

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN THE MONASTERY OF ALMÁD

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The archaeological research of the ruins of the former Almád Benedictine Abbey, located outside the village of Monostorapáti, was initiated by the Roman Catholic parish of Monostorapáti, to whom the area belongs, and László Hangodi, a historian at the Tapolca Museum, in 2014. In cooperation with the King Matthias Museum (Visegrád) of the Hungarian National Museum and the Laczkó Dezső Museum (Veszprém), the work was carried out by volunteers. In the past decade, several other institutions and researchers joined the research and processing of the artefacts. The monastery of Almád is a characteristic example of Árpád-period private monasteries. However, its exceptionally abundant written source material, well-preserved ruins, and its plentiful and representative artefacts offer a unique opportunity to study a contemporaneous noble family and their monastery. Additionally, they provide us some insight into the monastery's late medieval afterlife.

Key terms: Almád, monastery, Atyusz kindred, Árpád period, Saint Dominic, burials, archaeogenetics, Romanesque architecture, round pulpit, funerary chamber, Horvát Márk of Kamicsác

HISTORY OF THE MONASTERY

The construction of the Almád monastery was started in 1117 by a nobleman called Bánd, who died before the work was completed. It was his son Atyusz, who issued the monastery's founding charter in 1121 when the church was consecrated. The document, surviving in a transcript dated 1420, says that Atyusz's stepmother, Gyönyörű, also made a donation to the monastery before leaving on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The source adds that the monastery was founded by Atyusz, at the will of his father, together with his brother Miske (SZENTPÉTERY 1927). The document, therefore, dates the construction of the monastery church between 1117 and 1121. This dating was also confirmed by the archaeological excavations since the earliest coins discovered in the church are anonymous denars going back to the first third of the twelfth century. Between 1169 and 1173, István, the son of Miske (Atyusz's brother), who was without a male heir, bequeathed another substantial land to the monastery in his will (JAKUBOVICH 1924, 155–160). The original date of the document is 1174, but it is apparently false as it mentions King Stephen III. It must have been written sometime between 1169 when István was elected the Bishop of Csanád and 1173 when King Stephen III died (NEMES 2006, 19).

Based on the monastery's letter of endowment and István's will (HOLUB 1937; NEMES 2006), the Atyusz kindred already possessed vast estates in the twelfth century, mainly in the central part of Transdanubia, around Lake Balaton, in counties Veszprém, Zala, and Somogy, and even in Western Slavonia (*Fig. 1*).

The heyday of the Atyusz kindred was during the reign of Andrew II, when several members of the family were *comes* (*ispán*), while Atyusz III and his nephew Salamon were even made *bans*. At this time, *comes* Sal who did not have a male heir bestowed his property on the monastery in his wills of 1221 and 1227. The family's decline started during the reign of Béla IV. By the end of the Árpád period, they had lost their large fortune and even their rights of patronage regarding the monastery.

The Benedictine visitation of 1508 described the monastery as a neglected building. At that time, the monastery belonged to a neighbouring landowner, Márk Horvát, the lord of Nagyvázsony, and the abbot was also a relative of his. According to the visitation, he also had the abbot's house renovated (PRT III, 619).

The monastery's estates were still referred to in 1542. In 1548, however, the abbey was mentioned by King Ferdinand as a building that had been abandoned for years, and its land was occupied by laymen. For this reason, the king placed it under the protection of Péter Bakics Laki on the condition that, from its revenues, he would cover the education of his relative, Imre Cobor. (For the history of the monastery see, HANGODI 2014).

