

CHURCHES AND GRAVEYARDS ON SIBRIK HILL, VISEGRÁD

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The Sibrik Hill towering over the Danube bend at Visegrád was one of the most significant centers of the Early Middle Ages. From a strategic viewpoint the hill is optimally located, already the Romans have established a fort there in the 4th century AD, to supervise the road section running along the Danube and passing through the hill. The fort renovated during Early Árpád Dynasty served again as a military and administrative center and was plausibly the seat of the count (ispán). Mátyás Szőke excavated the Early Árpád Age linear cemetery on the western section of the site in 1972–1974. Between 1977–1979 he excavated a building complex that was revealed to be the remains of two overlapping Medieval churches surrounded by another graveyard. These burials and church remains are important not only regarding the early history of Visegrád, but also demonstrate the changes that occurred in burial structures in the times of the founding of the state.

Life at Visegrád during the 11th-12th centuries can be discovered through the excavation of several archaeological sites (BUZÁS 2004: 118). Research of the last decades shed light on amongst others the formation and interrelation of institutions functioning at county seat. Beside the fortress, related churches and graveyards it is worth mentioning that an Árpád Age settlement was also located on the slopes of Sibrik Hill, on the area of Várkert Dűlő (KOVALOVSKZI 1995). It had an early, small parish church and a graveyard with use attested in the 11th-13th centuries. The ruins of the basilian Saint Andrew monastery, founded by King Andrew I of Hungary in the middle of the 11th century were identified on the neighbouring hillside (BUZÁS-ESZES 2007: 48–93).

CHURCHES FROM THE ÁRPÁD PERIOD

The graveyards uncovered on Sibrik Hill are located southeast of the fort, on the far side of the road traversing the hill, protected by the hillside. The excavation of the building complex (KODOLÁNYI 2009) yielded the discovery of the foundation and destruction layer of a minor (10.2 × 4.4 m), east-west oriented parish church with a semicircular apse, dateable plausibly to the beginning of the 11th century. The foundation of the sanctuary, comprised of stones set in a clay-earth and the foundation ditch of the nave was clearly recognizable, yet we know little of the montant walls as they were completely cleared away during the construction of the second, more significant church. The foundation of the church with 18.4 × 9.4 m dimensions and a straight apse survived almost entirely thus its size and disposition are possible to reconstruct. Montant walls made from ashlar conjoined with mortar were discovered standing approx. 1 m high in the sanctuary and the southern side of the nave. (Figure 1)

The careful design of the edifice as well as its dimensions both suggest it being a significant ecclesiastic institute and so does the burial structure contemporaneous with the church located in front of the sanctuary. Two bye-altars were recorded on either side of



Figure 1: Excavation of the parish church in 1978 viewed from the western façade (Photo by Mátyás Szőke, archaeological documentation, King Matthias Museum, Visegrád)

the sanctuary, which was entirely covered with terrazzo floor and its walls were decorated with murals. The plinth of these carefully executed murals indicating Byzantine influence survived on a section of the southern wall of the nave and in the sanctuary and their numerous fragments were recovered from the destructive layer of the church. (Figure 2) These choice artworks pertain to the earliest murals of Medieval Hungarian art. In accordance with contemporary ornamental customs (TÓTH 1994: 218; TÓTH 1995: 137–153) the surface was horizontally divided to multiple sections and was decorated with floral ornaments, figures set in circular frames formed by string of pearls in the bottom sections, while in the upper sections figures and inscriptions were depicted. Furthermore the foundation for the supporting pillars of a stone chancel, the remains of a wooden rood screen and the mural remains of an external staircase tower and a southern vestibule were also identified.

Carven stone fragments recovered from the church, including several cushion fragments decorated with knot braids set above the column-caps of the gallery attest highly professional and artistic stonework. From an art history standpoint a parallel may be drawn between minor pillars of the gallery and those from the nearby Saint Andrew monastery, thus it is plausible that the same stonemasons sculpted them (BUZÁS ET AL. 2017: 224).

The relation between construction layers and diverse building sections indicates that this second church was erected in two phases. First the main edifice of the church was finished, the gallery was placed subsequently in the western end before completing the construction. The staircase tower was erected next to the gallery later on. It is not possible to determine what changes this reconstruction engendered in the superstructure although it is certain that the annex, possibly an open vestibule joining the church from the south was erected at the time of the reconstruction. It is enclosed by 23 m long wall with two openings facing the hillside, joining the eastern corner of the sanctuary. The southern entrance of the church can only be accessed through this annex. Its forefront served as a meeting point and burial ground with the tombs of local nobility. Finds recovered from its vicinity attest that the annex was surrounded by a fence and a wattle and daub house was constructed nearby with a little farmyard which may have served as residence for the clergymen of the church. (Figure 3)



