

## THE ISLAND – SAINT MARGARET AND THE DOMINICANS

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*In collaboration with the Vasvár Historical Collection of the Dominican Order, a new temporary exhibition opened in the Budapest History Museum on 17 November 2022. The aim of the exhibition is to represent Saint Margaret and her cult, together with her home, the Dominican monastery on the Margaret Island, based on the most recent archaeological research. Apart from the archaeological finds, the exhibition features paintings, fine metal artefacts, relics, and codices which have been lent by significant Hungarian museum institutions (Fig. 1). The opening of the exhibition was linked to a scientific conference organised on the occasion of the anniversary of Saint Margaret's death, where experts of the field from several Hungarian religious institutions, universities, museums, and research institutes presented their latest research (including archaeological research) on Saint Margaret.*



Fig. 1. View from the exhibition  
(photo by Ákos Keppel, Budapest History Museum)

The exhibition, housed by the Castle Museum of the Budapest History Museum, concerns a significant medieval monastery of Hungary and the famous female saint of the Árpád Dynasty, and is connected to a several-fold anniversary. 780 years ago, Béla IV and his wife, Queen Mary offered their daughter to God in exchange for being saved from the destruction of the Mongol invasion. Their deed still has consequences today: Margaret was canonized in the 20th century; the popular park lying in the middle of the capital is called Margaret Island; and Géza Gárdonyi wrote his still-popular novel, *The Prisoners of God*, about the princess. Some even more round anniversaries are also connected to this year: King Stephen V, Margaret's older brother, who died very young, was buried in the church of the Dominican monastery on the Margaret Island 750 years ago, together with their nephew, Prince Béla, a victim of the power struggle after Stephen V's death. The most important anniversary is connected to Margaret herself: it was barely more than 750 years ago that she died in the monastery, on 18 January 1270, shortly before her 29th birthday. Many contemporary and later documents account to her life, from the first legend of her life from the 13th century, probably written by Marcellus Dominican monk, her spiritual leader, to the accounts of the canonization procedure compiled in 1276. The latter contains descriptions by contemporary witnesses, while the medieval legend demonstrates the cult of a princess venerated as a saint. The convent of the island survived the Ottoman conquest and, finally settling down in Bratislava, they maintained Margaret's cult and memory and guarded her relics saved from the nunnery together with the Clares who fled from Óbuda.

One of the main themes of the exhibition is the memorabilia connected to Margaret and her veneration after her death. Among these, the remains of the tomb of St. Margaret are outstanding, which constitute of several hundred white marble fragments that have been unearthed throughout the territory of the monastery during the past two centuries. The most important and most representative pieces have been exhibited, as was a peculiar statue fragment depicting the head of a monk from the collection of the King Matthias

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*Fig. 2. Unknown artist: St. Margaret. From the Vasvár Historical Collection of the Dominican Order (photo by Ákos Keppel, Budapest History Museum)*

the discovery of the royal tomb find of Székesfehérvár in 1848, although the significance of the Margaret Island finding remained unrecognized for some time. The identification of the tomb of King Stephen V only happened more than a century later, in 1958, thanks to Rózsa Feuerné Tóth, archaeologist in the Budapest History Museum. The research of the ruins of the building was brought to a new level by the excavations by Kálmán Lux in 1921, and his son, Géza Lux in 1937–38. Their work is significant because they documented many details that today are not visible anymore (*Fig. 3*). It is also their merit that the ruins can be seen today, as the first conserving and reconstructive works are connected to them. The most recent and most spectacular results were brought about by archaeological investigations around the turn of the millennium, providing a significant amount of new information regarding the extent and architectural details of the monastery. The excavations were led by Katalin Iránsné Melis for over a decade, from who Eszter Kovács took over and continued the work until her sudden passing in 2018. As a result of their investigations, not only previously unknown architectural details or material remains of the monastery

Museum in Visegrád, which is rightfully considered as the closest “stylistic kin” of the tomb from Margaret Island.

