

THE ISSUE OF CONTINUITY IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES IN LIGHT OF THE MOST RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON THE LATE IMPERIAL PERIOD FORT IN VISEGRÁD

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The medieval castle of Roman origins at the Sibrik-domb (Sibrik Hill) site in Visegrád is an outstanding monument from the time of the establishment of the kingdom of Hungary. At the same time it is an archaeological site where the period from the Late Imperial period to the end of the 11th century and the issue of Roman and Early Medieval continuity can be studied in depth. During previous archaeological excavations we learned of the 4th century Roman fort and the early Árpád period castle of the comes (the head of the county, in Hungarian called an ispán) that was developed from it. Unfortunately we do not know the date and circumstances of when this medieval fortification was established, nor do we know the origin of the western Slavic name of the site, Visegrád, which was first mentioned in 1009. While up to this point this site has been amongst the better researched early county seats, it still has the possibility to give us a great deal of further information about the power centers of comites at the foundation of the kingdom of Hungary. The new research program represents a breakthrough in this area, where using the results from various fields of study the answers to these key issues are being sought.

HISTORY OF RESEARCH AT THE SIBRIK-DOMB SITE

Archaeological research into Sibrik-domb in Visegrád began in the 1950s with preliminary field walks. Excavations began under the direction of Sándor Soproni, during which the ground plans and dates of construction of the Roman fort and the medieval castle that was developed from it were identified.¹ Renewed excavations were performed in the 1970s under the direction of Mátyás Szőke, which were primarily concentrated on the western side of the camp where the former gateway was suspected, and investigations into the castle's southwestern section were also performed.² In 1985, and then in 2010 under the direction of Péter Gróf, rescue excavations took place.³

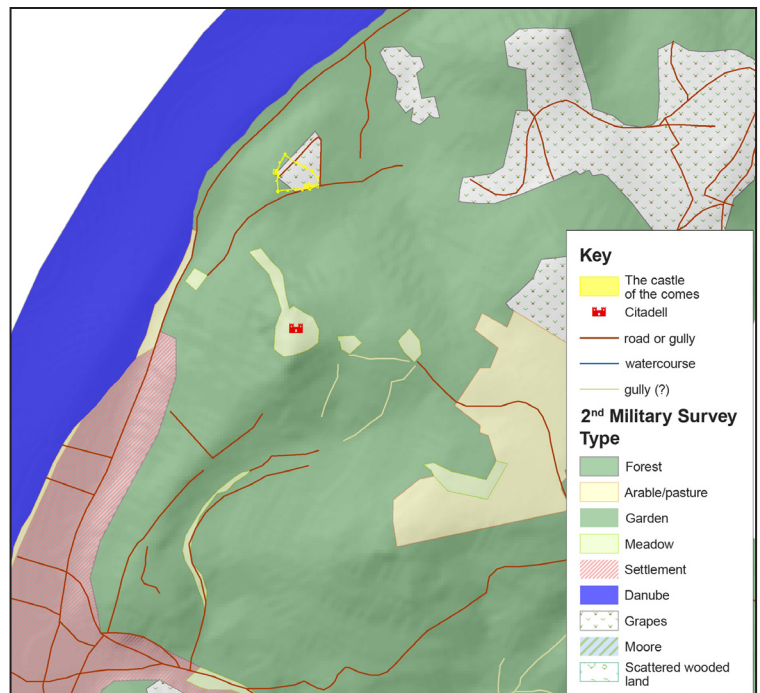


Fig. 1: Map of Visegrád with the archaeological sites (Katalin Tolnai)

¹ Soproni, Sándor: A visegrádi római tábor és középkori vár (The Roman Camp and Medieval Castle in Visegrád). *Archaeológiai Értesítő* 81 (1954), 49–54.

² Szőke, Mátyás: A visegrádi várispánsági központ kutatása (Research on the County Seat in Visegrád). *Dunakanyar* 1980/2.