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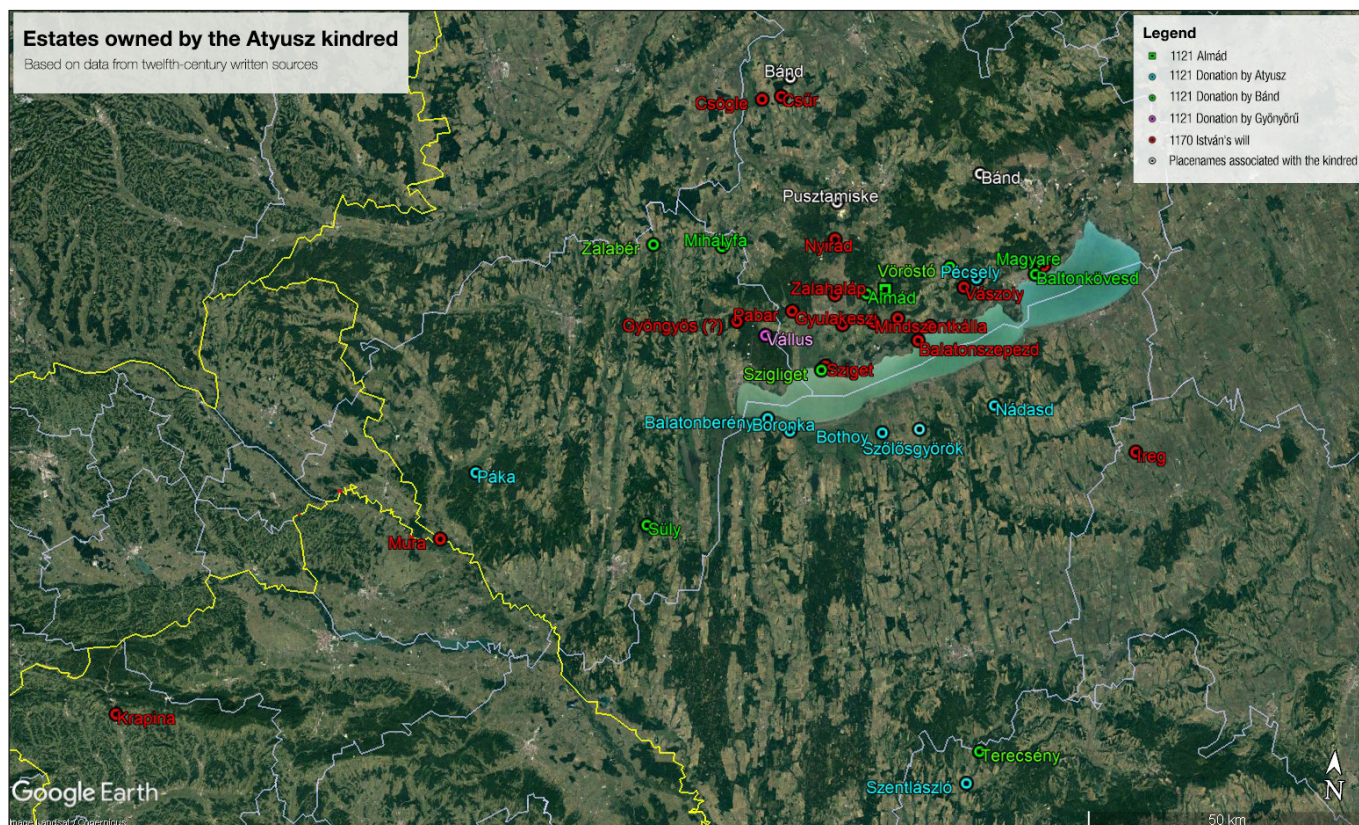


Fig. 1. The estates of the Atyusz kindred recorded in the twelfth century

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

During the archaeological excavations until 2024, we unearthed the monastery's church complex, including the three-aisled basilica with three apses, the chapel and the adjoining six-lobed rotunda to the south-east of the monastery church, and the northern sacristy. The north and east wings of the late medieval cloister, the northern end of the west wing, and the northern half of the western monastery wing were also discovered. The remnants of a sixteenth-century palisade fence erected along the eastern wall of the cloister and the rotunda came to light as well. Of the medieval building attached to the monastery's quadrangle on the north-east, partly visible above the ground, only the southern, outer courtyard has been investigated so far. We carried out fieldwalking surveys around the monastery, during which the remnants of the outer enclosing walls of the monastery, also visible on the surface, were inspected and measured. Additionally, we surveyed the medieval fishponds found to the north-east of the monastery and the ruins of a large medieval building at its eastern end. To the north of the monastery, we probed a medieval building, which can be seen above the ground (Fig. 2).

The ruins of the Romanesque abbey church (15×20 m) with aisles and three apses, constructed between 1117 and 1121, were covered with a layer of rubble that occasionally reached a thickness of 2–2.5 m and was disturbed by looting pits. In many places, these caused damage to the medieval floor and completely demolished the western wall of the church. The rest of the building, however, survived surprisingly intact, with walls sometimes more than 2 m in height (Fig. 3). The walls and the rectangular pillars were built of grey basalt ashlar (Fig. 4), and red tuff was sometimes used for the plinth of the pillars. Of the four pairs of pillars, it was only the northern colonnade's third pillar from the east that has been destroyed. However, the foundation of this one has survived, as well.

In the interior of the church, we observed flooring from two periods. In the second period, in the centre of the marble-floored choir with a marble parapet built in the first half of the thirteenth century, we found a large walled tomb, the top of which was still adjusted to the floor of the choir belonging to the first period. The funerary chamber had been completely emptied by treasure hunters in the modern period. In many places, the

