

RESEARCH IN THE LATE ROMAN FORT AT SÁGVÁR

Processing the archaeological material of the 1971-1979 excavations

ENDRE TÓTH – FRIDERIKA HORVÁTH

Extensive, rectangular Roman-era establishments in the vicinity of Keszthely-Fenekpuszta, Környe, Tác, Alsóhetény and Ságvár are long since been known. These installations are located at definite locations, favouring similar geological features in the hinterland of Pannonian provinces. They were constructed almost contemporaneously within the framework of an extensive building campaign. For a considerable time the site at Keszthely-Fenekpuszta stood in the center of academic interest, although the Late Roman fort at Ságvár has also been long known. Processing historic and archaeological data is one of the significant tasks ahead of domestic Roman provincial research. The four-year research program funded by the National Research-Development and Innovative (NKFI) foundation under the ID K 128237 was initiated in September 2018 led by Friderika Horváth, an associate of the Institute of Archaeology in the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Research Centre for Humanities (MTA BTK). Members of the research group include: Endre Tóth senior researcher, head of the excavations at Ságvár between 1971-1979, associate of the Hungarian National Museum (MNM); Katalin Dévai (glass) and László Rupnik (metal finds) from the Archaeological Institute of the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE); István Főrizs (archaeometric analysis of glasses) from the Institute for Geological and Geochemical Research in the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Research Centre for Astronomy and Earth Sciences; Katalin Bajok, associate of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Wigner Research Centre for Physics and doctoral candidate of the Archaeological Institute of the Eötvös Loránd University (archaeometric analysis of pottery). The numismatic material was processed by Katalin Sey Biróné from the National Museum of Hungary, archaeozoological data were provided by István Vörös.

Our research focused primarily on processing the excavations of Endre Tóth carried out in the period 1971-1979, clarifying chronological questions and the structure of the site, evaluating the find material on a stratigraphical basis and comparing it to the material recovered from Keszthely-Fenekpuszta.

HISTORIC BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH

The Late Roman period compelled fundamental changes and structural reorganization in the Imperial military. In the course of the Principate the army stationed along the limes constituted the basis of defending the Empire, yet a series of hostile assaults from the end of the 2nd century AD have confirmed the inadequate nature of the linear defense. In the 4th century military defense was extensively redesigned. The finest units previously stationed on the borders were drawn to the center of the Empire to form an elite task-force, which could affront hostile threats more effectively. Significant strategic bases were established in the hinterland to provide supplies and reinforcements for the renewed Imperial army. Located at a strategic location of the Imperium safeguarding the gates of Italia, the Pannonian provinces gained a highlighted military significance, thus Pannonian internal forts were established.

RESEARCH HISTORY

The Roman remains at Ságvár were discovered in the 19th century. Calvinist minister András Vasas Csicsvai was first to call attention in 1814 to the remains of Roman walls and carven fragments of funerary monuments, that were still visible above ground in the 1720s (KUZSINSZKY 1920: 8). In the second half of the century Flóris Rómer visited the site and drew a sketch about the hypothetic line of the walls of the fort (Rómer's 38th report: 183, HNM Archives). Collecting Roman archaeological remains from the vicinity of Lake Balaton, Bálint Kuzsinszky provided a more detailed image of the fort at the beginning of the 20th century. (KUZSINSZKY 1920: 9–10)

The mapping of the ground-plan of the fort was begun by István Paulovics, an archaeologist of the Hungarian National Museum. Based on remains observable above ground he investigated defensive works of the fort and determined its overall layout. (Fig. 1.) (RADNÓTI 1939: 150) The results of his excavations are still unpublished.