³ The most significant results of the earlier research were summarized by Katalin Tolnai, and she identified the locations of the excavated sections as well as reassessing the archaeological observations. For a detailed description of the excavations with a ground plan see: Tolnai, Katalin: A Visegrád-Sibrik dombon feltárt maradványok története (History of the Remains Excavated at Sibrik-domb in Visegrád). *Archaeologia – Altum Castrum Online* 2013. <http://archeologia.hu/content/archeologia/179/sibrik-tolnai.pdf>



Fig. 2: Aerial photograph of the Visegrád-Várkert and Sibrik-domb sites (photograph: Pazirik Studio)

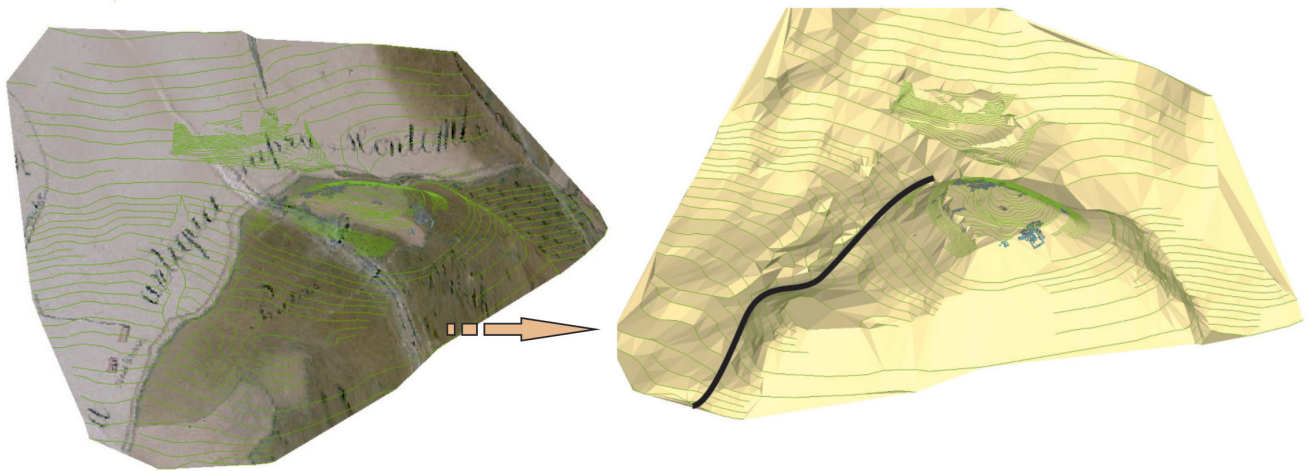


Fig. 3: Terrain model of the Sibrik-domb site and its surroundings (Katalin Tolnai)



Fig. 4: Aerial photograph of the Sibrik-domb excavation in 2013 (Pazirik Studio)

The most recent excavations began in the summer of 2013 under the direction of the authors of this essay.⁴ The research built upon geophysical surveys in the preceding years. These types of investigations had earlier been performed on the over 4,000 m² area, most recently a survey with ground-penetrating radar and a magnetometer in 2010.⁵ These indicated several anomalies within the interior of the fort that could be interpreted as buildings, and the excavation in 2013 targeted the features that had been identified through the geophysical survey.

THE HISTORY OF SIBRIK-DOMB ON THE BASIS OF THE PREVIOUS EXCAVATIONS

The ground plan of the former Roman fort located at Sibrik-domb is irregular, following the shape of the hill. Its construction can be placed in the 320s A.D., when three fan-shaped corner towers and eleven U-shaped side towers were erected. The location of the gate belonging to this building complex has not been resolved. During the reign of Constantius II (337–361) the central tower on the western side was dismantled down to the level of the foundations, and in its place a double gate was installed. During the reign of the emperor Valentinian I (364–375) a square tower was erected in front of the gate. A double ditch (*fossa*) only protected three sides of the fort, while it was not necessary on the fourth side due to the steep terrain. Its interior was only sparsely built up. So far three buildings have been brought to light that were constructed along the main wall of the fort, as well as one that stood on the interior of the camp and was separated from the row of buildings along the wall by a street. According to the *Notitia dignitatum*, an official Roman document from the end of the 4th century, the *auxilia Ursarensia* were stationed within its walls, but there is no direct archaeological evidence for this since from the excavations so far we only know of stamped bricks of the *legio II Adiutrix* and *Terentius dux*. At the end of the Roman period new inhabitants moved here, who erected their pit dwellings inside the protective walls.

The earlier archaeological research showed that the area of the Roman fort was used again during the establishment of the kingdom of Hungary. A keep was shaped out of the large tower from the period of Valentinian I, the destruction of which was dated by a coin of King Ladislaus I (1077–1095). In the early Middle Ages, at a period that cannot be more precisely determined, a portion of the corner towers were also remodeled, and a small building with stone foundations was erected in the southeastern section of the fort's interior area. On the site of this latter building a large stone palace divided into two sections was later constructed. Outside the castle to the southeast, a church with two construction periods and next to this a large 11th century cemetery were discovered. The second period of the church has been dated to the middle of the 11th century by the coins found in the cemetery (with the imprints of King Salamon [1063–1074] and Prince Géza [1074–1077]), as well as the abundant stone carvings and frescos. In the Várkert-dűlő area stretching below the castle, the remains of pit dwellings from a settlement and the settlement's church, as well as the graves of its surrounding cemetery and the remains of a monastery founded by King András I (1046–1060) were identified.

