

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH OF THE RUIN CHURCH OF ASZÓFŐ-KÖVESD IN THE COURSE OF RECENT CONSERVATION WORKS<sup>1</sup>

MIKLÓS RÁCZ<sup>2</sup>

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*The building in Aszófő occupies a special place among the medieval ruin churches near Lake Balaton. Monument protection authorities tackled the issue of protecting the ruins in the 1930s, and since then, several archaeological and monument-protection-related projects (the latter including documentation and restoration works) have taken place. Roman artefacts unearthed during a previous excavation have revealed quite early on that the history of the remains goes beyond the Árpád Age. Recently, the preservation of the building became timely again; the works were preceded by a geophysical survey, detailed architectural documentation, and archaeological research. The conservation of the ruins took place within the ‘Rom Vándor Program’ [ca. ‘Ruin Explorer Programme’] by Market Építő cPLC.*

**Keywords:** Aszófő, ruin church, ruin conservation, building continuity, Roman Period, Middle Ages, archaeological research

### DESCRIPTION OF THE RUINS

The ruin church stands south of Aszófő, on the shore of a bay of Lake Balaton, at the edge of a plateau slightly sloping towards the lake and bordered on the east and south by the coast. The ruins consist of a nave and a quadrangular sanctuary with a sacristy on its northern side (Figs. 1–3, 23). The nave walls are about 8 m high on the western side and 3.5–5 m on the long sides, while the visible, lower-rising walls of the sanctuary and the sacristy are mostly 20th-century works (Figs. 1–5). Only the irregular remains of a single opening are visible where the western gate once was, with the contour of the triangular upper closing indicated on the facade by plaster remains above and a small circular window above that. On the facade, a stone cornice with a row of pointed arches decorated with small hemispheres has been preserved (Figs. 1, 4). In the western part of the nave, arch fragments and corbels indicate the location of a three-section western gallery and the tower at the centre above it (Fig. 1). Only the north-western corbel is original, while the rest, together with some of the arches, have been added as part of the preservation works in 1958. Only fragmentary profile fragments of the northwest *in situ* corbel can be observed (Fig. 6). The low but rising foundations of the two pillars or columns supporting the former gallery structure stand above the floor level. The perpendicular arches of the northern and southern longitudinal walls have also been added in the mid-20th century; their position cannot be verified by research, and thus, they cannot be considered authentic. Two short wall fragments in the upper part of the western wall may have belonged to the attaching tower (Fig. 1). The two foundations along the north wall of the nave can be associated with the former gallery staircase (Fig. 3). Vertical wall joints can be seen on both sides near the eastern ends of the two side walls of the nave; these appear as continuous gaps in the masonry structure along the medieval section of the two walls up to at least about 2.5 m (Figs. 2, 7–10). The masonry looks identical on both sides of the joints. This type of joint is a specific phenomenon and can hardly be explained by anything other than that the two parts of the nave were erected in different construction phases. Such phenomena can also be seen on the outer

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Péter Belec, Programme Director, for the possibility of publishing a summary of the survey and research results. The ruin conservation was designed by Bálint Kelemen (KÖZTI). In the framework of the programme, Máté Stibrányi and Zsombor Klembala Stibrányi and their colleagues from Salisbury Archaeology Ltd. carried out a ground-penetrating radar site reconnaissance survey in the summer of 2022. Máté Szabó and Orsolya Heinrich-Tamáská are processing information on the Roman *villa* complex. The authentication excavation was carried out with archaeologist Dóra Oláh (Laczkó Dezső Museum, Veszprém). I am grateful to all of them for sharing their results with me.