Alongside the fort, significant research was conducted on the southern cemetery on the eastern side of the Tömlöc Hill, where Aladár Radnóti uncovered more than 300 Late Roman burials. (RADNÓTI 1939) The grave goods were first published by Alice Sz. Burger. (BURGER 1966; SCHMIDT 2000)



Fig. 1.: Photo of the wall and side-tower of the fort at Ságvár from the excavation of István Paulovics

ROMAN REMAINS AT SÁGVÁR

Traces of several Roman settlements are known on the direct area of Ságvár and its close vicinity. The importance of the site stems from its geological setting: Ságvár was settled at the easternmost of the North-South oriented valleys transecting Somogy county, where the road running along the valley can most easily circumvent the Lake Balaton to the north. (Radnóti 1939: 148) Some finds entered the collection of the Hungarian National Museum in the second half of the 19th century have already drawn attention to the significance of the area in Roman times. (HNM Inv. Nr.: 11.1868, 119.1878, 152.1879, 33.1879, 6.1931, 9.1932). The monumental fort laying under the eastern part of the present-day town was first to attract academic interest. (Fig. 2.) Excavations conducted there yielded data mainly regarding the 4th-century history of the settlement, but also provided insight into its earlier history. On the eastern half of the establishment, under the gardens on the northern side of present-day Sándor Petőfi street, 4th-century buildings were founded on a layer approximately 20-30 cm thick, which once belonged to the Early Imperial settlement. Not only everyday objects from this settlement were recovered, but occasionally architectural remains were also unearthed. Under the northeastern part of the fort, extracted wall foundations belonging to buildings razed either during construction or destroyed beforehand lay, which leads one to believe that a cluster of buildings once stood there, decorated with rich paintings possibly belonging to an extensive Roman villa. Apart from remains of a few pried wall sections, only sporadic features of the settlement were observed. (TÓTH 2009: 23–24) The chronology of the early settlement can be extrapolated on the basis of recovered finds, mostly pottery fragments, including imported terra sigillata pieces dateable to the second half of the 1st century AD. (TORMA 1883: 12–13; CIL III 12014, 395a, 401, 587).

The Middle Imperial phase was eliminated at latest by the construction of the fort, when the entire area was cleared and planed; the time of the planning can also be deduced from terra sigillata. The cemetery of the Early Imperial settlement located under the fort is presumed to be northwest from the fort, based on early finds transferred to the Hungarian National Museum, mostly glass finds of north Italian origin. (TÓTH 2009: 24)

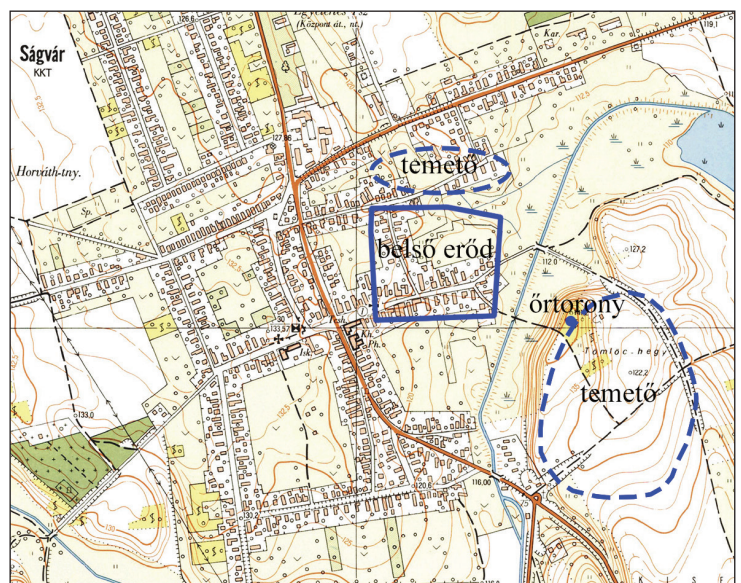


Fig 2.: Roman era findspots at Ságvár under the present-day settlement

The plentitude of early finds and a bronze harness fitting attest that locals, who plausibly included discharged veterans settled in the Pannonian heartland, and possessed in Early Roman times adequate economic potential to acquire valuable imported pottery. During the course of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, early veteran colonies located along main routes transformed to significant villa estates throughout Pannonia. Following up this development pattern can be an important yield of future research.