THE RESULTS OF THE MOST RECENT RESEARCH AT SIBRIK-DOMB

On the basis of the ground-penetrating radar examination, there was a new building that had to be taken into account in the interior of the castle, which during the excavation in 2013 proved to be a medieval church with a semicircular apse. On the northern side of the building a grave was discovered that had particular significance for the analysis of the site. The pewter chalice (*Fig. 13*) and paten placed next to the deceased led to the conclusion that this was the grave of a churchman. We found a brick grave in the center of the

⁴ Buzás, Gergely: A visegrádi ispáni vár régészeti kutatása (Archaeological Research into the Ispán's Castle in Visegrád). *Archaeologia – Altum Castrum Online* 2013. <http://archeologia.hu/content/archeologia/216/buzas-gergely.pdf>

⁵ The survey was performed by Archeo Prospections® under the leadership of Sirri Seren (Zentralanstalt für Meteorologie und Geodynamik) within the context of the collaboration between Dr. Falko Daim (Römisch-Deutsches Zentralmuseum) and Dr. István Feld (Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Humanities, Institute of Archaeology) on the project entitled a *Reiterkrieger-Burgenbauer. Die frühen Ungarn und das Deutsche Reich vom 9. bis zum 11. Jahrhundert*.



Fig. 5: Ground plan of the comes' castle and its surroundings with the particular construction periods indicated (Gergely Buzás)

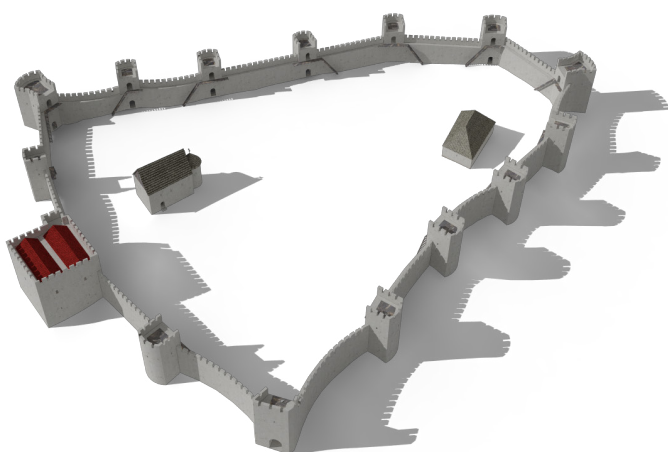


Fig. 6: Reconstruction of the comes' castle (Gergely Buzás – Pazirik Studio)



Fig. 7: Excavation of the castle's keep (Mátyás Szőke)

