

FIFTY YEARS OF THE GOTHIC SCULPTURE FIND OF BUDA

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Fifty years ago, on a late winter day, László Zolnay, archaeologist of the Medieval Department of the Budapest History Museum, discovered an unexpected find in the area known as the Northern Courtyard of the Buda Castle. The area, previously considered of little archaeological value, had already yielded medieval building remains at a shallow depth, later identified as cellars and cisterns of medieval houses. A large assemblage of sculptural fragments and stone carvings has been unearthed there, representing high-level medieval art; much of them have been destroyed in Hungary, revealing a lost world. Half a century after the first finds had been unearthed, the Budapest History Museum commemorated the significant discovery, the focus of a scientific research programme today still, with a scientific conference, a renewed exhibition, and various programmes for the public.



Fig. 1. Discovery of the sculptures in February 1974 (Photo Archive of the Medieval Department of BHM)

Keywords: sculpture find of Buda Castle, Gothic statues, conference, exhibition, anniversaryuló

February 1974 marked a significant event not only in the history of Hungarian but also in the history of international medieval studies. In the two decades following the Second World War, major restoration work took place in the royal palace in Buda. In connection with that, an excavation was carried out on the western side of Building A of the palace (then known as the Labour Movement Museum) under the direction of László Zolnay at the beginning of 1974. The surprise came when figural carvings began to appear in Section 1974/4, later identified as a collapsed medieval cellar, filled up with debris including 14th–15th century finds, which were of good quality, although quite common in the area. Many Gothic and Renaissance architectural carvings have been found in the area before, but a rather small number of sculptural works were known not only from there but also throughout the medieval royal palace. However, the large-scale excavations led by László Gerevich have uncovered many medieval buildings and produced a huge number of finds, which have been published in a major monograph. On 16 February 1974, one of the workers with a pickaxe unexpectedly found the arm of a knight figurine. After the workers switched to more delicate tools, more sculpture fragments started turning up. Dozens of fragments were found on the first day, and as the excavation progressed, the number swelled to thousands. The findings were soon in the spotlight, as the site was put under military guard in no time, partly due to the extraordinary collection of finds and the large number of visitors, researchers, journalists, and the public, who flocked there in the following weeks. Art historian Ernő Marosi recalls the feelings of those who visited the site: “We left the site at dusk in a euphoric mood...” (MAROSI 1998).

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Fig. 2. The renewed exhibition of the Gothic sculptures in November 2023 (photo by Ákos Keppel, BHM)



Fig. 3. The renewed exhibition of the Gothic sculptures in November 2023 (photo by Ákos Keppel, BHM)

The conservation work, which lasted for about two months after the excavation (and partly also during it), was led by Ernő Szakál, a prominent stone conservation specialist of the period. It was largely thanks to his efforts that the sculptures could be admired in the new permanent exhibition of the Castle Museum from 4 April 1976. Simultaneously, the archaeological and art historical interpretation of the sculptures began. The key research questions included: Who do the statues represent, when were they made, who made them and where, and when and how were they buried? Some of the questions could be answered easily and without controversy. There was a consensus on the date of the statues' deposition, as everyone accepted the date given by the accompanying coins that they were buried around the mid-15th century. The dating of the finds was one of the most important and sensitive issues. While leading archaeologist László Zolnay initially dated the sculptures to the 1370s, art historians agreed with Marosi on dating them to the time of Sigismund of Luxembourg. Here, too, opinions were divided as to whether it was the early 15th century or, rather, the last decades of his reign. Art historical research on the sculptures has continued ever since.

In 1987, an exhibition on the age of Sigismund of Luxembourg, and a new permanent exhibition of the sculptures in 1992, curated by András Végh and Károly Magyar, brought the artefacts back into the limelight. The scientific discourse was re-launched, given a new impulse by the excavation of the Church of St. Zsigmond [Sigismund] in the neighbourhood of the palace in St. George's Square in 1994. Here, the most important affiliate-artefact of the Gothic sculpture ensemble was discovered, including the fragments of a Christ figure that once stood in the church. These sculptural fragments were found in a pit, thoroughly crushed and burnt. Its significance was that it is the only sculpture so far that is clearly linked stylistically to the group of finds from 1974, found independently of them; nevertheless, its destination and destruction are



Fig. 4. Gothic sculptures 50. Scientific conference at the anniversary of discovery, 4 March 2024 (photo by Ákos Keppel, BHM)



Fig. 5. Closing event of the conference: a guided tour in the exhibition on 4 March 2024 (photo by Ákos Keppel, BHM)



Fig. 6. Brigitta Egyed on the show entitled ‘Sculpture Tales on 20 April 2024 (photo by Balázs Medve, BHM)

