

# GENIUS LOCI

# LASZLOVSZKY 60

edited by  
Dóra Mérai  
and

Ágnes Drosztmér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,  
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,  
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



ARCHAEOLINGUA

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# The Abbey of Meszes: New Insights on the Site Location

ÜNIGE BENCZE\*

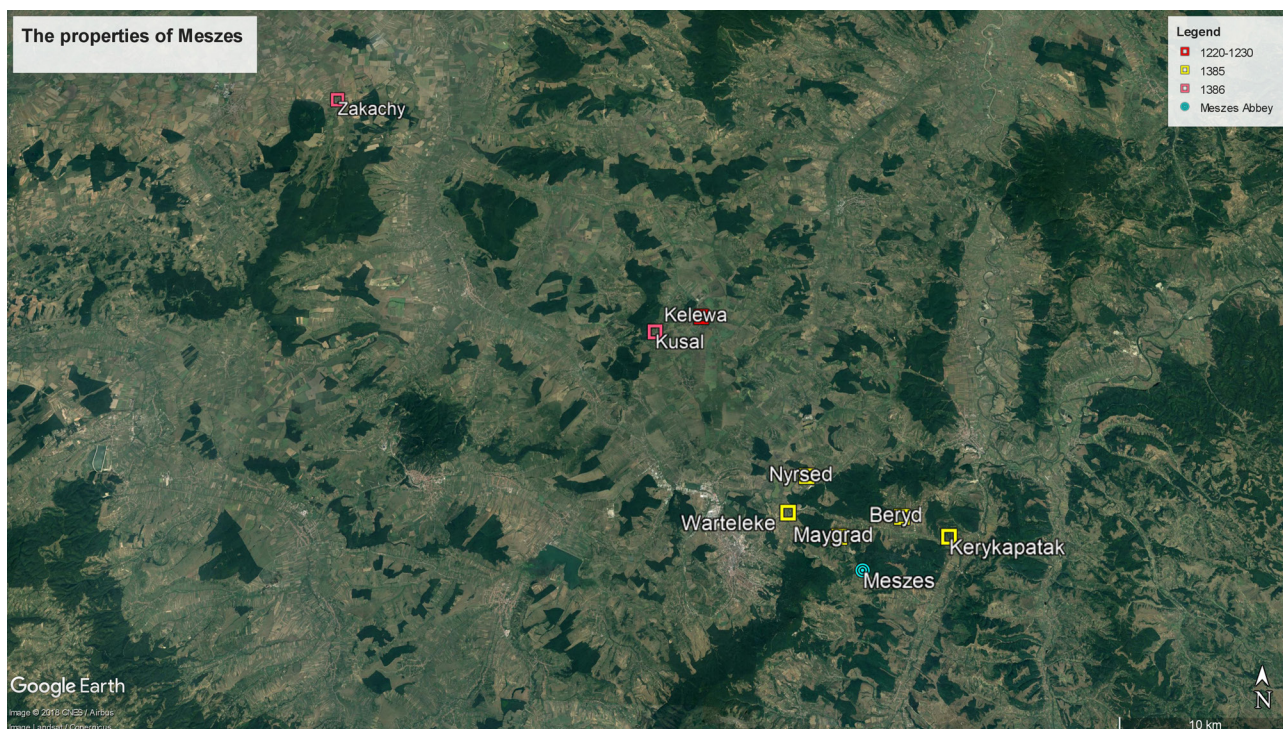
According to an authentic charter from 1165,<sup>1</sup> Prince Álmos (1096-1106) founded the *Meszes* or *Meszesapath* abbey, dedicated to St. Margaret of Antioch, near the ruins of a former Roman auxiliary camp in the vicinity of today's village of Moigrad (in Hungarian, Mojgrád), although the exact circumstances remain unknown.<sup>2</sup> The abbey received numerous donations from the kings and queens of Hungary. For example, King Stephen III (1162-1172) donated one salt boulder from each cart that transported salt through the Meszes Gate; Queen Anne de Châtillon (1172-1184) gave one fifth of the incomes from the toll at Zalău (in Hungarian, Zilah; in German, Zillenmarkt);<sup>3</sup> Queen Maria Laskarina (1235-1270) as well as Queen Elisabeth the Cuman (1270/1272-1277) confirmed the donation;<sup>4</sup> and King Andrew II (1205-1235) donated the piece of land called *Kelewa*.<sup>5</sup>

