

REPORT ON THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME ON THE GOTHIC SCULPTURE ENSEMBLE FROM BUDA CASTLE

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As is well known in academic circles and to older generations of the general public, a huge collection of finds was discovered during renovation work in the Buda Castle Palace in 1974; the ensemble became known as the Gothic sculpture ensemble from Buda Castle. The sensational discovery, which exalted a large part of the country for months, consists of thousands of small and large stone sculpture fragments (Fig. 1). The finds were transferred to the Budapest History Museum (BTM), where the best part of the sculptures have been on permanent display since 1976. The statues, which are now clearly known to have been commissioned by King Sigismund of Luxemburg (1387–1437) to decorate his palace in Buda sometime between 1410 and 1420, are of unparalleled importance in many respects and represent one of the most outstanding relics of the period, not only in Hungary but also internationally. For this reason, a new research programme has been launched in recent years, aiming to continue with the previous work and reassess the finds themselves. This paper covers the most important points of this project.

Keywords: Gothic sculpture ensemble from Buda Castle, stone sculpture around 1400, research, King Sigismund of Luxemburg

Exactly half a century ago László Zolnay, a medieval archaeology specialist at BTM, discovered the sculpture fragments that became known and famous as the Gothic sculpture ensemble from Buda during an excavation near Buda Castle. In 2024, the museum celebrated the 50th anniversary of the discovery with a renewal of the permanent exhibition, a new exhibition guide, a conference, and a varied programme of activities for the general public (Fig. 2). The professional programme included a presentation on the new research programme, also the subject of this paper (TAKÁCS 2024).

Research on the sculptures was particularly intense in the second half of the 1970s and the early 1980s, immediately after the discovery of this exceptional find. Three men had main roles in that: the excavation leader, László Zolnay, who, in addition to archaeology, approached the material mainly from the perspective of cultural history; Ernő Szakál, who led the classification of the fragments and the restoration and reconstruction of the figures; and Ernő Marosi, who attempted to describe the art historical position and significance of the sculptures (for the results, see MAROSI 1976; ZOLNAY 1977; SZAKÁL 1977; ZOLNAY & MAROSI



Fig. 1. Cover of an issue of *Ludas Matyi*, a humorous journal, shortly after the discovery of the sculpture ensemble in 1974. The sketch is titled 'The Big Catch' (in-text: "If it's shorter than 20 cm, throw it back!")

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Fig. 2. The permanent exhibition of the sculpture ensemble, renewed in 2024 (photo by Ákos Keppel)

1989). Already in 1976, in parallel with the research, the most important torsos and fragments were put on display in a permanent exhibition. However, the tide of research had retreated by the mid-1980s, leaving behind a series of unresolved questions and uncertainties and, eventually, coming to a standstill, except for a single intermezzo: new pieces have been recovered in an excavation at the Church of St. Zsigmond [Sigismund] in Buda in 1994–1996 (for these new finds, see the proceedings of the 1996 conference held in the BTM in BTM 1999). At the same time, the ensemble became almost forgotten, without being integrated into the international image of the period; moreover, it also remained unknown to the younger generations of the Hungarian public.

Realising the above, András Végh, archaeologist and historian in the Castle Museum of BTM, contacted me in the mid-2010s to ask if I would be interested in working on the sculptures under his care. The invitation did not come completely out of the blue: on the one hand, I had already come face to face with certain sculpture fragments and their problems when organising the *Sigismundus Rex et Imperator* exhibition in 2006 (see TAKÁCS 2006, especially 219–238, 316–330, and 367–368), while later, in the early 2010s, I devoted a study to the historiography of the ensemble, the current situation of its research, and the tasks and directions for future research (PAPP 2014). Several fundamental factors supported the relaunch of the research on the sculptures. Although the overall picture is still highly incomplete and uncertain, compared to the 1970s, we know orders of magnitude more about European art around 1400, including the stone sculpture of the period. The political situation in Hungary in the decades after the discovery of the sculpture ensemble made it much more difficult to keep up with international, Western research and to integrate Hungarian findings into it than it is today. The opportunities for scientific analyses—and the demand by archaeologists and art historians—are incomparably greater today than they were in the past. Moreover, since the pivotal discovery in 1974, new fragments belonging to the ensemble have been turning up, with some exaggeration, up to this day. In light of the above, not only are existing research results worth re-evaluating but reassessing all known fragments would also make sense. The latter means three things: the new research must be based on primary sources, i.e., the sculptures themselves; one must reassess all previous ideas and assumptions in order to confirm or, where appropriate, revise or refute them; and the material must be reassessed focusing

not merely on individual questions but, as far as possible, taking a comprehensive, holistic approach. Since BTM—whose Director-General at the time, Péter Farbaky, was fully committed to our work—could only partially provide the finances required by such a project, we applied and won an OTKA research grant from the National Research, Development and Innovation Office and another for scientific analyses.