<sup>2</sup> Independent researcher; e-mail: [raczmik@hotmail.com](mailto:raczmik@hotmail.com)

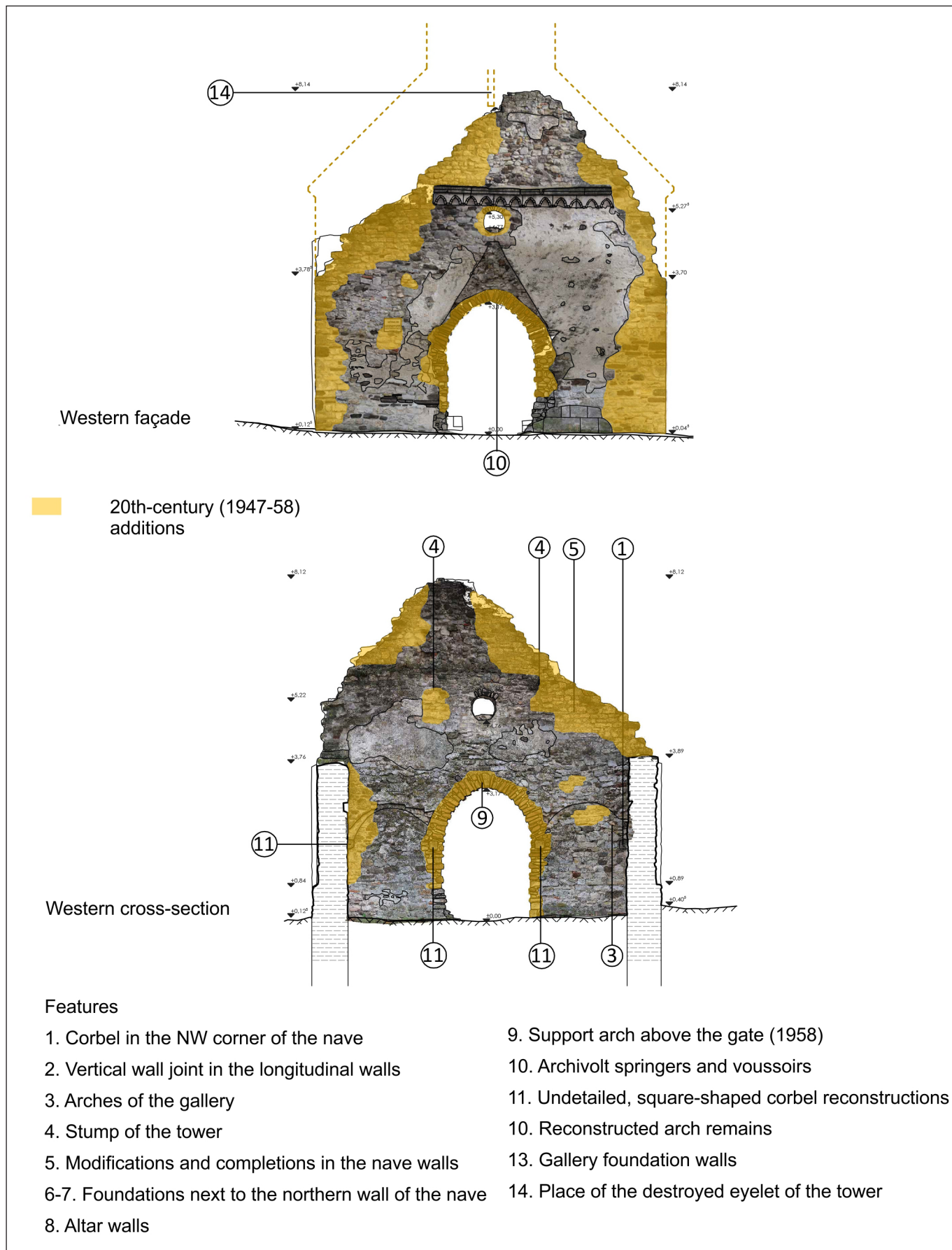


Fig. 1. Survey drawings, 2022 (Building survey by Tibor Szappanyos, Kvalitron Ltd and Bálint Kelemen, KÖZTI. Interpretation by Miklós Rácz)

