

THE 130-YEAR-OLD AQUINCUM MUSEUM—A MUSEUM OF RENEWAL

Remarks on the festive exhibition

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Aquincum 130—The very best! A selection of the finest finds from the past 130 years of excavation in Aquincum—temporary exhibition in the Aquincum Museum (14 June–31 October 2024).

The Aquincum Museum of the Budapest History Museum celebrates the 130th anniversary of its foundation in 2024. On this occasion, the team of the museum has created a temporary and complementary exhibition displaying the most spectacular, beautiful, and interesting Roman finds from the almost one-and-a-half century of excavation in Aquincum in the so-called 'old museum building' and the protective building of the mosaic floor with the Dirke scene. The items are arranged in the showcases in the order of their times of discovery; the selection includes gold coins, stone carvings, a mummy portrait, the remains of an ornate Roman wagon burial, and, in a separate part, some mosaics of the one-time Roman town, all presented in the context of the history of Budapest. In her opening speech, Paula Zsidi, the retired director of the Aquincum Museum, gave a brief overview of the history of the Aquincum Museum and Archaeological Park; this summary is also presented in this paper.

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The Aquincum Museum of the Budapest History Museum opened its doors for visitors first 130 years ago on 10 May 1894 (Fig. 1). The road that had led to that event was long: the exploration of the ruins of the Roman settlement at Aquincum had begun already in the last decades of the 18th century. It took a multitude of exciting and spectacular archaeological excavations (e.g., of the amphitheatre of the civil town or the large public bath, some residential buildings, and the Mithras sanctuary in the area of the ruin garden), the discovery of extraordinary and beautiful Roman artefacts, the joint action of renowned researchers of the era (Károly Torma, József Hampel, and Bálint Kuzsinszky), and visits from a few celebrated guests (like Crown Prince Rudolph) for the name of Aquincum to become part of the public discourse, as a result of which the site was started to be developed into a ruin garden.

We wanted to celebrate the upcoming anniversary with a meaningful exhibition; however, in light of the history of the place, the task seemed tremendous and full of responsibilities. How do we present the history of the museum in a way that gives justice to the work of our predecessors, gives a com-

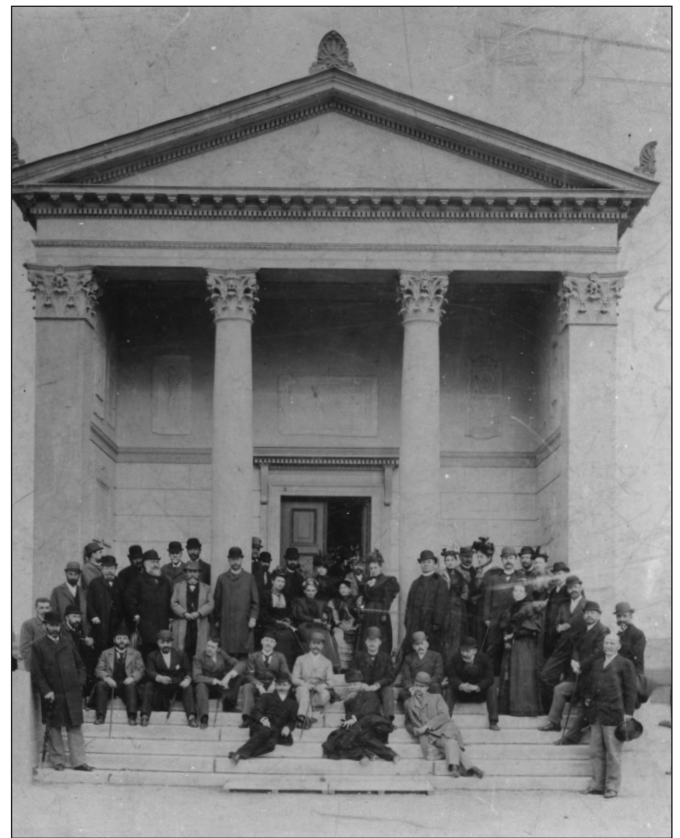


Fig. 1. Attendees of the opening ceremony of the Aquincum Museum on 10 May 1894 (source: BHM Aquincum Museum)

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prehensive overview of the archaeological sensations of the past hundred and thirty years, and tells the visitors the history of the settlement complex of Aquincum? (Fig. 2). The curator team (Tibor Budai Balogh, Anita Kirchhof, Orsolya Láng, and Péter Vámos) has finally decided upon a concept where the backbone of the exhibition is a selection of finds from the past decades; it comprised artefacts which became important because of their beauty, uniqueness, or scientific value. Archaeological exhibitions commonly have a chronological or thematic structure. In this case, the curators opted for a chronological arrangement; however, it was based not on the dating of the selected finds (e.g., to the Early, Middle, or Late Roman Imperial Period) but the time of their discovery, outlining the history of the excavations (and the museum) from the last decades of the 19th century until 2023. The exhibited selection of iconic or recent discoveries includes the statue of Mithras depicted as being born from a rock from the so-called Victorinus Mithraeum in the civil town, some moulds for *terra sigillata* bowls from the eastern pottery workshop district of the civil town, the coin hoard from Selmeci Street, the famous mummy portrait from Aquincum, mosaic floor and wall painting remains from the villa at today's Búvár and Folyamőr Streets, curse tablets from the cemeteries of Aquincum, a wagon burial unearthed a few years ago at Csillaghegy, and the painted altar stone of the Mithraeum discovered at the northern limits of the military town (Figs. 3–6). Instead of 'regular' descriptions, the spectacular and beautiful artefacts were put on display together with longer descriptions. The timeline their discoveries outlined was set against some milestones in the evolution of the Hungarian capital, including, amongst others, the opening of the Eastern Railway station in 1994, the Queen concert in the *Népstadion* in 1986, and the