Two variants of the Roman toponym survived: *Tricciana* mentioned in the *Itinerarium Antonini* (ItAnt 267,8), a 3rd-century itinerary and *Quadriburgium* appearing in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, a registry from the 4th century. The settlement was likely renamed in the 4th century as a result of fundamentally altering its character. The supposed change of name was plausibly related to the transformation from a villa estate to an extensive, rectangular fortification. With its approximately 7.3 hectare area, it is the smallest among Transdanubian Late Roman internal forts. (Fig. 3.)

The fort is located in a low-lying area, bordered from the east by the waterlogged plain of the Jaba River. The complete interior of the fort was visible from the ca. 50 m high Tömlöc Hill, rising on the eastern bank of the river. During their war with the Romans, Sarmatians and Quadi seized and pillaged the fort in 374, the marks of which were observed at several spots. Plausibly the Roman watchtower atop Tömlöc Hill with unusually thick walls that constitute an architectural hapax in Pannonia was constructed afterwards, providing a secure command post overseeing the fort and its surroundings. (TÓTH 2009: 34–36)

Three Late Roman cemeteries are known in the area of the fort. Two are located on the northern and southern sections of Tömlöc Hill respectively, approximately 300 meters from one another. The longest functioning graveyard was established along the northern wall of the fort. Its material is only scarcely known. A pitcher with smoothed net patterns recovered from here bears the stylistic markings of the Late Roman period. (Fig. 4.) (RADNÓTI 1939; BURGER 1966; SCHMIDT 2000; TÓTH 2009 36–37)



Fig 4.: Pitcher with smoothed decoration recovered from the cemetery in the foreground of the northern fort wall

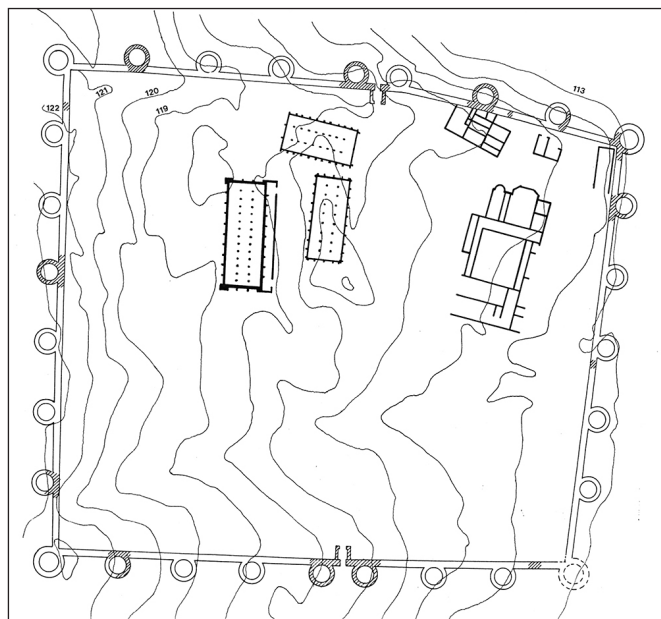


Fig 3.: Ground-plan of the second building phase of the fort at Ságvár

Traces of the Late Roman settlement were discovered approximately 7-800 meters north of the fort and west of the fort, along the Jaba river, on present-day Ali Field. Furthermore, Late Roman graves were also recovered between Ságvár and Som, as well as between Ságvár and Ártánd.

EXCAVATING THE FORT

The excavations conducted between 1971–1979 determined the layout of the fort and its defensive works as well as two building phases. The research was hindered by the fact that the oldest, easternmost part of present-day Ságvár was erected over the southern part of the fort, which is thus out of academic reach. The fort was constructed on a definite slope, its eastern part is 10 m lower than its western. The eastern

part of the fort is surrounded by the wetland of the Jaba river, excavating eastern fortifications were hampered by rising ground-waters and they were only partially excavated.