Figure 2: Mural section on the plinth of the southern wall of the sanctuary (Photo by Mátyás Szőke, archaeological documentation, King Matthias Museum, Visegrád)

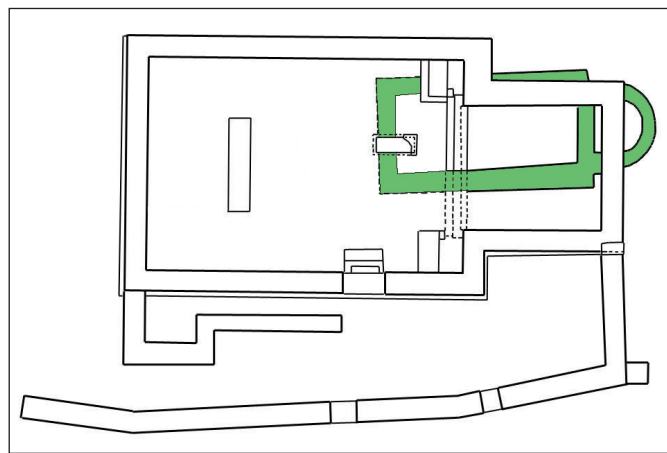


Figure 3: Ground-plan of the excavated complex, foundations of the earlier church highlighted in green (drawing by Judit Kodolányi based on the archaeological documentation)

and daub house was constructed nearby with a little farmyard which may have served as residence for the clergymen of the church. (Figure 3)

This thoughtfully constructed church, elaborated with significant artistic works was already abandoned in the middle of the 12th century. Its destructive layer indicates no sudden devastation and can be dated *terminus ante quem* by a 12th century coin recovered under the demolition layer of its southern bye-altar.

Whether the church was abandoned at once or gradually after loss of its function is yet to be answered. Nonetheless simultaneously with its abandonment, some graves in the cemetery were emptied and the remains were probably transferred

with people leaving. Afterwards the use of the graveyard ceased and regarding later periods only the sparse marks of secondary use were observed in the edifice of the church and its environment.

GRAVEYARD OF GRAVEYARDS?

A total of 221 graves were recovered in past years in the close vicinity of the churches (KODOLÁNYI 2011). The excavation conducted on the site west of the churches in 1972–1974 yielded the discovery of 146 graves in a linear cemetery and a further 75 graves were recovered in the vicinity of the churches. (Figure 4) Arrangement clearly indicates the presence of a linear cemetery and a cemetery around the church building although it is unclear whether the graves consist a single cemetery or two cemeteries and if so, what is the relation between them.

Graves do not cease neither west of the linear cemetery nor east and north of the church nearing the confines of the excavation. Trenches opened between the two cemetery sections attested the presence of graves. Since the borders of the cemetery were not possible to determine it is probable that further burials are present at the area. Presumably the churches and cemeteries were used by the same community during the

