

## CONSERVATION OF A MEDIEVAL CHURCH AT CSÁKÁNYOSPUSZTA

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*The ruins of the church of the medieval village of Csákányegyház are located in a forested area on the fringes of the town of Tatabánya, at the foothills of the Vértes Mountains. The excavation of the church took place between 2003 and 2006, but there was no opportunity to preserve the remaining wall structures afterwards. The site, situated along popular hiking trails, attracts many visitors. Unfortunately, both its popularity and exposure to the elements have deteriorated the condition of the remaining wall fragments. This summer, after substantial planning and preparation, the conservation of the walls was carried out with the support of Market Építő Ltd under its corporate social responsibility initiative within the ROM Vándor programme. ROM Vándor is a heritage preservation programme by Market Építő Ltd, which, using its own resources and partially its own workforce alongside partners, saves one or two ruin churches from deterioration each year. The main goal of this initiative is to preserve and promote our built heritage, primarily sacred medieval relics from the Árpád Age. The work includes the professional exploration, conservation, and renovation of the surroundings of the ruins. In 2024, the ROM Vándor programme received the Exemplary Monument Conservation award from the Hungarian National Committee of ICOMOS.*

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Tatabánya is a modern town bearing the marks of several waves of 20th-century industrialisation. Although it has limited built heritage, it possesses significant tourist appeal due to its picturesque setting and rich biodiversity. Situated in the valley of the Által-ér at the meeting point of the Vértes and Gerecse mountains, the excellent natural landscape of today's settlement and its surroundings have supported human habitation since the Paleolithic.

The Tatabánya Museum has an archaeological collection since 1992. The medieval settlement network of the town has been gradually outlined by field surveys (LÁSZLÓ 2001; 2010; SCHMIDTMAYER 2008, 208–210), excavations started before and continuing into the 2000s (led by archaeologists Julianna Kisné Cseh, Gábor Vékony, and János László), and research into the medieval sources related to the area.

The ruins of the medieval church of Csákányegyház village still stand on the edge of a forested area (Fig. 1) on the southern fringes of the town. The village likely extended southeast of the church, though its precise location remains uncertain. While the first recorded mention of Csákányegyház dates back to 1325, evidence from field surveys and a pectoral cross, likely originating from the site and now part of the collection of the Kuny Domokos Museum in Tata, suggests that the settlement may have already existed as early as the 10th–11th centuries. The surviving backplate of a once-gilded bronze reliquary with engraved decoration represents a type associated with pilgrimages to the Holy Land and commonly found in 11th-century graves (LOVAG 1994, 193). The times of both the founding and the abandoning of the village are uncertain. Mid-15th century documents mention it already as a *praedium*, a deserted settlement.

János László excavated the medieval church and its graveyard between 2003 and 2006. The church, measuring 9.75 x 5.83 m, was oriented northeast-southwest and had an entrance on the southeastern side (Fig 2). The excavation brought to light arched window frame, semicircular-profile cornice, and wall plaster fragments, as well as a rare find: a vessel containing seeds that had been hidden as a foundation offering. Altogether, 144 burials were excavated southeast, east, and north of the church building.

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Fig 1. Northeastern view of the ruin church with the Vértes Mountains in the background



Fig. 2. Bird's eye view of the reconstructed ruin church

The church ruins stand atop a small elevation in the middle of a cultivated field. Before the excavation, still standing the wall stubs of his relatively small, single-nave village church with a horseshoe-arched sanctuary were about 20–80 cm high, eroded, and damaged, with many stones fallen from the masonry and scattered around and inside the building. It was erected of limestone rocks completed by rustication made of some harder sandstone. A stone depot and a fire pit used by tourists were found next to the ruins in the north; the material of both likely came from the former walls.

Although specific plans were made, the conservation of the walls of the excavated church ruins was not carried out after 2006. Over the past decade, not only has the stone depot around the church dwindled away, but the condition of the remaining walls has also continuously deteriorated due to weather, vegetation, and vandalism. Its legal status further hindered efforts to preserve the site: since the land was privately owned, neither local government funds nor grant funding could be secured. The issue of the church resurfaced when the *ROM Vándor* programme was launched at the beginning of that year. To enable the restoration to begin, the landowner generously donated the area surrounding the church to the town of Tatabánya. This donation created the opportunity for the project to commence.

The conservation and restoration of the church ruins were carried out within the framework of the *ROM Vándor* programme by Market Építő Ltd, following the plans by KÖZTI Ltd. led by Bálint Kelemen. Csákányospuszta is the third successful project of the initiative (following the restoration of the ruin churches of Tök and Kövesd near Aszófő), while recently, a fourth site, the restored ruin church at Varjaskér near Somogyszentpál, was also opened.

In the preparatory phase of the planning, a geodetic survey, architectural historical documentation, and a value inventory were created. As part of the research, the designers also made a theoretical reconstruction, followed by 3D mass modelling, with the visual design being partially enhanced using an artificial intelligence (AI) image-generating platform (Fig. 3). The basis of the restoration concept (and the *ROM Vándor* programme) was to carry out the technical restoration, preserve the aesthetic and historical values inherent in the ruin, and create a natural and harmonious relationship between the ruin and the landscape with small-scale, value-enhancing contemporary additions.

The most important tasks were to preserve the value and conserve the ruin. The first step involved dismantling the loosened stones and rebuilding the walls, followed by the restoration of the wall fabric



Fig. 3. Theoretical reconstruction of the church of Csákányospuszta

based on excavation photos from 2005. Wall height was only increased where it was deemed necessary for interpretability. Several carved corner blocks were returned from the Tatabánya Museum to their original (or likely original) functional locations. Contemporary additions include a so-called Corten steel gate marker (which also serves as an information sign) (Fig. 4), a limestone gravel floor covering that creates an organised interior space, and an altar in its original position, though made of a single large limestone block with a modern design (Fig. 5). A new fire pit, set within steel rings, was also created for the visitors, and a limestone block bench was placed beside the church and the fire pit, serving as a place for prayer and contemplation for pilgrims and providing comfort for hikers. Another information board was installed along the dirt road at the bottom of the plot, providing valuable information on the ethics of land use, the natural and landscape values of the site, and the archaeological excavation. The opening event of the restored church ruins included a commemoration of the ancestors who once lived there: electric candles were placed at the locations of the 144 graves uncovered in the cemetery around the church, and the re-consecrated ruin church was illuminated in the night (Fig. 6).

The Tatabánya Museum has been involved in preparing the work from the beginning and monitoring the restoration works. The Csákányospuszta church ruins were under general archaeological protection during the planning phase, but since then, the process of classifying it as a protected monument has begun, and the remains have already received provisional heritage protection. The cooperation of the participating partners during the programme was exemplary: in addition to the parties involved, both the authorities and the public showed great goodwill and helpfulness from the start. Special mention must be made of the generous donation by Zoltán György Sármán, the landowner, without which this important project, far exceeding



Fig. 4. Entrance of the church marked by a Corten steel information board



Fig. 5. The interior of the church with a limestone altar and a bench



Fig. 6. Remembrance of the graveyard cemetery: candles mark the places of the one-time graves

simple conservation, could not have been started. It has attracted significant public interest, and many people visited the site. The ruin holds particular significance for Tatabánya, as this is the only preserved medieval architectural heritage element of the town, thus bearing a particularly important role in shaping local identity.

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