The written sources do not specify the affiliation of the abbey. Based on the information that Benedictines were present in the entourage of Prince Álmos and they were the earliest monastic order that settled in Hungary, researchers have automatically connected the abbey to the Benedictines. The first record of the abbey belonging to a specific religious community comes from 1234-1235, when it was listed as a Premonstratensian priory in the *Catalogus Ninivensis*.<sup>6</sup> After this, the abbey disappeared from the archival sources for quite a while. It reappeared in 1361, when King Louis I (1342-1382) donated the completely abandoned (*desertam videlicet et omnino destitutum*) monastery of *Mezesapath* with its patronage right and all its pertinences to Magister Jakch de Kusal as a reward for his service.<sup>7</sup> Soon after receiving the donation, the family entered into litigation with the Dobokai family for the ownership of the abbey, which lasted until

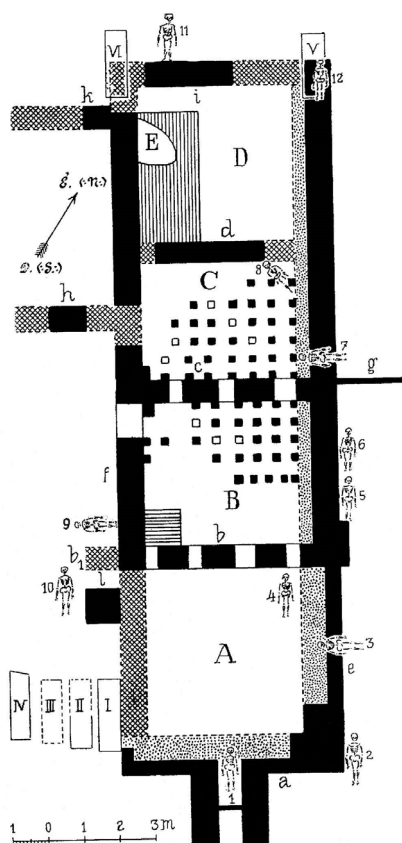
1365 when they won the lawsuit.<sup>8</sup> The litigation was re-opened in 1368 by Ladislaus Vitéz and the parties reached an agreement according to which they divided all the properties of the monastery into two equal parts. In addition, Magister Jakch received the deserted monastic village called Kerua – the earlier mentioned Kelewa (which lay next to Coșeu; in Hungarian, Kusaly), and half of the property of Külsősolymos (an unidentified location).<sup>9</sup>

The first source to offer a list of the monastic properties by name dates only from 1385: Nyrsed – Mirsid (in Hungarian, Nyírsid), Maygrad – Moigrad, Warteleke – Ortelec (in Hungarian, Vártelek), Kerykapatak – Creaca (in Hungarian, Karika), Beryd – Brebi (in Hungarian, Beréd), and Monosturpatak (now disappeared). Another enumeration comes from 1386,<sup>10</sup> when a representative from the chapter of Oradea (in Hungarian, Nagyvárad, in German, Großwardein) was sent out to introduce the sons of the late Magister Jakch to the possession of the abbey and its lands (two additional lands were mentioned: Kusal [Coșeu] and Zakachy [Săcășeni]; in Hungarian, Érszakácsi). The two lists contain the names of villages from the area around the presumed location of the abbey (see Fig. 1). The original early medieval structure of the monastic land is unknown, but the differences between the two lists might imply that the monastic lands were the same ones listed in 1385.<sup>11</sup> Also, it cannot be discerned which lands were received during the Benedictine presence and which perhaps during the Premonstratensian management. The low number of monastic properties indicates a relatively small monastic community; the fourteenth-century property structure indeed reflects the original number of properties, although most likely this structure cannot be traced back to the early periods. Given the already abandoned state of the mon-

\* Mureș County Museum, Târgu Mureș



► Fig. 1. The properties of Meszes Abbey based on the archival sources (compiled by Ű. Bencze)



► Fig. 2. The Roman period house excavated by Árpád Buday (Árpád Buday, "Porolissumból. Jelentés az 1914. évi munkálatokról" [From Porolissum. Report on the work done in 1914], *Dolgozatok az Erdélyi Múzeum Érem- és Régiségtárából* 6 (1915): 53).