The project started by collecting and processing the various documents and records, i.e., basic information on the sculptures. These sources included, besides the excavation and restoration documentation in the BTM (Archaeological Data Archive, Repository of Drawings and Photographs of the Medieval Department), the accessible parts of László Zolnay's legacy and the legacy of Ernő Szakál in Pereszteg. The complete literature on the sculptures, about one hundred fifty studies and articles, has been collected and annotated. Some surviving excavation staff members and those involved in the subsequent processing of the finds were also interviewed about their memories. And since the sculpture ensemble was clearly made for Buda Castle and the adjacent provostal church of St. Sigismund, we compiled a *regesta*, a collection of written sources, about these buildings and the foreign masters Sigismund sent to Hungary or specifically Buda. In the latter case, we went back to the original or earliest documents, which allowed us to clear up many old misconceptions and misunderstandings about them.

Simultaneously, the documentation and cataloguing of the torsos and fragments, never done in such detail and in such a systematic way, has also begun. Since the bulk of the find material consists of small fragments, some of which have no carved surface, are unintelligible because of their small size, or do not provide new information compared with the larger pieces, it would have been pointless to survey all of them. Therefore, only about 170 pieces (together with the fragments in the permanent exhibition) that seemed relevant to the aims of the research were selected and examined in detail, one by one, in a repurposed corner of a storage room of BTM. András Végh helped organise and Attila Péter and, later, Ágoston Takács carry out this work. Besides basic data (inventory number, site, leader of the excavation, year of excavation, dimensions, material), we recorded information on the condition of the artefact, any paint traces, a detailed description of the object from an art-historical perspective, and an as complete as possible list of references. This work was not (merely) done for its own sake, as it revealed a wealth of previously unknown information and novelties. For example, the traces of a dagger that once hung from it were discovered under the belt of a lower body (Inv. no. 75.1.7), which helped identify the figure iconographically. It has also become clear that the Madonna statue (Inv. no. 75.1.30) has a sideways-turned compositional counterpart (Inv. no. 75.1.20), indicating that the sculptors in the workshop used some models (*Fig. 3*). Importantly, the survey included the mapping of all available production-related information, including the types of blocks and sculpting techniques used, the factors determining the elaboration of the compositions, and when and what tools were used in the crafting process. In addition, the particulars of the unfinished sculptures were also carefully recorded



Fig. 3. Depiction of a saintess (Inv. no. 75,1,20), a compositional counterpart of the so-called 'White Madonna' (Inv. no. 75.1.30) (photo by Bence Tihanyi)



Fig. 4. Photo shoot in a storeroom of BTM with Bence Tihanyi, András Vég, and Szilárd Papp (author unknown)



Fig. 5. The author at work in the room of the permanent exhibition (photo by Bence Tihanyi)

because this aspect of the find assemblage is basically unexploited and, thus, offers an exceptional opportunity for research by making the find unique worldwide.

The detailed photo documentation was another, equally important, part of documenting the selected sculpture fragments. As only some occasional colour and digital photos had been made of the finds, Bence Tihanyi and Ágnes Bakos, photographers in BTM, systematically captured the images of the catalogued items, taking approximately 1,700 shots (Fig. 4). This work had more than one aim: besides creating a detailed documentation, each photograph was also post-processed in a way that now all of them are suitable for publication. Working with two professional photographers has taught me a great deal about the differences in visual approaches to objects, the advantages of bringing different viewpoints closer together, and that changing one's own perspective for that of another might be useful sometimes.

Thanks to the leadership of the BTM, we also had an exceptional opportunity to examine the sculptures. Since a small part of the ensemble is on display in the permanent exhibition and the rest has been kept in the depths of shelves and cupboards in various storage facilities, it has never been possible to see all related artefacts in one space at the same time. Therefore, the permanent exhibition was closed for three or four months, and all the finds from the storerooms were brought there. This allowed us to compare directly and thoroughly the relationships in size, surface treatment, stylistic connections, or personal traits of the respective sculptors between the sculptures (Fig. 5), and also represented an opportunity to Péter Módy, who, occasionally, had been working with the material for a long time, to carry out some conservation work (Fig. 6). The main art-historical benefit of this work was that two dozen additional individual fragments of diverse sizes could be matched to the large pieces. An important discovery was, for example, that a crown (Inv. no. 94.53.2–3) and the eagle wing fragment of a Czech royal helmet ornament (Inv. no. 94.53.1) belonged together.



Fig. 6. Conservator Péter Módy at work in the room of the permanent exhibition (photo by Bence Tihanyi)

Ákos Török examined the stone material of the statues to find answers to three main questions. First, he confirmed the identification of the raw material of the sculptures from the 1970s as soft limestone from the area of Buda. Second, he identified the raw material of several other stray fragments from in and around Buda Castle (which had only been evaluated using art-historical methods), helping determine, in many cases, whether they belong to the sculpture ensemble. Third, material analysis has also provided important, albeit not always conclusive, evidence in the case of pieces without a matching fracture surface, which, on morphological grounds, probably

once belonged to the same sculpture. Surprisingly, the material of a small architectural model (Inv. no. 94.49) from the 1974 find assemblage turned out to be made of a material different from that of the sculptures, which was not even domestic, but limestone from Solnhofen (Kelheim) in Bavaria.