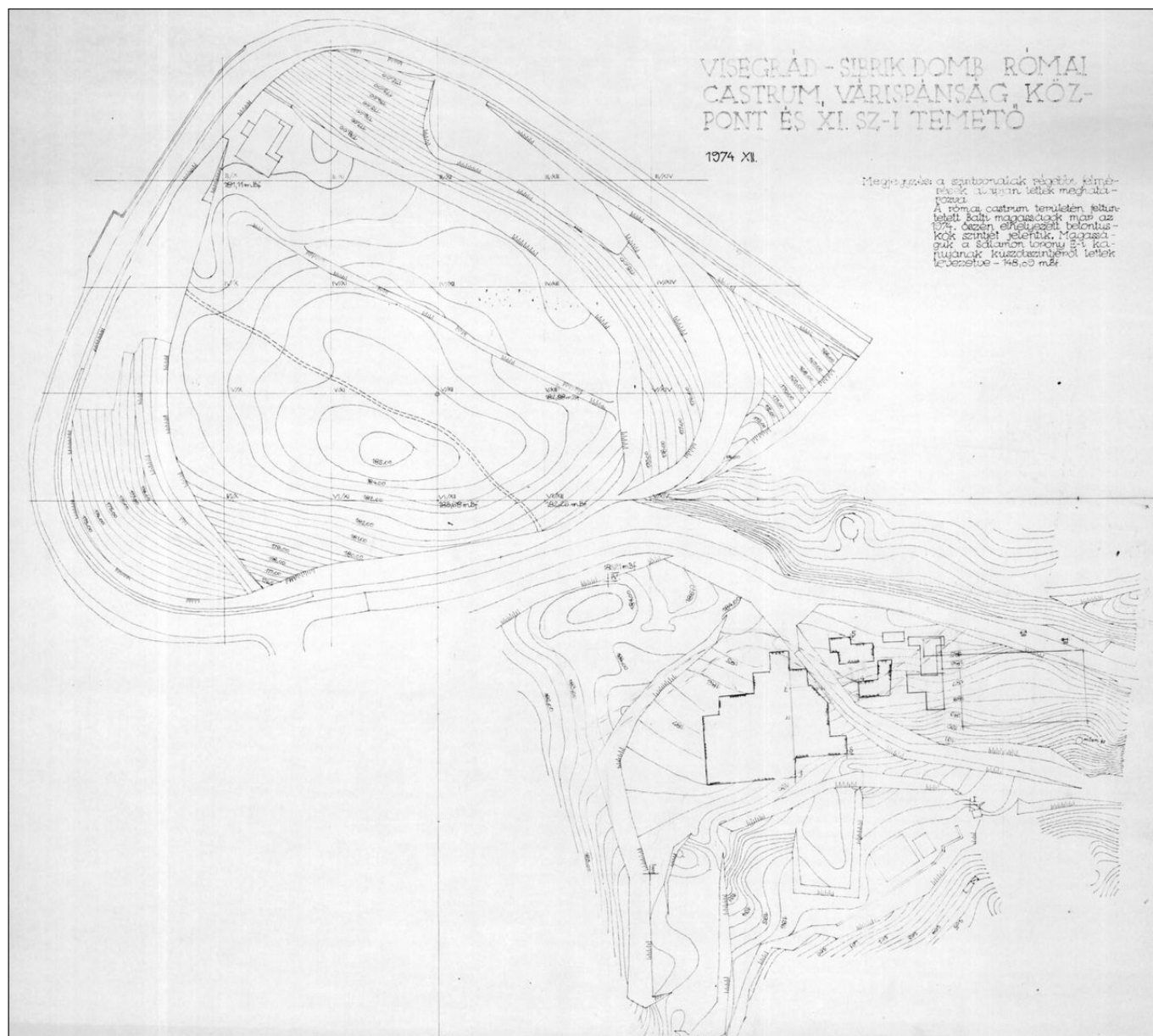


Figure 4: The relation between the two excavated cemeteries (Surveys by Mátyás Szőke, archaeological documentation, King Matthias Museum, Visegrád)



Figure 5: The grave structure discovered in front of the sanctuary (Photo by Mátyás Szőke, archaeological documentation, King Matthias Museum, Visegrád)

The noble status of three adults (one female, two males) buried in the vicinity of the church is attested by three golden rings deposited in their graves. Dateable coins issued by Kings Salomon, Géza I and Ladislaus I of Hungary recovered from both burial groups suggest burials were contemporaneous and differed only by following either the more traditional custom of linear burials or the Christian rite of burying in close vicinity of the church. The latter may be sepultures of the lords of the county castle, including the count and his family.



Figure 6: The two graves unearthed within the annex: the one with the Roman column as a tombstone on the right, the exhumed one on the left (Photo by Mátyás Szőke, archaeological documentation, King Matthias Museum, Visegrád)

course of the 11th and 12th centuries and that the two cemeteries were not divided substantially. However beyond location there are multiple noticeable differences between the two cemeteries, regarding grave goods, demographic distribution and burial rites.

Relational analysis of the two graveyards might shed light on the intriguing processes of transition from linear cemeteries to burials around the churches that took place in the 11th-12th centuries. In case of the church at Visegrád, details indicate that we're dealing with an outstanding site.

Two grave groups of the most prominent members of the community were observed both in the linear cemetery and in the one on the western side of the second church. Rich grave goods attest high social status and wealth, including coins of Kings Salomon I, Géza I, Ladislaus I and Dux Géza of Hungary), circle hair clips, pearl necklaces, boar tusks, arrowheads in the linear cemetery and coins of King Ladislaus I of Hungary, golden and silver circle hair clips and rings and a Roman column fragment placed atop one of the graves as a tombstone.



Figure 7: The same two graves as on Figure 6 in a later phase of excavation (Photo by Mátyás Szőke, archaeological documentation, King Matthias Museum, Visegrád)

A third grave group was observed east of the sanctuary of the second church, in the area considered most holy in cemeteries surrounding churches, where possibly the graves of clergymen were located. From the waist of grave Nr. 160 an iron cilice was recovered. A chalice and a *patena* (pyx disk) were placed between the palms of the deceased in grave Nr. 164. The parallels of this latter tin-vessel, made specifically for funerary purposes indicate (FOERK 1911: 24) that the grave held a notable clergyman, which reflects the importance and function of the church itself. Three graves were recorded in this cemetery section around the church from which bodies were exhumed and transferred, amongst these one located at the place of honour within the nave, in front of the altar. (Figures 5–7) The dimensions of this latter grave imply that it belonged either to a child or possibly to a female, but research conducted recently in the county castle facilitates that an already disinterred skeleton no longer in outstretched anatomic order, may have been deposited here secondarily in a burial case (BUZÁS ET AL. 2017: 224). In accordance with contemporary church law graves may be exhumed for one of the following three reasons (SZUROMI 2005). The first is canonization, which may be excluded in this case. The second is anathematization (*excommunicatio*) and the third is transferring earthly remains to another hallowed ground. At Visegrád the third reason seems most plausible: local nobility transferred the relics of persons important to them to their new residence.