To mark the fiftieth anniversary of the statues’ discovery, the Budapest History Museum commemorates the excavation and the subsequent scientific research with an event series over several months. To mark the occasion, in November 2023, the exhibition, which is now over 30 years old, was renewed in terms of both aesthetics and content while retaining the original concept. New panels and screens have been installed to display the sculptures and their discovery. In the same exhibition space, the environment around the Angevine silk tapestry, another of the museum’s prides, has also been renewed. A new bilingual guide to the exhibition was also published for the anniversary, filling a gap as the original publication had not been updated since 1992. In addition to the renewal of the exhibition, it was important to show the professional public where the research on the sculptures currently stands. On 4 March 2024, the museum organised a scientific conference to present the sculpture ensemble and the results of its study from as many aspects as possible. The introductory lecture of the full-house conference, given by Zsuzsanna Kuczogi, a retired draughtswoman of the Medieval Department of the Budapest History Museum, who herself participated in the excavation and documentation of the finds, focused on the discovery of the statues. The second lecture was given by Szilárd Papp about the new research on the sculptures in the context of the forthcoming monograph. Károly Magyar, who continued the fieldwork after László Zolnay, presented the archaeological and historical context of the Northern Courtyard, discussing in detail the visual and written sources related to the area. In the next session, historian Attila Bárány spoke about King Sigismund’s foreign political activity, examining the wider context in which the statues were made. Tamás Illés Horváth then shared his research on royal cults. After the break, art historian Zsombor Jékely spoke about the pictorial art of Sigismund of Luxemburg’s court. The focus then returned to the statues, with painting conservator Éva Galambos presenting her findings and analysis of the paint remains on the statues. The last speaker of the session, archaeologist and clothing researcher Orsolya Zay, spoke about the clothing of the age of Sigismund and its details

known. From this discovery onwards, the group of statues can be clearly dated to the Sigismund period.

In 2006, the sculptures were presented at the international exhibition “*Sigismundus. Rex et imperator*”, and András Végh, reassessing the archaeological documentation, concluded that the sculptures could have been buried when the former house on the site collapsed. This suggests that the site could have been a stone-carving workshop or its storeroom, from where the sculptures fell into the cellar when the wooden ceiling collapsed.

Because many questions have remained open, in 2016, archaeologist András Végh and art historian Szilárd Papp began a new, more thorough processing and basic research of the sculptures. They not only searched for the sculptures but also gathered the respective written sources. The results of this research are being published continuously, with the latest partial results included in Szilárd Papp’s academic doctoral dissertation.



Fig. 7. Activities for children on the sculpture exhibition in 2024 (photo by Zsanett Lébold, BHM)

on the sculptures. The conference ended with a visit led by expert Szilárd Papp to the renewed exhibition.

In addition to the professional programmes, a series of activities aimed at the general public was launched to celebrate the anniversary. On 20 April, the museum organised a large-scale family day dedicated to the Gothic sculptures. In addition to guided tours and playful activities, visitors were invited to a performance of the ‘Sculpture stories’, in which Brigitta Egyed and her team of actors brought the sculptures and the stories around them to life. The series of educational activities related to the sculptures attracted many school-age children, who can now encounter the unique collection of artefacts not only in the museum but also on paper. Last year, a storybook titled *The Secret Life of Artefacts* was published, illustrated by Dorottya Sziert-Szabó and based on the winning works of the Budapest Historical Museum’s Castle Museum’s storytelling competition; it features one of the Gothic statues as a character in several stories.

What has been described so far is a summary of the first fifty years of the find ensemble’s history since its discovery. Let’s hope that the next fifty years will bring similar excitement.

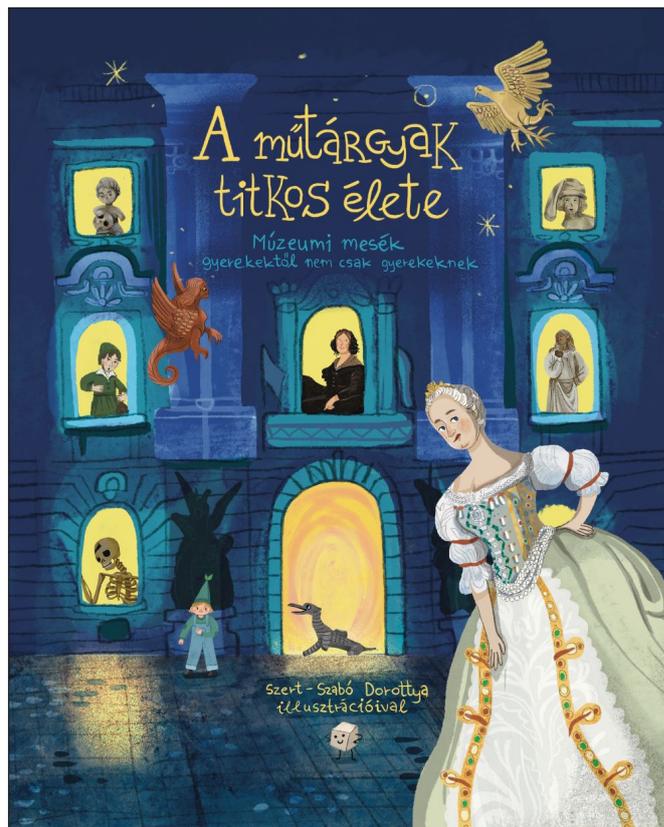


Fig. 8. Cover of the book ‘The secret life of artefacts’

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