Éva Galambos and her team thoroughly examined the painting of the statues by mapping any remaining paint trace using a head microscope. They also took about a hundred samples for material analysis to identify the composition of the foundation, binder, and paint layers, and the original colours of the paints. In difficult cases, element analysis provided additional data to the information gleaned so far. The collected evidence allowed for the complete colour reconstruction of thirteen figures.

A selection of eighteen fragments was scanned for two purposes with the help of Ágoston Takács. On the one hand, this greatly facilitated the reconstruction of the original dimensions of the torsos and the grouping and matching of the fragments in the five to six size categories distinguished within the assemblage. On the other hand, the pieces selected were ones from clusters of likely non-matching fragments of the same sculptures, and the 3D reconstruction of the sculptures or fragments made it possible to confirm or refute the suspected relationship.

Simultaneously, a more traditional art-historical analysis of the ensemble has also been in progress. In order to determine the broader context, connections, and significance of the sculptures, it was necessary to overview first the history of European sculpture of the period by mapping the respective record of the regions and countries with possible analogies, mainly parts of Central Europe (Lower Austria, Bavaria, Bohemia) and the historic south of the Low Countries and France. The opportunity to visit the library of the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte in Munich greatly helped this work; the direction emerging from the processing of the publications determined the areas the sculptural record of which had to be examined on the spot, the importance of which—given that the genre is fundamentally three-dimensional—can hardly be overlooked. Accordingly, we spent several weeks studying sculptures in France and the Low Countries, Bavaria and Austria, the United States, and a few days in Vienna, Bratislava, Prague, and Paris.

As a result of all this research, it became clear that, contrary to previous assumptions, the bulk of the ensemble has close analogies in the French court, mainly Paris, Burgundy, and perhaps Bourges. Therefore, it was worthwhile to look at the contemporaneous art pieces from these areas. First, we contacted a dozen French colleagues specialised in the research of the period to see if they knew of any written sources of interest to us, then three historians with experience in French archives (Veronika Novák, László Gálffy, and Laura Fábián) spent a few weeks looking for a needle in a haystack in the archives of Paris, Bourges, and Poitiers. Although these efforts remained fruitless, a new written source has been found which at least confirms and adds to the information already known, namely that during his one-month stay in Paris in 1416, Sigismund hired many local craftsmen and ones from other regions and sent them to Buda.

One, if not the main, aim of the basic research of the sculpture ensemble was to make all results available in a monograph. In recent years, writing this book (now at an advanced stage) has taken up much of our time. The volume will consist of two major units. The second will be an appendix with the *regesta* mentioned above, the detailed results of the stone and paint analyses, and a catalogue of selected fragments. These parts are already complete; they were written first because they contain the body of basic data from which the discussion of various topics relating to the ensemble, forming the first part of the book, builds. The seven chapters of this first part include 1, excavations, finds and the definition of the ensemble; 2, the execution of the sculptures; 3, the Buda workshop and its operation; 4, the appearing themes; 5, the origins of the formal language and the masters; 6, the question of the so-called Stibor workshop; and 7, possible influences and afterlife. Just over half of these chapters have been completed. Naturally, detailed and rich illustrations of the ensemble and a comprehensive discussion of its analogies will be important parts of the book.

The research has yielded countless new, fundamental findings and ones partly confirming previous theories, improving significantly our knowledge of the artistic representation of Sigismund of Luxembourg, the cultural life of his court in Buda, and his international connections. It has become certain that the 1974 find was recovered from a part of the former sculpture workshop and that, save for one or two, the sculptures have never been put on display. These findings have also led to exceptional observations, even in an

international context, on the details of operation of a medieval workshop. In certain cases, it was possible to identify particular masters in the workshop, and also to outline the methodological difficulties and limits of this line of research. Previous hypotheses regarding the themes represented by the sculptures have also been modified significantly: the proportion of elements related to power representation was smaller than previously thought, while that of the ones depicting various saints was higher and included depictions in diverse size categories. The ensemble included at least one biblical scene, the Prayer of the Three Kings, with Sigismund himself likely represented as one of them. It has been proven more certainly than ever before that most of the sculptures were probably made by masters from France, clearly due to Sigismund's diplomatic activity abroad, i.e., his stay in Paris in 1416. This also means that the dating of the related part of the ensemble can be narrowed down to immediately after 1416 from the previously determined two- to three-decade period. The new results mentioned here, together with several others, shed an entirely new light on this unique find, significantly enhancing its scientific value. The void left behind in the material culture of the Kingdom of Hungary by the workshop that ceased its operation without completing the task it was established for illustrates excellently the specific situation of the country and its changing position on the cultural map of Europe.

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