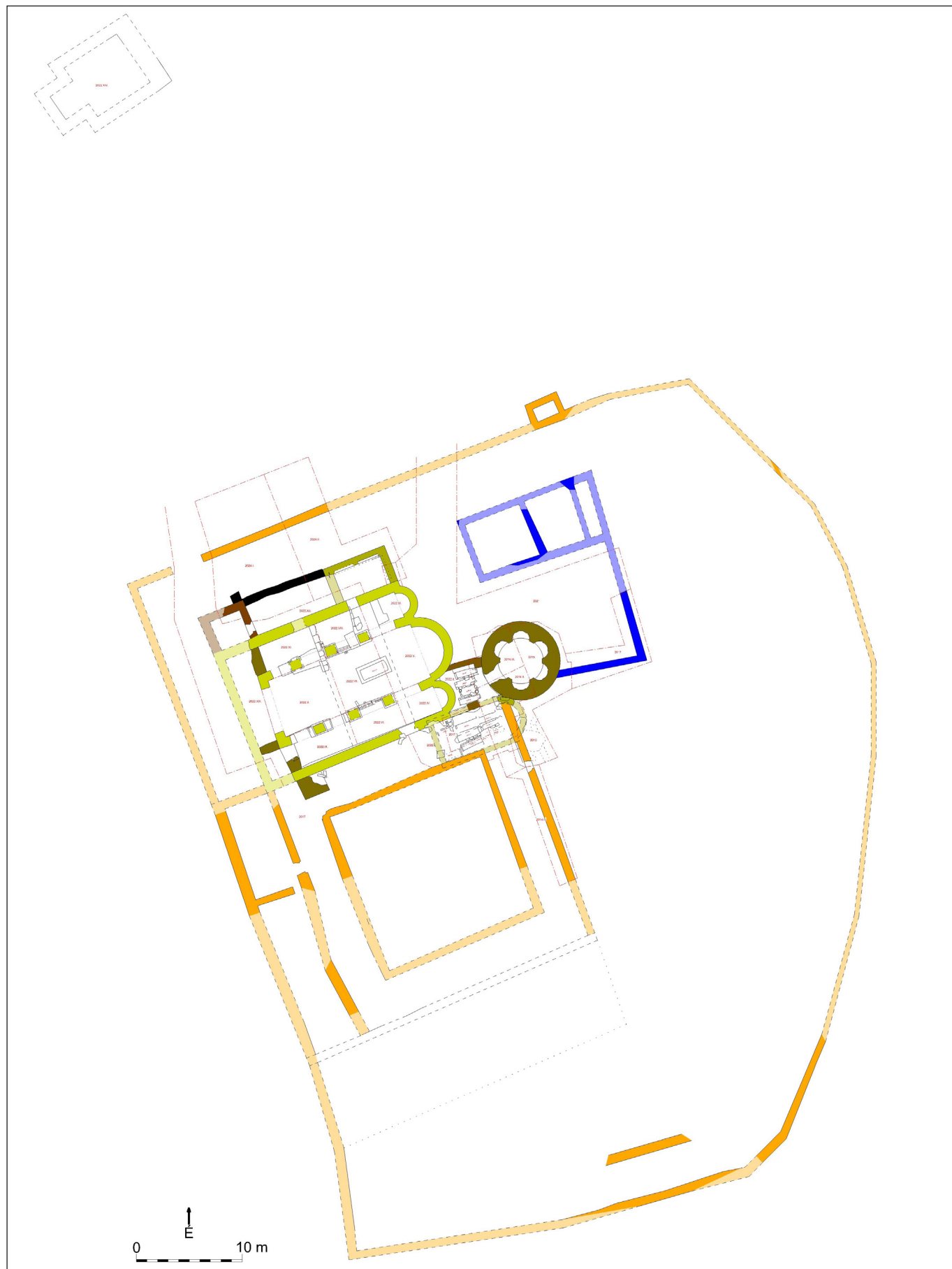


Fig. 2. An overview plan of the Almád monastery



Fig. 3. Drone view of the excavated ruins of the monastery (2022)

remains of painted or whitewashed plaster were found on the church walls. In the western part of the church, several later masonry works could be documented. For example, the south-western pillars were reinforced and the western sections of the lateral aisles were bricked up. However, the western façade was completely demolished due to treasure hunting in the modern period. In the northern aisle of the church, next to a late medieval side altar made subsequently, we discovered the remains of a group of burials dating from the early sixteenth century. We also excavated several eighteenth- and nineteenth-century looting pits, which contained bones in a secondary position. The bones must have been transferred there from the central funerary chamber.

Attached to the south-east corner of the church was a chapel (Fig. 5), which was largely demolished during the construction of the late medieval Gothic cloister. Nevertheless, some details of its apse and



Fig. 4. Wall remains of the northern side apse of the church (2022)



Fig. 5. Drone view of the south-western side chapel and its burials (2022)

the excavated foundation trenches of its nave could be observed. Inside the chapel, we unearthed seven walled tombs and several earthen graves. The walled tombs had stone slabs on top of them. The central tomb was covered with a Roman marble funerary stele, which was placed on the tomb with its carved side facing upwards (*Fig. 6*).

To the semicircular apse of the chapel, a rotunda with a six-lobed interior was added later (*Fig. 7*). Of its external and internal ashlar masonry and stone flooring, some major details have been preserved, which allowed for the precise reconstruction of its layout. In the middle of the apses raised by one step, we observed slightly protruding lesenes, which, along with the small white marble column shafts brought to light by the excavation, must have been the remnants of altars. Pieces of painted plaster could be seen on the walls and ashlar from the collapsed vaulted ceiling, suggesting a plastered and decorated interior.