Fig. 2. *The old museum building today*
(photo by Péter Komjáthy)



Fig. 3. *Pottery moulds for making terra sigillata bowls from the eastern workshop district of the civil town of Aquincum*
(photo by Péter Komjáthy)

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Fig. 4. *Detail of a wall painting from an inn (today at 45 Pacsirtamező Street) in the military town of Aquincum*
(photo by Péter Komjáthy)



Fig. 5. Elements of the so-called 'Wagon of Csillaghegy' in the exhibition (photo by Péter Komjáthy)



Fig. 6. Painted altar stone with an inscription from the Mithras sanctuary unearthed in the military town of Aquincum (photo by Péter Komjáthy)

reconstruction of the historic building of the famous *Corvin* department store in 2023. This way, the exhibition reflects on the 150th anniversary of Budapest and helps the visitors—local residents as well as tourists—to connect the great eras of the excavations in Aquincum with the history of the capital city. The two timelines on the lower part of the walls in the exhibition rooms are accompanied by a third with markings for the dates of important excavations in Aquincum, as well as photos and short descriptions for those artefacts from the Roman town which are currently on display in the permanent exhibition (like the water organ, the bronze helmet of an infantryman, or the statue of Fortuna Nemesis; Figs. 7–8).

The 'traditional' parts of the exhibition in the northern and southern wings of the 'old' museum building are completed by a section in the central room on the history of the museum (as this part of the museum was



Fig. 7. Interior of the exhibition 'Aquincum 130—The very best!' (photo by Péter Komjáthy)



Fig. 8. Interior of the exhibition 'Aquincum 130—The very best!' (photo by Péter Komjáthy)



Fig. 9. Entrance room of the exhibition 'Aquincum 130—The very best!' and the exhibition on the museum's history (photo by Péter Komjáthy)



Fig. 10. Interior of the exhibition 'Tiny stones, colourful flooring' (photo by Péter Komjáthy)

the one opened in May 1894). The original late 19th-century wall paintings were partially reconstructed in this room, where the written sources, images, and objects related to the earliest excavations and the foundation of the museum are on display: the room is full of paintings and historical photos, letters, the deed of foundation of the museum, one of the museum's publications from the early 20th century, documents damaged in the Second World War, and some finds from the first excavations (Fig. 9). Using the instruments and solutions of museum education, interactive elements and toys complete the exhibition to make it more attractive for the younger audience. Those interested in the history of the museum building housing the exhibition are not left without information either: as a result of recent conservatory exploration, a detail of the early 20th-century floor and a part of the original, colourful wall decorations resembling Roman wall paintings have been exposed and could be presented.

The exhibition in the old museum building is completed with a small one in the neighbouring protective building for the Dirké mosaic scene; it is entitled *Tiny stones, colourful flooring* and focuses on the mosaics of Aquincum and the technology behind them. The small exhibition revolves around the central element of the unique mosaic floor depicting the punishment of Dirké. This floor fragment was found exactly where it is today; it was left and conserved *in situ* and covered with a protective building later. In the future, other reconstructed elements will be added to the floor fragment (Fig. 10); thus, this exhibition remains in the making and is intended to be a permanent one, which will only be completed when, after more than a century, all recovered parts of the mosaic floor are fitted back to their original places.

Let us cite some of the opening speech held by Paula Zsidi, the retired director of the Aquincum Museum, to motivate you to visit the two exhibitions offering insight into the history, successes, and challenges in the first 130 years of the Aquincum Museum, while also marking the route to take for the current team:

The day is 10 May 1894, and Budapest, the Hungarian capital that had only united two decades ago, is preparing for a major cultural event. The representatives of the Council of Budapest and the Ministry of Religion and Public Education, the Magistrate of District 3, and the National Archaeological Society arrive at the opening of the Aquincum Museum, the first independent museum complex of the Budapest Museum founded after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1867. The building, designed to resemble a Graeco-Roman podium temple, sits amidst freshly excavated ruins; in the south, the chimneys of the brick factory at the feet of the Kiscell Hills appear on the horizon; in the west, sight is stopped by the silhouette of the Buda Mountains. From time to time, the wind brings the rattling of cars from the road to Szentendre and the clattering of the newly built suburban train. In the north, the splashing of the Aranyhegyi stream, turning the Krempel mill's water wheels, mixes with the mooing of cows on the neighbouring farm. The crowd gathers for a sensation in this idyllic and tranquil then-suburban landscape. In the words of Bálint Kuzsinszky, the director freshly appointed by the board of Budapest, "The crowd that tends to pay an occasional visit to Old