The stones of the walls and circular towers were mined in later periods in almost all of the researched areas, a mere 1.5 m section of the northern wall was excavated. A several meters long unfolded section of the western wall and one of the towers is visible near the Calvinist church even today. The contemporary ground-level of the fort has almost completely perished, a single section of it survived in the western tower of the southern gate. Internal buildings are known only from the northern part of the fort, these include the granary, two further storage edifices, the commander's quarters and a villa-like building with a central courtyard. (Fig. 5.) (TÓTH 2009).

Mihály Szőke Miklósi conducted preventive excavations in 2010 during municipal drainage works on the western part of the fort. His observations complemented and confirmed previous results. Ca. 34 meters west of the fort a surrounding large V-shaped ditch was identified, which considerably eroded over time. A peculiarity of the research was the discovery of a smaller, steeply elaborated ditch between the wall and the *fossa* (the main defensive ditch), which plausibly belonged to the earlier period of the fort. Furthermore, in one of the side towers, the ground-level belonging to the second construction phase was identified, alongside fort walls of different periods built atop each other were observed on the exterior. (MIKLÓSI SZŐKE 2010: 338–339)

The most interesting and historically most important finds of the excavations came to light in the eastern tower of the southern gate, from the filling of a pit caved after the second building phase that was subsequently used to bury rubbish and waste. Finds included a few Christian objects of liturgic purposes, among others two identical bronze plates, depicting three men each in a separate triangular field. According to their inscriptions, the figures depict Petrus, Paulus and Timotheus respectively. (Fig. 6.). This fitting is the earliest example of applied arts depicting apostles. The person of Timotheus allows discussing important questions of history and church history. (TÓTH 1995; TÓTH 2014) The latest period of the fort is marked by a semi-subterranean building constructed in the vicinity of the northern gate, dateable plausibly to the 5th century. The final destruction of the fort is marked by a burnt layer and there is no evidence for its use during the centuries of the Migration Period.

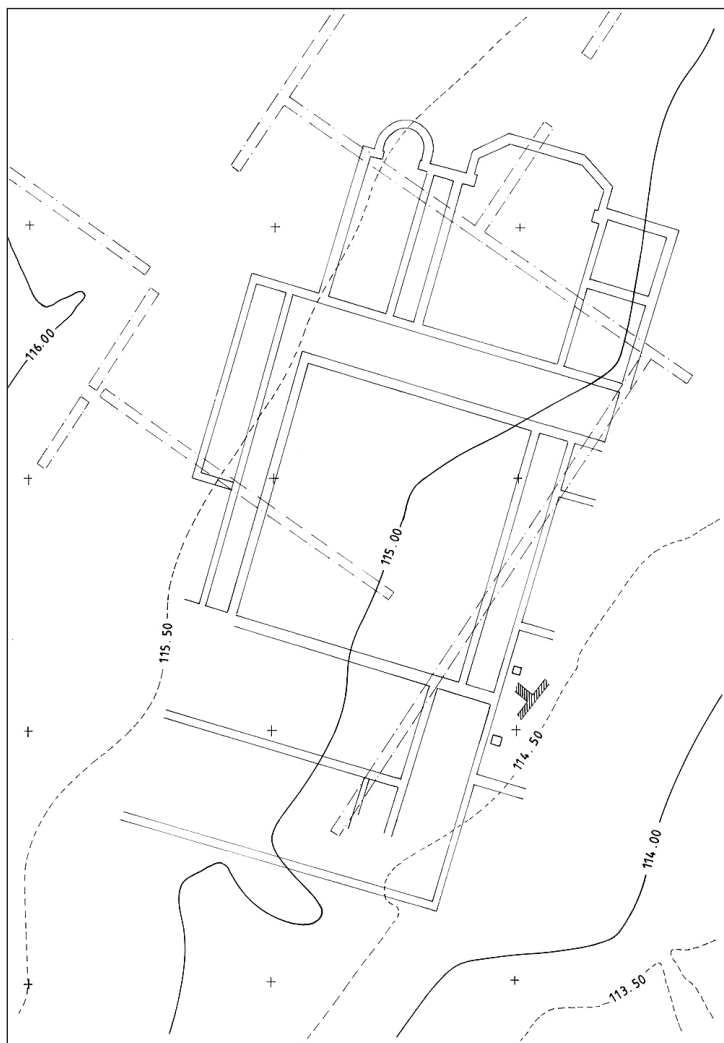


Fig 5.: The main building of the fort with a central courtyard



Fig 6.: Fragment of a casket fitting recovered from the southern gate tower of the fort depicting apostles Peter and Paul and martyr Timotheus