An annex was built subsequently to the south-east side chapel between the entrance to the rotunda and the southern side apse of the church. Inside the annex, four walled tombs covered with stone slabs and an ossuary pit came to light. The burials in the walled tombs belonged to different periods. The two central tombs were constructed of Roman and eleventh/twelfth-century spoliae (*Fig. 8*).

On the northern side of the church, major details of the sacristy and a tower were discovered (*Fig. 9*).

The sacristy was built at the same time as the church, but towards the end of its construction. Its ashlar stone walls, having the same structure as the church, were divided by sedilia (*Fig. 10*), suggesting that it may as well have been used as a chapter house. The north-western tower, with basalt rubble walls and a vaulted ground-floor room, was probably built later. Next, a makeshift room was constructed between the sacristy and the tower, with plastered walls built of basalt, which could be accessed through a door opened from the side aisle of the basilica. It must have served as an archive, which was necessitated by the start of notar-



Fig. 6. Graves no. 2017/1 and 2017/2 before their excavation (2017)



Fig. 7. The ruins of the rotunda from the south (2015)



Fig. 8. Graves in the annex of the south-eastern chapel (2022)



Fig. 9. The sacristy of the church during excavation (2024)



Fig. 10. The eastern part of the sacristy interior (2024)

ial activities in the mid-thirteenth century. Afterwards, when the monastery ceased to serve as a place of authentication in the mid-fourteenth century, the wall between this room and the sacristy was pulled down.

The medieval building, located to the south of the monastery, has a square-shaped layout and a rectangular extension to the west. Its chronology and function have not yet been established. The large number of human bones found in its surroundings and above the remnants of the walls suggest that it may have been used as a charnel house (*kärner*).

THE SURROUNDINGS OF THE MONASTERY

From 2022 onwards, the excavations were complemented by metal detecting surveys, carried out in and around the monastery. The work, organised by Fruzsina Fekete, was conducted by the volunteer, museum-affiliated metal detectorist group of the Hungarian National Museum. As a result of the surveys, numer-