Buda to check on the new discoveries made on the excavations carried out there will certainly be pleased to see the new building rising above the sea of ruins around it, a building the form of which lets no doubt about its function even when seen from afar. It is a praise of the diligence and good intent of the management of the capital that the finds recovered from these excavations have now a proper home” (*Vasárnapi Újság* 27 May 1894, 354). Most attending the opening ceremony knew that the Aquincum Museum is the first such complex north of the Alps where, besides the excavated Roman ruins, the finds recovered from them are exhibited on the spot. This complex had opened before the similar ones of Carnuntum in Austria, Vindonissa in Switzerland, and Saalburg, Haltern, and Xanten in Germany. The father of Hungarian archaeology, Flóris Rómer, the leaders of the excavations, Károly Torma and József Hampel from the Hungarian National Museum, and later, the first director of the Aquincum Museum, Bálint Kuzsinszky took the lion’s share in establishing the institution.

Upon entering the small building, designed by Gyula Orczy, the attendants of the opening ceremony could gaze at its ornate interior resembling the wall decorations of Pompeii and wonder at the cream of the about 3,000-piece collection of finds. According to coeval reports, “the opening ceremony was followed by a dinner at Római-fürdő” (KUZSINSZKY 1897, 10). The fame and success of the exhibition spread far, and in the upcoming decades, the Aquincum Museum became a popular target for trips amongst local residents and a prominent venue for cultural life in the capital. A few illuminating moments or ones of international significance in this period are worth highlighting.

The first is the mosaic floor depicting the punishment of Dirké, first published in the 1920s. In a later study, Lajos Nagy wrote about the image, “Its connection is the closest with the Farnese Bull, a complex statue in the Thermae of Caracalla” (NAGY 1943, 94), thus indicating that the provincial art of Aquincum has a close connection with the classical art in Italy, and cannot be understood properly without assessing it in light of that. The floor with the mythological scene could not be protected *in situ* at that time; so it was removed, and only now, after a century, could be reconstructed and presented (even if, for the time being, only in parts) at its original place.

Barely a decade later, the name Aquincum appeared in the news as the place of a sensational discovery. Lajos Nagy, the second director after Bálint Kuzsinszky, recovered the remains of a water organ there in 1931. News of this unique find spread across the borders of the country, and even the Italian king, Vittorio Emanuele, came to Aquincum to see it. Lajos Nagy wrote in his report, “His Highness the Italian king visited first the amphitheatre, then the exhibited finds in the museum and the lapidary” (ÉDER 2020, 188).

There were also darker periods in the 130-year-long history of the Aquincum Museum, which suffered significant damage in World War Two and the following years. A bomb hit the museum building in September 1944. It was reopened in 1948 after a modest renovation; however, the condition of the ruins gradually deteriorated over the years, and the institution started losing its prestige due to a decrease in available funds and the poor condition of the ruins. In 1953, the scientific staff and the management were moved from the main building and the institution was downgraded from museum to exhibition area.

It could recover from this hopeless situation thanks primarily to the perseverance, high-quality professional work, and great organising skills of Klára Póczy, who managed to win Gyula Hajnóczy, a professor at the University of Technology, to the cause of rehabilitating the ruin garden, as well as the support of the management of Budapest. As a result, the rehabilitation started in the 1960s based on the plans by Ágnes Vladár. The innovative take on the tasks related to the protection, rehabilitation, and preservation of the ruins turned the attention of professionals in Hungary and abroad to Aquincum again. Although the rebuilding was not completed due to the construction of the residential estate in Óbuda and the related intensive rescue excavation project, upon its abandoning, the museum was in a state that made it fit to be widely utilised as a venue of cultural, educational, and touristic programmes.

Repairing its damaged prestige, however, took way more time and involved the fall of the Communist regime. In 1989, the Aquincum Museum officially became a museum again, and in the following period, it received back all parts (including a scientific staff) it had been deprived of after World War Two and, with the new building with offices in storage rooms opened in 2000, even its collection. The following

twenty-five years since have been a period of development supported by the Hungarian state, the capital, and District 3 of Budapest. As a result, the Aquincum Museum is home today, besides the Ancient History Department, to the Department of Prehistory and Migration Period. By today, it had also become a centre of research on provincial Roman archaeology in Hungary, with a team including several internationally renowned researchers with university degrees who also participate in university-level education. Its collection of provincial Roman finds is amongst the largest in the country, and its archaeological park is an important point in the cultural and touristic assortment of the Hungarian capital. The success of the first 130 years gives confidence and strength to the ‘museum of renewal’ to face the upcoming developments, projects, and challenges.

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