CHRONOLOGY

The most important functional change regarding the churches neighbouring the castle was the construction of the second church, that marked a clear divide between two find horizons in the life of the Árpád Era center at Visegrád. Not considering the few sparse Roman burials, the first church and the preceding phase constitutes the first period. Earliest settlement manifested in semi-subterranean houses and burials predating the first church can plausibly be dated to the end of the 10th century or to the turn of the 10th-11th centuries. It is possible that the cemetery was formed in relation to an early settlement and the first parish church was subsequently erected on its outskirts. The construction was carried out in the years around the turn of the millennia is related to the donative charter issued by King St. Stephen I of Hungary to the bishopric of Veszprém in 1009 (GYÖRFFY 1967: 22–23; VESZPRÉMY 2002:31) noting Visegrád as a county seat. Parallel to this building phase several changes were carried out on the Late Roman fortification, including its rectangular tower being converted to a tower house. This period is clear indication to the change of function and status of Visegrád (SZÖKE 2000: 365–366; BORUZZ ET AL. 2018).

The second, markedly isolated period is hallmarked by the construction of the second church, its environs including the annex building and subsequent burials. This recent change affected the life of the community and its traces are discernible in the grave goods. If the construction of the second church coincides with the building of the Saint Andrew monastery founded by King Andrew I of Hungary (BUZÁS ET AL. 2017: 224) as attested by art historic parallels, then both constructions can be dated to the third quarter of the 11th century. Thus the second church flourished during the reign of King Salomon I and possibly during the rule of King Ladislaus I of Hungary as well.

The decline that came with the abandonment of the second church was probably a result of a political change as indicated by the decrease in the administrative significance of Visegrád. According to Attila Zsoldos, the county seat founded in 1009 was transferred to the nearby Esztergom already before 1079 (ZSOLDOS 1998:15). Nonetheless this brought about another change in the life of the church community. The coins of King Ladislaus I of Hungary attest the use of both the linear cemetery and the one surrounding the church until the end of the 11th century, although it is uncertain whether the exhumation of the above-mentioned graves and the relocation of the count and his family (BUZÁS ET AL. 2014: 7) occurred previously.

For the sake of completeness it is worth mentioning that King Ladislaus I of Hungary imprisoned former king Salomon who rebelled against him in the castle of Visegrád between 1081 and 1083 (CHRONICA HUNGARORUM 2004:88). The comparison of archaeological data with this historic evidence suggests that the only prison appropriate for royalty was either the two-roomed stone building or the tower house of the 11th century county castle.

Excavations conducted on the site until recently have expanded our knowledge on the early center at Visegrád (BORUZS ET AL. 2018; BORUZS ET AL. 2019). The role of the Early Medieval church located within castle walls excavated in 2013 and 2014 (BUZÁS 2013: 11) and the archaeological features of our site cannot be interpreted separately. Complex chronological analysis dated this church to the years around 1000 (BUZÁS ET AL. 2014: 5). It displays similarities in many aspects to the second church located outside the castle. It was not accompanied by an external graveyard, although one constructed grave and two further graves were recovered within the church. A chalice (*patena*) indicating the burial of an important clergymen was recovered from one of the latter graves. Similarly to the graves of the second church, the remains were disinterred from the constructed grave, yet a single phalanx, a carpal bone and a large golden band ring were left behind. Gergely Buzás suggested that the adult, noble male deposited in the grave was the lord of the castle, the first count whose bones his heirs transferred first to the second church after it was inaugurated during the second half of the 11th century and afterwards transferred again from there too (BUZÁS ET AL. 2014: 7).

The history and function of churches and graveyards discussed above can only be understood in relation to other institutions of the early center. Considering the functional division between temples located within and without the castle, researchers of the county center suggested that the former was a private church, whilst the two consecutive churches were erected by the count to serve as sepulcher. The transfer of the count's earthly remains from the internal church and the exhumated graves in the second church, including the one with the golden ring attest this hypothesis (BUZÁS ET AL. 2017: 224). However it is yet uncertain what the relation between the linear cemetery and the graveyard surrounding the church was, and so is the layering and composition of its community. The significance of the county castle and its churches ceased after the end of the 11th century, yet traces of settlement can be observed in later periods, life went on at the Saint Andrew monastery and the settlement at Várkert Dűlő.

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