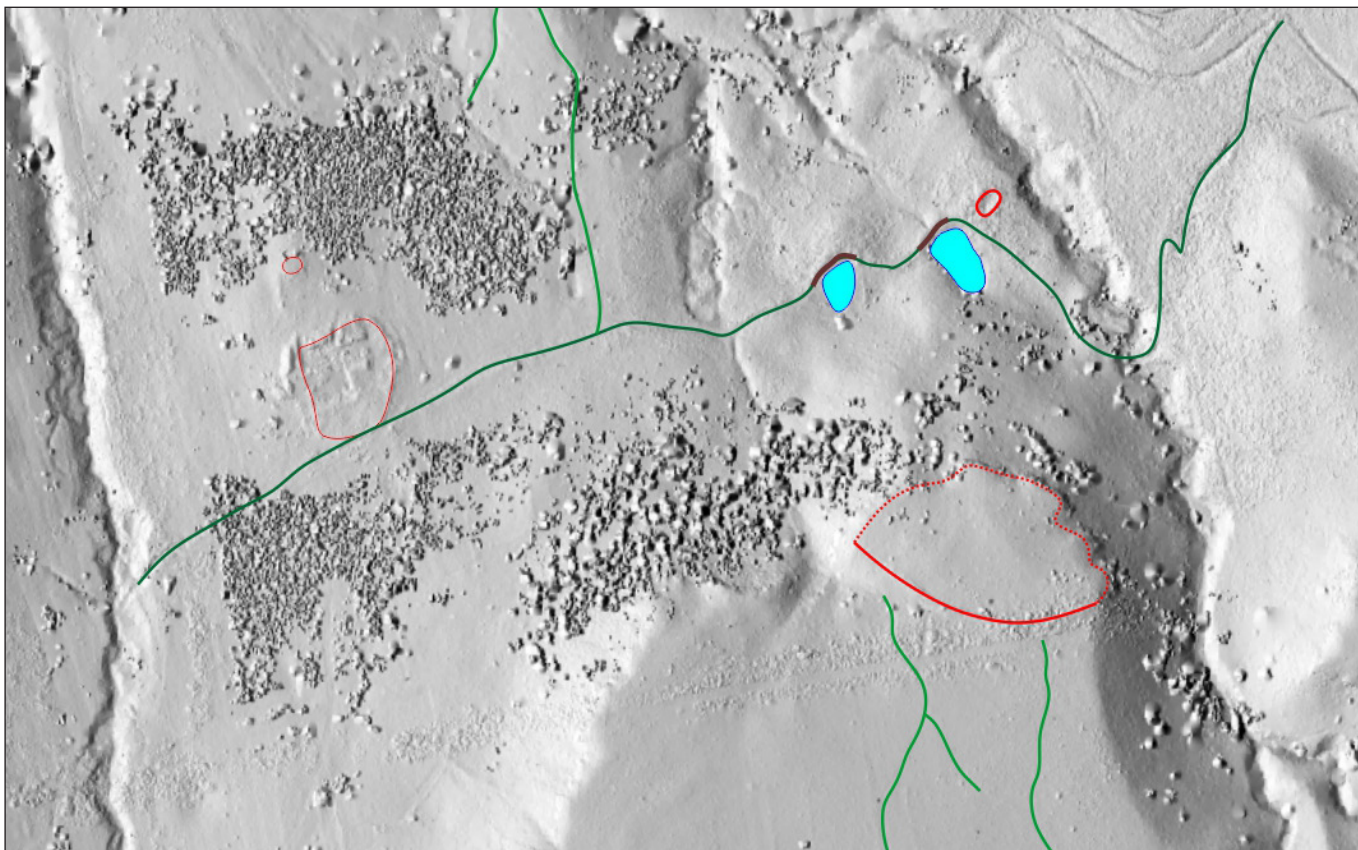


Fig. 11. LiDAR survey of the monastery and its surroundings, marking the monastery ruins, fishponds, the castle, and roads



1.



2.



3.

Fig. 12. 1. Carolingian spur from the castle above the monastery. 2. Early medieval arrow head from the castle above the monastery. 3. Árpád-period arrow head from the castle above the monastery



1.



2.



3.

Fig. 13. 1. A capital with chessboard decoration from the south-western tower. 2. Fragment of a cornice. 3. Fragment of a cornice.



Fig. 14. 1. Marble pillar from the choir screen of the church. 2. Marble pillar from the choir screen of the church. 3. Marble pillar with birds from the choir screen of the church. 4. Fragment of a marble parapet from the choir screen of the church. 5. The reverse of a marble parapet fragment from the choir screen of the church. 6. Marble pillar with a lion from the choir screen of the church.



1.



2.

Fig. 15. 1. Curved beam of the marble pulpit from the church. 2. Marble plinth of a tomb.

ous metal artefacts, such as book fittings, belt fittings, and twelfth- to sixteenth-century coins – including a large number of Austrian coins dating between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries – were discovered among other finds in the monastery and its immediate vicinity. We also investigated the surroundings of the former fish ponds located to the south-east of the monastery. When combing the rubble of a large building between the easternmost fishpond and the steep natural valley on its east side, we found medieval bricks and iron nails, which confirmed the medieval origin of the building. Nearby, on the side of the fishpond, a medieval finger-ring and a piece of hoop jewellery could be detected.

On the corner of the plateau with a rocky edge rising above the fishponds, a fortification surrounded by a stone wall was identified (Fig. 11). The metal detecting survey in its forested inner area yielded a bracelet and sickle fragments from the Bronze Age, a Carolingian iron spur (Fig. 12.1), several Árpád-period arrow-heads (Fig. 12.2–3), and a grater.

One of the outstanding results of the excavations is the large number of Romanesque stone carvings with high-quality workmanship found in and around the church. These include several re-used Roman and some eleventh-century carved stones. However, the majority is formed by the tufa carvings of the twelfth-century church (Fig. 13) and the marble fragments of the thirteenth-century choir screen (Figs. 14–15) (BUZÁS 2022; BUZÁS 2023).

TOMBS AND BURIALS

The anthropological and archaeogenetic analysis of the human remains found in the church and the south-eastern chapel was carried out by the HUN-REN Institute of Archaeogenomics under the direction of Balázs Gusztáv Mende. The research results were featured in a poster displayed at the 2024 travelling exhibition “Kings, Saints, Monasteries. The World of the Early Benedictines in Hungary in the Light of Recent Scientific Research” in Tihany and Bakonybél.

The two thirteenth-century tombs excavated in the anteroom of the south-eastern chapel, the masonry of which contained several spoliae, were also intriguing because of the deceased buried in them. The anthropological investigations identified the remains of a woman and her son who died in the first half of the eleventh century. The nephew of this man was buried in a tomb covered with a Roman funerary stele in