A short animation by the Animated Film Studio of Kecskemét (director: Sándor Békési), presenting Margaret’s life in a crowd-pleasing way, premiered in the exhibition. A significant part of the exhibition addresses one of the most important relics of Margaret, an iron belt, which, according to the tradition, was used by the princess for penance. Having been kept by the nuns in Bratislava for long, today it is part of the collection of the Treasury of the Main Cathedral in Esztergom. A small selection of depictions of Margaret – about a half a dozen paintings from the 17th to the 20th century – can also be seen in the exhibition as a representation of the continuity of the veneration of her person (*Fig. 2*).

As a result of archaeological investigations in the last thirty years, we do not only know Margaret better as a person, but more has been learnt also about the nunnery that was her home. The other main aim of the exhibition is to demonstrate this newly acquired knowledge. The ruins on Margaret Island have been studied for almost two centuries, since 1838, making it one of the longest-researched medieval monuments in Hungary. It is worth mentioning that it was the first church where the tomb of a medieval monarch had been unearthed, before



*Fig. 3. A reconstruction of the 13th-century look of the convent on a model made of gypsum by Kálmán Lux in 1942 (photo by Ákos Keppel, Budapest History Museum)*



complex became discovered but such unique finds have also come to light as fragments of the one-time lavish wall paintings, some of which can also be seen in the exhibition. Accounts from as early as the 19th century mention traces of colourful paintings on the walls of the church, but there was no opportunity to save and present them then, and they perished over time. Katalin Melis excavated the foundations of one of the rooms in the annex north of the church in 2001, and found a wall painting imitating marble; its remains were conserved by Eszter Harsányi. This is the first known colourful detail from amongst the ruins of the monastery, unearthed 150 years after the first excavations. A more surprising assemblage was discovered by



Fig. 4. Wall painting fragment from the area of the convent (photo by Ákos Keppel, Budapest History Museum)

Eszter Kovács in 2007 in the south-western room of the monastery, connecting to the church. The area, including the stairway and a corridor connecting to it, was earlier overlooked by archaeologists because of a tree. After the tree died, an opportunity presented itself for excavating and documenting the construction under the late medieval stairway. The excavations brought to light a wall painting part *in situ*, the cleaning and reconstructing of which (also made by Eszter Harsányi) turned out to be the most challenging task during the preparation of the exhibition. The best-preserved parts of the painting that once decorated three adjoining walls are the bottom and the edges: two shorter, about two-metre-wide wall section surrounding a three-meter-long section. Although in the present state of conservation the iconography of the paintings is not clear, it is obvious that there was a scene on each shorter side, while the longer middle part was divided into five short sections. Based on stylistic features, the paintings were probably created during the early 15th century. The most recently discovered, most colourful, and probably most beautiful decorations of the monastery are also connected to the investigations by Eszter Kovács. During the 2017–18 campaign, she discovered a large amount of painted wall plaster fragments in an infill layer near the west curtain wall, which probably ended up there as a result of modern levelling works (when the debris was spread at the foot of the curtain wall). One can only vaguely guess the original place of the fragments. It would be an obvious solution to connect them to the chapel at the western part of the monastery, since it is close to the unearthed remains. Such as other wall paintings from the site, this assemblage is also fragmentary but it is outstanding even so because not only contains pieces from the frames or footing in the lower parts of the paintings but also those from the upper part, including heads with nimbuses of several figures. The diversity of the fragments suggests that they might come from different parts of the building complex (Fig. 4).

Besides the architectural elements, the exhibition also displays objects representing the everyday life of the nunnery. Beside simple everyday pottery vessels recovered by excavations, special objects have also been placed in the showcases, such as the fragment of a ceramic statuette depicting a saint – maybe St. Margaret herself –, or the book fittings which, for the first time in 500 years since leaving the monastery, might be together in the same room with the volume from the collection of the National Széchényi Library, written in 1521 by Lea Ráskai, a nun from the convent on Margaret Island. The exhibition also features other archaeological finds, including book cover fittings and a smaller paint jar, objects representing the less-known book culture of the Dominican nuns of the Margaret Island.

The exhibition is open until 18 March 2023 during opening hours in the Gothic Hall of the Castle Museum of the Budapest History Museum.

*translated by Tünde F. Komori<sup>2</sup>*

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