astery in 1361, its original property structure must have suffered alterations as well.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century witness examinations located the toponyms Monostor and Monostorpatak between the villages of Moigrad and Jac (in Hungarian, Zsákfalva). Even though a number of attempts were made to locate the site of the abbey, it seems that the closest identification was made by Árpád Buday, who interpreted the medieval finds as coming from Meszes abbey in 1914.<sup>12</sup> He carried out excavations on the border of the two villages in a place called Pometul – Dealul Bisericii. He unearthed a Roman period house there, which had later been filled in and used for unclear purposes (Fig. 2). Various burials were dug into the walls of the house: eleven simple burials and six tombs built from bricks, some of which also contained medieval bricks. Buday distinguished two types of orientation among the inhumations (northwest-southeast and west-east). The finds contained medieval coins from the twelfth to the fourteenth century<sup>13</sup> and carved stone fragments<sup>14</sup> distinctly connected to medieval architecture. Buday noted that the territory had been disturbed in several places and because of this the Roman and medieval finds were mixed.



► Fig. 3. The location of the site (photo: Ü. Bencze)

New excavations and a geophysical survey were initiated in 2008 and 2009 on Pomet Hill, the results of which have not been published yet.<sup>15</sup> The geophysical survey produced a complex map of Roman roads, hearths, traces of earlier archaeological trenches, and buildings from at least two construction phases (a Roman period and post-Roman period building activity).<sup>16</sup> Only one excavation unit<sup>17</sup> was opened, which contained a large number of successive burials, indicating prolonged and intensive use of the space (with graves generally oriented northwest-southeast and rarely west-east, see Figs. 4 and 5).<sup>18</sup> Based on the stratigraphy, a coin issued by King Stephen III, and the fact that some of the burials

were dug into a Roman wall, the inhumations were dated to the Middle Ages. Even though the excavation had to be ended before reaching sterile soil, the finds discovered are telling. The excavation unit was located near Árpád Buday's excavation (see Fig. 3).

The results of the research in 2008-2009 are connected to Buday's 1914 excavation by three major phenomena. First, the presence of inhumations with two different types of orientations, second, the existence of medieval coins, and third, the burials cutting a Roman wall. Even though the exact connection between the building excavated by Buday and the wall identified in 2008-2009 could not be clarified stratigraphically,



► Fig. 4. In situ burials in 2008 (photo: Ü. Bencze)



► Fig. 5. In situ burials in 2009 (photo: Ü. Bencze)

the chances are high that the newly discovered wall fragment was part of the building excavated in 1914.<sup>19</sup> The spatial connections (if any) between this cemetery section (Pomet Hill) and another Roman-period cemetery situated further down the slope, on Ursoieş Hill,<sup>20</sup> has not been determined.<sup>21</sup>

The abbey of *Meszes* could have existed somewhere in this area since the intensity of the burials as well as the occurrence of high quality carved-stone material indicate the presence of a wealthy religious institution. Even if one presumes (as Buday did)<sup>22</sup> that the stone material was carried there to fill in the Roman-period building, it was probably transported from a reasonable distance.<sup>23</sup> Given the density of the building remains and other archaeological features in the area, however, only extended excavations would be able to identify the exact location of the church and other monastic buildings.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Zsigmond Jakó, ed., *Erdélyi Okmánytár* [Transylvanian Archives] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1997), vol. 1, 125/10 (Hereafter EO); the original can be consulted online on the site of the Hungarian National Archives (Magyar Országos Levéltár) under the number DL 76136 (Hereafter MOL DL/DF).
- <sup>2</sup> Álmos could only have started the building the abbey in 1096 at the earliest, when he became lord of the dukedom. However, he did not remain in this status for long because Coloman (1095–1116) seized the duchy from Álmos between 1098 and 1101–1102, see Dorottya Uhrin, “Antiochiai Szent Margit legkorábbi magyarországi kultusza [The earliest cult of Saint Margaret of Antioch in Hungary],” *Magyar Könyvszemle* 133, no. 1 (2017): 13–31.
- <sup>3</sup> EO I, 126/11; MOL DL 28573.
- <sup>4</sup> EO I, 256/389; MOL DL 28573.
- <sup>5</sup> EO I, 153/114; MOL DL 105472.
- <sup>6</sup> EO I, 180/176.
- <sup>7</sup> See EO IV, 72/99 and 100. Scholars have identified it with today’s Chilioara (in Hungarian, Szilágykirva).
- <sup>8</sup> Ștefan Pascu, ed., *Documenta Romaniae Historica, C. Transilvania*, vol. 12 (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1985), 455.
- <sup>9</sup> EO IV, 272/677; MOL DL 96433.
- <sup>10</sup> The original can be consulted online on the site of the Romanian National Archives (Arhivele Naționale ale României) under the reference numbers CJ-F-00460-2-36 and CJ-F-004060-2-37.
- <sup>11</sup> Coșeu was the family’s ancestral property, where, according to a confirmation charter issued by King Louis I, a weekly fair could be held, see: EO III, 268/724; MOL DF 254797. It is likely that at that time Săcășeni was part of the family’s estates.
- <sup>12</sup> See the excavation report by Árpád Buday, “Porolis-sumból. Jelentés az 1914. évi munkálatokról” [From