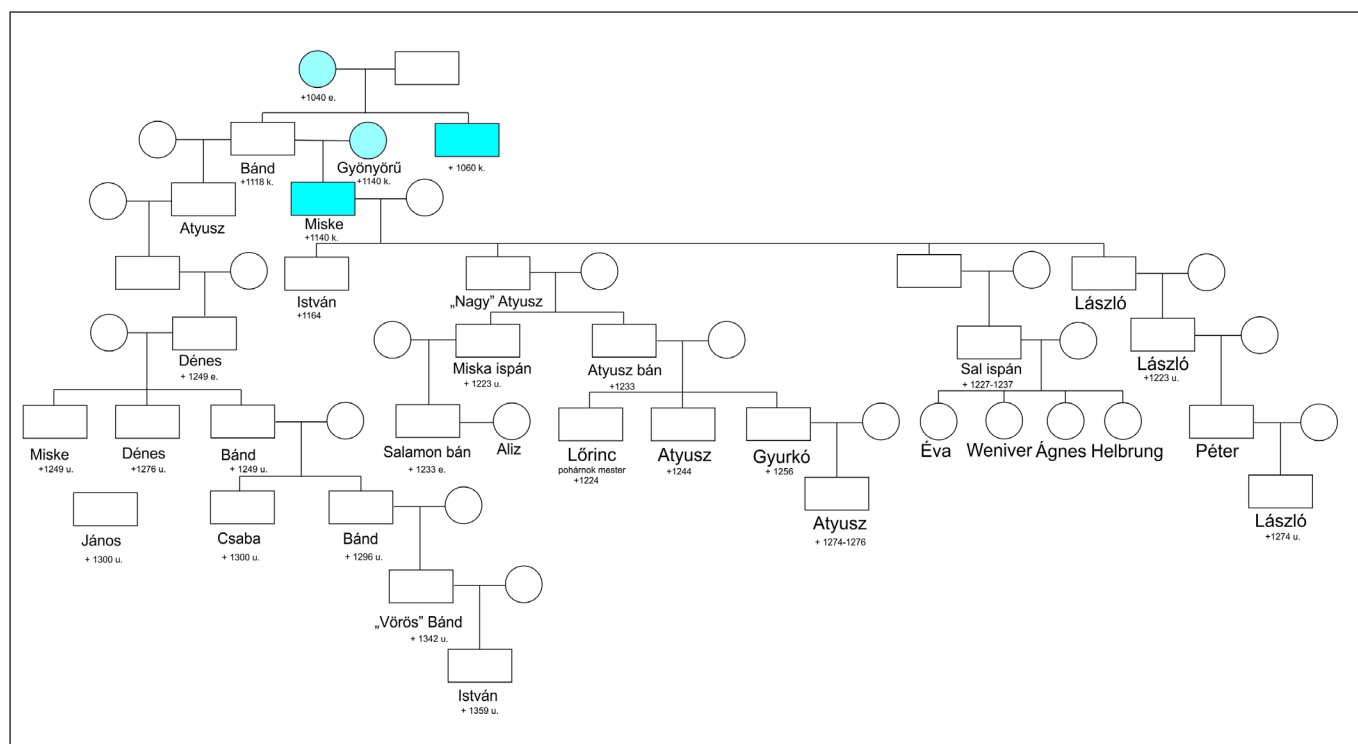


Fig. 16. Geneogram of the Atyusz kindred (the persons identified during the excavation are highlighted in blue)



Fig. 17. Fragment of an eleventh-century springing stone from the Roman Catholic parish church of Monostorapáti

the south-eastern chapel. The bones of the nephew's mother were found in a grave in the chapel's annex. The nephew's tomb also contained the remains of one of his late descendants from the sixteenth century. Furthermore, the bones of another member of his relatives could be identified in the area of the church. The family reconstructed in this way can certainly be associated with members of the Atyusz kindred who founded the church. Among them, the Árpád-period man buried under the Roman funerary stele is most likely to be one of the founders, Miske, known from the letter of endowment. His mother, Gyönyörű, is also mentioned in the charter. Their eleventh-century ancestors, Miske's uncle and his mother (Fig. 16), were transferred to the monastery chapel in the thirteenth century from a demolished or at least reconstructed eleventh-century church. The piece of octagonal pillar shaft dating to the mid-eleventh century and the fragment of Roman column shaft found in one of the burials must have also been removed from this early, still unidentified church. The size of the latter fragment fits well with that of a springing stone from the second half of the eleventh century discovered earlier in the Baroque parish church of Monostorapáti (Fig. 17).

CONSTRUCTION PHASES AND CARVED STONES

The monastery church, completed in 1121, was characterised by a rather plain architectural structure, without ornamentation. It had simple whitewashed walls, which were only decorated with painting in the apse and the sacristy. The pillars had a square shaft and their plinths became increasingly complex towards the east. They were crowned by a cornice supporting the semicircular arches.

The three miniature red tufa columns with cube capitals discovered in secondary positions in thirteenth-century graves can be associated with the large walled burial chamber established in the choir of the church. They must have originally decorated an altar table or a tomb with a blank arcade. Neither the church nor its chapels had altar foundations that could have supported such a large altar structure, so they should rather be interpreted as the elements of a tomb. The church's choir was rebuilt in the early thirteenth century, during which its floor level was also raised, which necessitated the reconstruction of the tomb as well. This may explain why the



Fig. 18. The church of the monastery in the mid-twelfth century, reconstruction

fragments of the twelfth-century burial chamber were incorporated secondarily into the masonry of another tomb in the thirteenth century (Fig. 18).