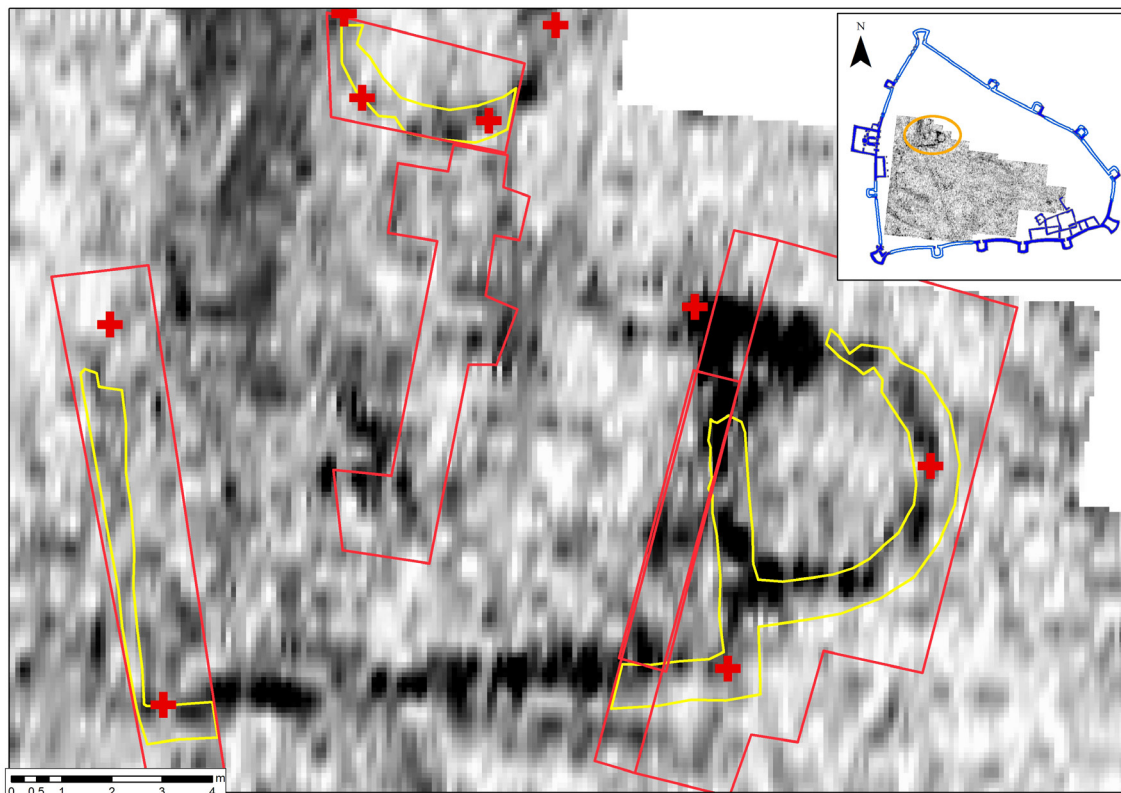


Fig. 8: Ground-penetrating radar survey of the castle church and the 2013 excavation trenches (Archeo Prospections® – Katalin Tolnai)

nave, where only a finger joint and a gold ring (Fig. 12) were discovered; the remains of the deceased had been exhumed at a later date. To the north of the church we unearthed a large, walled Roman cistern.

The 2013 excavation of the comes' castle also provided new answers in connection with its construction history, which correspond with the conclusions related to the chronology of the settlement excavated at the Visegrád-Várkert-dűlő site that stretches below the hill. On the basis of earlier research it had not been clear whether there was habitation in Visegrád prior to the 10th century, in the 8th–9th centuries. Proof was found through the processing of the settlement investigated at Visegrád-Várkert-dűlő that it was already inhabited in the late Avar period, and it was possible to identify an archeological horizon on the basis of stratigraphic observations and the find material from the recent excavation of the castle. The foundation ditch from a post-framed structure with wattle-and-daub walls found beneath the apse of the church preserves the memory of the 8th–9th century period, whose dating is supported by a bronze spur from the second half of the 8th century to the beginning of the 9th century (Fig. 11).⁶ The conclusive chronology of the early medieval layers was also checked using radiocarbon dating techniques.⁷ We tested samples of three settlement traces from the early horizon mentioned above, and the results, combined with the archaeological dating, suggest an 8th century origin.⁸ The radiocarbon dating of the later horizon, which is represented by the church and the priest's grave with the chalice, can be placed most likely to the 10th century, or the beginning of the

⁶ Kind, Thomas: Westliche Einflüsse auf der östlichen Balkanhalbinsel im Spiegel der früh- und hochmittelalterlichen Reitausrüstung. In: *Post-Roman Towns, Trade and Settlement in Europe and Byzantium: Heirs of the Roman West (Millennium Studien/Millennium Studies)*, vol. 1, ed. Henning, J. (Berlin – New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 543–612.

⁷ Mihály Molnár (Institute for Nuclear Research of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences – Hertelendi Laboratory of Environmental Studies, AMS Laboratory) was responsible for the C-14 tests. The test was performed within the context of the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund project number NK 104533. (*Az átalakulás évszázadai – települési struktúrák, települési stratégiák a Kárpát-medence központi részein a 8–11. században [The Centuries of Transformation – Settlement Structures and Settlement Strategies in the Central Sections of the Carpathian Basin in the 8th–11th Centuries]*. Head researcher: Miklós Takács.)

⁸ The 1 sigma data from the three samples are rather uniform, so the most likely intervals are: cal AD 683 – cal AD 771 (sample code: DeA-3319), cal AD 667– cal AD 767 (sample code: DeA-3320), cal AD 686 – cal AD 771 (sample code: DeA-3486).



