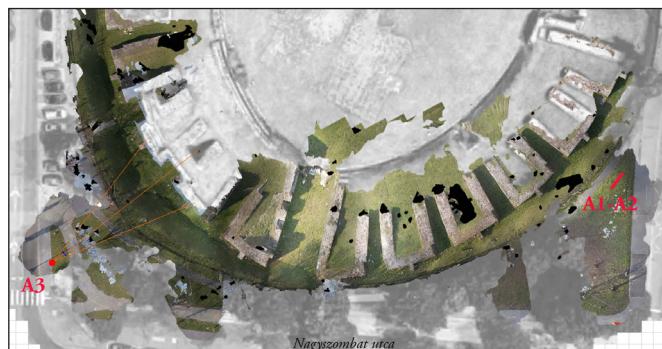


Fig. 9. The photogrammetric survey (colour) and the Google Maps photo of the site (greyscale) superimposed, with the viewpoint of Board A3 (red dot) and the wall segment shown in the reconstruction drawing (by L. Timár)

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