A chapel was later added to the south-east corner of the church (Fig. 19). It can probably be identified with the dilapidated chapel dedicated to Saint Dominic and found in the monastery, which was mentioned in the 1508 visitation. The patron saint may be identified with Saint Dominic, the Benedictine Abbot of Sora, Italy, canonised in 1104 (BIBLIOTHECA SANCTORUM 4, 737–738, Filippo Caraffa). His relics, required for the foundation of the chapel, may have been obtained by Gyönyörű on her pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The chapel may, therefore, have been founded by Gyönyörű, who was originally laid to rest there, in a walled grave found in front of the altar. Afterwards, her son, Miske was buried behind her, in the middle of the church. Miske's descendants must have also used this chapel as their burial place, while Atyusz – who issued the monastery's founding charter – and his descendants were buried in the church's funerary chamber.

It was after the construction of the south-eastern chapel that the six-lobed rotunda was erected. Its building may be associated with the substantial donation that Miske's son, István, bequeathed to the monastery in his will around 1170 (Fig. 20).

The tower in the south-west (Fig. 21) was erected at a later stage of construction, in the twelfth century. Based on their place of discovery, the large number of small limestone mullions with chessboard capitals and red tufa springers (Fig. 13) must have primarily come from the south-western tower and they decorated the tower windows once. It is probable that the cornice elements with rope-weave ornament also belonged to the tower.



Fig. 19. Reconstruction of the rotunda interior



Fig. 20. The church of the monastery in the second half of the twelfth century, reconstruction

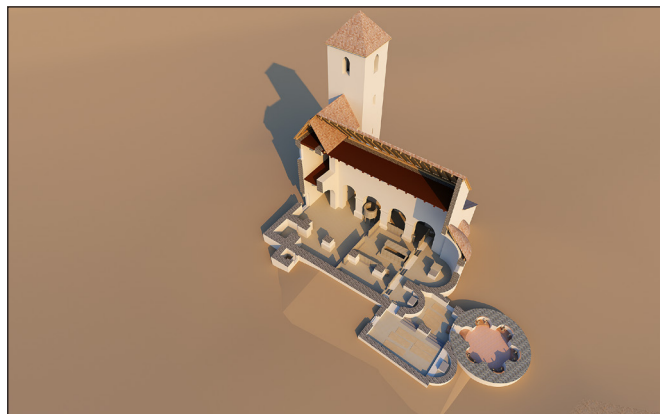


Fig. 21. Cross-section reconstruction of the thirteenth-century church



Fig. 22. Reconstruction of the thirteenth-century church interior



Fig. 23. 1. Pilgrim badge and a Friesach coin of Eberhard II, Archbishop of Salzburg (1200–1246), from under the choir floor (2022) 2. Gilded silver book corner fitting with Saint Mark's lion from the thirteenth century



Fig. 24. Reconstruction of the late thirteenth-century church

The last major rebuilding of the church took place in the first third of the thirteenth century. It was then that the carved marble choir screen and the round pulpit were completed (Figs. 23–24). The foundation of the pulpit was excavated in the nave of the church, between the first and second pillars of the northern colonnade. From the superstructure, we discovered a curved marble beam with an inverted Attic profile (Fig. 15.1), a curved fragment of a parapet with a surface polished smooth, and a hexagonal pillar. The marks of joints observed on the marble beam show that, in addition to the central hexagonal pillar, six slender columns supported the pulpit, which were placed below the beam. A similar round pulpit is known from the Church of Muggia Vecchia in Istria. The parapets, re-carved in Roman spoliae, surrounding the monastic choir and closing the eastern half of the aisles, were divided by pillars decorated with carvings. The background of the leaf tendril ornament with a polished surface is worked roughly, which suggests that it must have been filled with some dark paste. The figure of a lion also appears among the ornaments of one of the pillars (Fig. 14.1, 2, 6). The closest analogue to the technique and motifs of the decoration is known from the western façade of the Zadar Cathedral. Above the funerary chamber found in the middle of the choir, there was probably a marble tomb from which only a corner fragment of the marble plinth has been preserved (Fig. 15.2). A close thirteenth-century analogue of this tomb plinth is represented by the funerary monument of Marino Morosini (†1253), the Doge of Venice, found in Saint Mark's Basilica, Venice. Behind the tomb, the church's chapel with a raised floor was also separated from the choir by a marble parapet. One of its pillars has been discovered: it was larger than the pillars of the choir screen and was decorated with a relief showing birds and tendrils (Fig. 14.3). The side panels of the parapet were decorated with lattice in relief on both sides (Figs. 14.4–5). The reconstruction of the choir and the carving of the marble decoration are dated by the Friesach mint of Eberhard II, Archbishop of Salzburg (1200–1246). The coin was discovered under the raised choir flooring, together with a lead *Volto Santo* pilgrim badge from Lucca (Fig. 23.1). The style of the marble carvings points towards the North Adriatic region, which is associated with the title of *ban* held by Atyusz III and his nephew Solomon who must have commissioned the



Fig. 25. The reinforced second pillar of the church's southern colonnade



Fig. 26. Grave no. 2017/1 after its excavation, with a female skeleton secondarily buried in it in the sixteenth century

work. It is this period that one of the most important metal artefacts brought to light by the excavation belongs to. This is a gilded silver book corner fitting showing tendrils and Saint Mark's lion dated to the first third of the thirteenth century (Fig. 23.2). The fitting, which must have originally adorned the cover of a Gospel Book, is closely related to a group of early thirteenth-century Hungarian metal objects, the closest parallel of which is a peacock buckle preserved in the Hungarian National Museum (KOVÁCS 1973).