Porolissum. Report on the work done in 1914], *Dolgozatok az Erdélyi Múzeum Érem- és Régiségtárából* 6 (1915): 51–95.

- <sup>13</sup> The earliest one was probably issued by Coloman, then Béla II (1131–1141), Béla III (1172–1196), Ladislaus IV (1272–1290), Charles I (1308–1342), and Louis I (1342–1382).
- <sup>14</sup> Fragments from a rose window, a possible tympanum with floral decoration, a sculpture, and a lancet window frame.
- <sup>15</sup> The excavations took place during the Necropolis Porolis-sensis Project, which was an international collaboration between the Institute of Archaeology and Art History in Cluj-Napoca, the Babeș-Bolyai University, the National History Museum of Transylvania, the Museum of History and Art in Zalău, Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, and the University of London.
- <sup>16</sup> See the results in Lipovics et. al., “Domborzati modell alkalmazása egy Porolissumban végzett régészeti célú mágneses mérés feldolgozásában és értelmezésében” [Applying a terrain model in the processing and interpretation of magnetic measurements for archaeological purposes in Porolissum], *Archaeometriai Műhely* 2 (2009): 31–42.
- <sup>17</sup> This trench was researched by Nicola Lyons (University of London) and myself. The documentation and finds are kept in the Zalău County Museum of History and Art.
- <sup>18</sup> A total of 36 inhumations were unearthed in the 4 x 4.80 m trench, and two successive burials in a stone cist (a tomb built from re-used stone slabs). Such a large number of inhumations in such a small space clearly indicates a cemetery with at least three burial horizons.
- <sup>19</sup> Only large-scale, open-surface excavations can shed light on the exact connections between Buday’s excavation and the most recent research by re-opening some of the already excavated areas.
- <sup>20</sup> The Roman cemetery was the focus of the Necropolis Porolis-sensis Project (see footnote 15) which aimed to define the extent and characteristics of the cemetery. Here, only cremation burials were unearthed. See a summary of the project: Ágnes Alföldy-Gázdac et al., “Project ‘Necropolis Porolis-sensis:’ Methods and Perspectives,” *Acta Terrae Septemcastrensis* 6, no. 1 (2007): 9–17; on the burials, see: Ágota Ferencz-Mátéfi, “Temetkezési sajátosságok Porolissum temetőjében” [Particular features of the Roman necropolis in Porolissum], in *Archaeologia Transilvanica. Studia in honorem Stephani Bajusz*, ed. Alpár Dobos et al. (Cluj-Napoca – Târgu Mureș – Budapest: Transylvanian Museum Society, Mureș County Museum, Martin Opitz Publishing House, 2015), 153–159.
- <sup>21</sup> No cremation burials have been identified on Pomet Hill, only inhumations with skeletal remains (generally without grave goods).
- <sup>22</sup> In Buday’s opinion the premises of the Roman building were filled up, when it was no longer in use, and leveled to prepare the site for new constructions. He does not discuss in detail, however, when this could have happened, he merely mentions that an analysis of the finds with which it was filled in could be a starting point. When he describes the finds he highlights that one cannot rely on their dating since all the finds were heavily mixed; they found Árpád-period coins under the hypocaust and Roman coins in the upper layers. Also, if one looks at the dating of the medieval finds (the carved stone fragments, the latest coin issues and an iron spur) they all suggest that the building could have been filled in during the fourteenth century or later.
- <sup>23</sup> Monasteries were frequently sited near Roman ruins because they served as available construction material.