Fig. 9: The excavated apse of the castle church

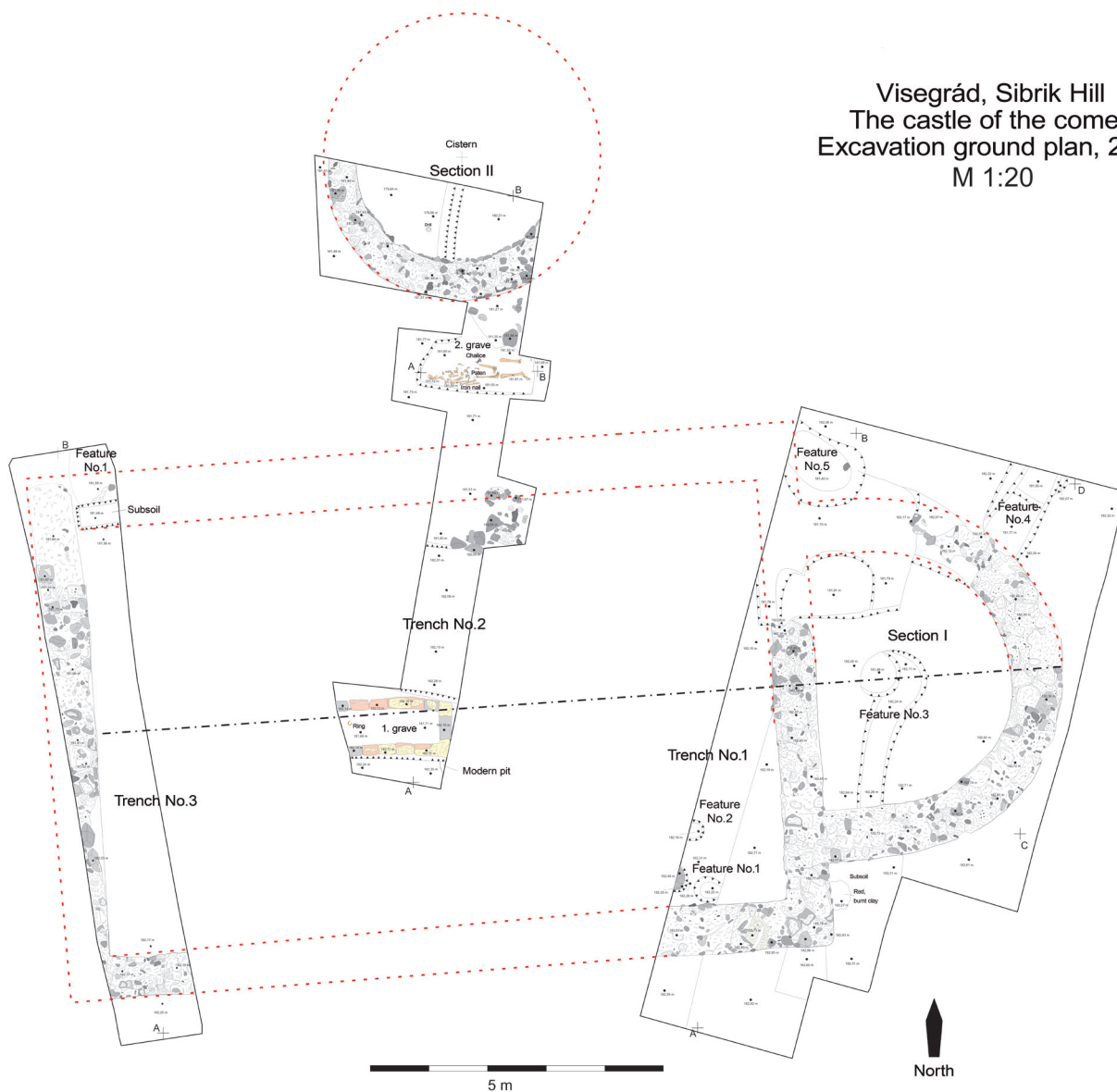


Fig. 10: Excavation ground plan of the castle church (illustration: Róbert Loki)



Fig. 11: Bronze spur from the fill in the foundation trench below the castle church



Fig. 12: Gold ring from the brick grave in the castle church (photograph: Gergely Buzás)



Fig. 13: Remains of a 10th century pewter chalice from the priest's grave and its 3D reconstruction (SziMe 3D Ar)

11th century.⁹ According to the results, the stone church, is an early monument of the Christian conversion amongst the Hungarians that began in the second half of the 10th century. This evidence is unique to this point in our country, as we had not yet had any archaeological data concerning these activities.