The construction of the archives on the north side of the church (Fig. 24) is most probably related to written data relating the 1282 renovation. At that time, Abbot Balázs – with the consent of the patrons – sold one of the monastery's estates to restore the ruined abbey and provide for the monks and the poor. It was probably also at this time that the western part of the church, damaged during an earthquake in 1267, was rebuilt (Fig. 25). Zoltán Szabó drew my attention to the earthquakes recorded in several parts of Austria in 1267. He discusses these events in his book, currently under publication (SZABÓ ZOLTÁN: *A székesfehérvári királyi bazilika építéstörténete II/5. Uralkodói temetkezések és koronázások a székesfehérvári földrengések és tűzvészek tükrében* [The construction history of the Székesfehérvár Royal Basilica, vol. II/5. Royal funerals and coronations in the context of earthquakes and fires in Székesfehérvár]). I am indebted to him for sharing this information with me.

Based on a Sigismund coin discovered in the layer of the enclosure wall, the building of the abbot's house, located to the north-east of the church, dates back to the reign of king Sigismund.

The 1508 Benedictine visitation reveals that at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the monastery was settled by the kinsfolk of Márk Horvát of Kamicsác, the *Ban* of Croatia, Dalmatia, and Slavonia, who

had acquired Nagyvázsony. At this time, the members of a new kindred were placed to rest in the Árpád-period graves in the south-eastern chapel (*Fig. 26*), except for the central tomb covered with a Roman funerary stele. They may be identified as the members of the Horvát family, who lived in the monastery according to the 1508 visitation. Apart from the tomb in the middle of the chapel – which was left intact as it was still used by the Atyusz descendants at this time – the walled tombs were opened and the bones were probably transferred to the graves found in the northern part of the chapel, which were not used for burials by the new kindred. This is presumably how the bones of Miske's mother, Gyönyörű, were also moved to one of the graves found there.

Since the south-eastern chapel – demolished during the construction of the cloister – was still used for burials in 1521, the cloister and the new monastery building must have been made in the 1520s.

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE MONASTERY

It was only after 1541 that monastic life came to an end. The monastery was converted into a noble residence. Its eastern and probably southern sides were fortified with an earth and timber palisade along the external side of the stone enclosure walls. After the Ottoman occupation of Veszprém in 1552, the building was finally abandoned and demolished. Many stone carvings were taken from there to strengthen the castle of Nagyvázsony. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an intense treasure-searching activity was carried out among its ruins with the permission of the Veszprém Episcopal See (HANGODI 2014, 160–161), which fully removed the western wall of the church, among other things. However, the excavated human remains – presumably thanks to the ecclesiastical supervision – were carefully reburied (*Fig. 27*).²



Fig. 27. Human bones reburied by treasure hunters in a looting pit dug at the western end of the north aisle in the modern period (2023)

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² I am indebted to the community of the parish and the settlement of Monostorapáti, especially to Erzsébet Gulyás, Sándor Illés (parish priest), László Hangodi (historian), the staff members of the Wass Albert Library and Museum, and the group of volunteers from Almád-Monostor who initiated the excavation in Almád and supported it with their work and funding. I would also like to thank my colleagues at the King Matthias Museum of the Hungarian National Museum for their work, specifically István Kováts, Katalin Boruzs, and Edit Kocsis (archaeologists), and Zsuzsanna Grósz (conservator). From the Archaeological Institute of Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Róbert Lóki (archaeological technician) took part in several seasons of the excavation. The survey was assisted by the Pazirik Informatikai Kft. The anthropological finds were processed at the HUN-REN Humanities Research Centre, Institute of Archaeogenomics under the supervision of Balázs Gusztáv Mende (anthropologist). The excavations and fieldwalking surveys were supported by the Community Archaeology Programme of the National Archaeological Institute, Hungarian National Museum, headed by Fruzsina Fekete (archaeologist). I wish to thank Károly Belényesy for the LiDAR survey of the area. The processing of the Roman carvings was carried out by Zsolt Mráv (archaeologist). The Friesach coin was identified by Csaba Tóth. The pilgrim badge was studied by Máté Varga. Our work was supported by the Laczkó Dezső Museum (Veszprém) and the county archaeological authorities.

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