Within the framework of the present research program, we aim to examine the frequently debated interpretation and chronology of the internal forts. (RADNÓTI 1954; BARKÓCZI 1954; SÁGI 1954; MÓCSY 1974; SOPRONI 1978; SOPRONI 1985; FITZ 1980; BORHY 1997; TÓTH 1975; TÓTH 2003; TÓTH 2009; HEINRICH-TAMÁSKA 2011; VISY 2018) Several similar rectangular forts were constructed in Pannonia during the 4th century, analogous examples are known mainly from the provinces of the Balkans. Due to excavation and processing works carried out regarding the fort at Keszthely-Fenékpuszta, located on the western end of the Lake Balaton, numerous new data were revealed in the last decade (CPP 2; CPP 3), which encourages us to publish find materials from the sites of Eastern Transdanubia in a similar manner. A train of four similar forts running along a north-south line is present in Eastern Transdanubia: the northernmost is nearby Környe, followed by Tác, Ságvár and Alsóhetény. These establishments pertain to the same type in more than one aspect, which benefits the interpretation of their function: one may compare and in certain aspects generalize one's observations.

These military installations were amongst the most extensive construction works in Pannonia carried out by the military. They were built contemporaneously or near contemporaneously, following a similar choice of location, constructed along a parallel ground-plan including the layout and structure of defensive works, internal buildings as well as identical phases reconstruction. Their certain architectural features are well-known from forts along the limes, despite their chronology not being unanimous.

Water was essential to the economic activities carried out in the fort (e.g. bakery, butchery, iron working), thus its vicinity had a defining impact in locating them.

Observations made during excavations indicate that the fort at Ságvár fell victim to several hostile attacks. Recovered coins date the level of destruction in the *horreum* (granary) to the middle of the 370s. Further signs of assaults from this period were discovered on the area of the fort (lonely grave).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Along the conventional approach aimed at the temporal and spatial classification of archaeological features and finds, we strive to moot and answer questions utilizing archaeometric methods (glassware and pottery).

A significant proportion of the Late Roman glassware in Pannonia is produced by local industry. It is a generally accepted view nowadays, that there were specialized workshops in the Roman Empire, mostly in the Middle East where large quantities of excellent raw materials were available. Archaeological evidence suggests, a direct commercial link between primary and secondary manufacturing centres in Classical Antiquity. (GORIN-ROSEN 2000; NENNA ET AL. 2000) Raw glass trade resulted in the fact, that glasswares with exceeding formal diversity, recovered from remote sites of the Empire with mainly regional connections, share an identical chemical composition. The products of primary workshops are identified by trace elements (FREESTONE ET AL. 2002; DEGRYSE 2014); for identifying trace elements in the glassware of Ságvár, photoablative ICP-MS analyses are in order. For disclosing further questions electron microscopic and micro X-ray diffraction analyses (μ XRD) are planned. These analyses will convey important information on the time, means and causes of changing trade routes for raw glass in the Late Roman period. This issue is important because glass production in Pannonia was significant from the 4th century up to the middle of the 5th century.

Projected petrographic analyses aim to determine mineralogical and technological similarities and differences, in order to enable further specifying the provenience of the objects.

The existing pottery database of Keszthely-Fenékpuszta serves as a comparative basis for analysing the pottery of Ságvár. Furthermore, it also assists the comparative analysis of similarities and differences in the raw material acquisition and pottery stock of processed forts along uniform principles.

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