From the aspect of our knowledge of the historical conditions of the conquest period and the establishment of the kingdom of Hungary, whether or not we can speak of a continuity of settlement in the Carpathian Basin in the 9th–10th centuries is an important question. The archaeological sites in Visegrád provide an excellent opportunity to study this. In general, at the moment it can be stated that the ceramic chronology does not make it possible to identify the people found in the Carpathian Basin with settlements that survived the conquest period. Furthermore, considering the diverse population of the area in the 9th–10th centuries, we also cannot determine their ethnicity purely on the basis of archaeological observations. However, considering the favorable research conditions, we can make strong hypotheses in connection with Visegrád's early history. The undoubtedly western Slavic place name of *Výssegrad* first documented in a written source from 1009 can be compared with the new results. In this case, the excavated early 8th–9th century phenomena can serve as an archaeological backdrop for the determination of the ethnicity of the people who provided the settlement its name. So, in light of this, the possibility of the continued survival into the early Árpád period of the Slavic population that had lived here is probable.

⁹ The 1 sigma result: cal AD 900 – 920, 960 – 1020, 2 sigma result: cal AD 895 – 1017. (sample code: DeA-3955). The 1 sigma result of the sample taken from the body buried in the church: cal AD 900 – 990, 2 sigma result: cal AD 892 – 1011. (sample code: DeA-3944.) According to these results, it is a 7.5% chance that the priest's grave can be dated to the 11th century, and it is a 1.8% chance that the body buried in the church can be dated also to the 11th century. It is very likely that both of them died during the 10th century. In connection with the method see: Molnár, M. – Janovics, R. – Major, I. – Orsovszki, J. – Gönczi, R. – Veres, M. – Leonard, A.G. – Castle, S.M. – Lange, T.E. – Wacker, L. – Hajdas, I. – Jull, A.J.T.: Status report of the new AMS 14C sample preparation lab of the Hertelendi Laboratory of Environmental Studies (Debrecen, Hungary). *Radiocarbon* 55/2–3 (2013), 665–676; Molnár, M. – Rinyu, L. – Veres, M. – Seiler, M. – Wacker, L. – Synal, H.-A.: EnvironMICADAS: a mini 14C AMS with enhanced Gas Ion Source Interface in the Hertelendi Laboratory of Environmental Studies (HEKAL), Hungary. *Radiocarbon* 55/2–3 (2013), 338–344.

Alongside all of this, the recent research on the Sibirik-domb site also raises stimulating questions in relation to the functioning of the early Hungarian state structure. The castle of Visegrád, which was mentioned as a county seat in a 1009 deed of gift of the bishopric of Veszprém, was one of the first seats of a comes in Hungary, so its excavation makes it possible to gain more knowledge on the early rank of comes. For this reason, the brick grave found in the interior of the castle church provides particularly interesting opportunities for analysis. Even though the bones of the deceased were exhumed, a finger joint and a gold ring remained in the grave, and serve as an important contribution to the archaeological analysis. The location and design of the grave, as well as the gold ring indicate that the individual interred here was of outstanding importance. This is also supported by the fact that the remains were later taken out of the grave. The burial shows a conspicuous similarity to the group of graves that belong to the church outside the castle from the middle of the 11th century. Another brick grave was found in the middle of this church building, from which the remains were also removed. Based on the size of the grave, it is probable that originally it was not meant for the placement of an entire human body, but only for bones. Furthermore, in the area of the church's southern side, a group of bodies with gold rings that were probably related and can be clearly differentiated from the other graves of the cemetery were discovered. We can infer that these graves, along with the exhumed grave in the castle church, held the 11th century members of the comes family of Visegrád Castle. If our hypothesis is proven correct by the later examinations, it would shed new light on the functioning of the 11th century system of counties, about which little is known presently. According to the increasing number of written sources from the end of the 11th century, unlike the practice of hereditary countships in contemporary Germany and Italy, the Hungarian office of comes was not hereditary, and in fact those holding the position were replaced at the head of the county relatively often. Due to the scanty number of written sources from the first half of the 11th century, the process by which this system developed in contrast to that of the west is not clear to historical research. To the extent that it can be shown that in Visegrád – a documented early comes' seat that disappeared at the end of the 11th century – there is the burial site of a family that held the comes' seat through several generations, then we can infer with solid evidence that the position of comes that was created during the period of the foundation of the kingdom of Hungary was an office that could be inherited, similar to that of a count in the west, and that the change can be linked to the new structure of power that developed under Géza I and László I at the end of the 11th century.

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