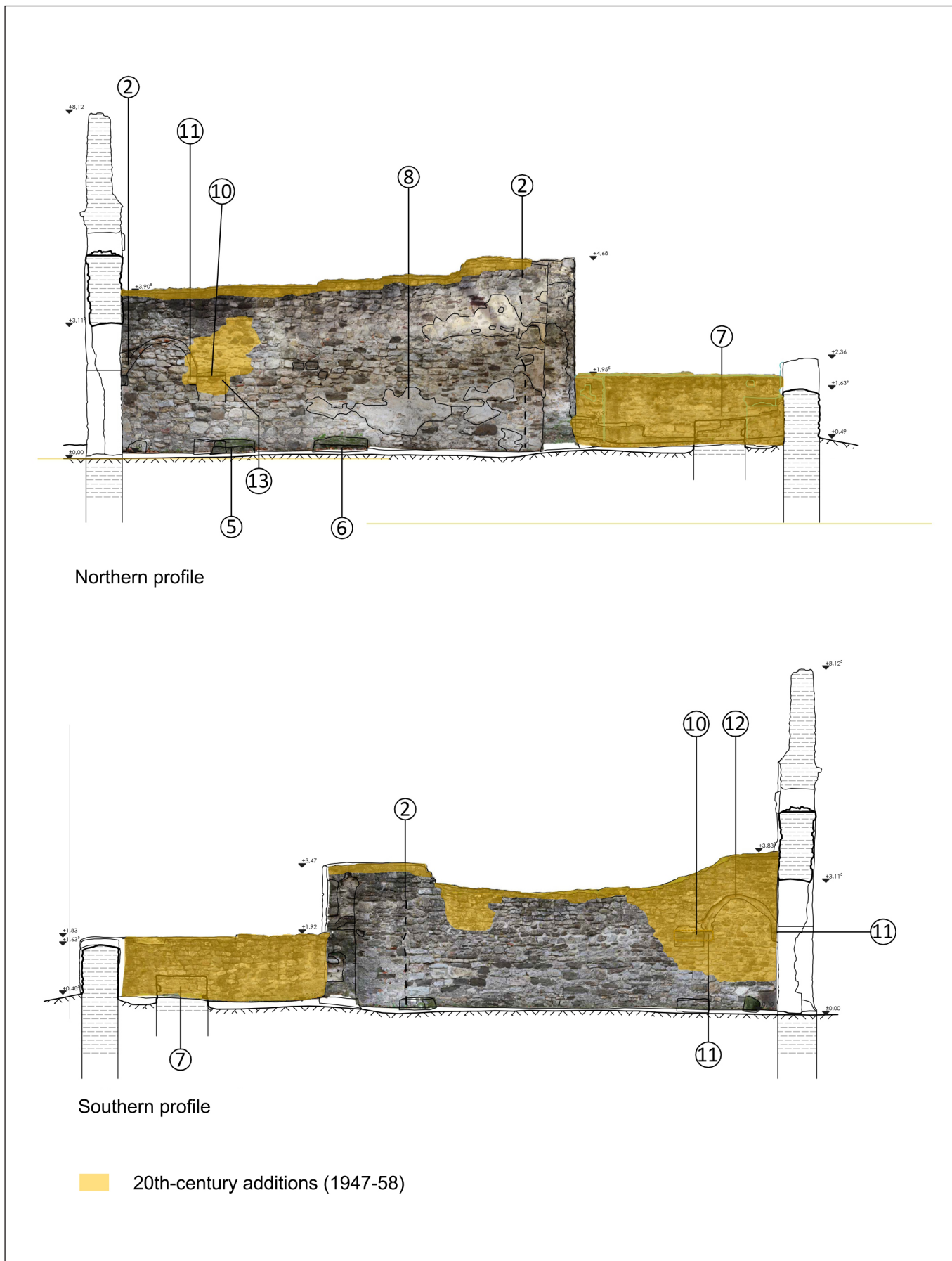


Fig. 2. Survey drawings, 2022 (Building survey by Tibor Szappanyos, Kvalitron Ltd and Bálint Kelemen, KÖZTI. Interpretation by Miklós Rácz)



Fig. 3. Survey map with the excavated foundations and the GPR survey image of the close area.  
 (Building survey by Tibor Szappanyos, Kvalitron Ltd and Bálint Kelemen, KÖZTI. Interpretation by Miklós Rác,  
 GPR survey by STIBRÁNYI & KLEMBALA 2022, Salisbury Ltd.)





Fig. 4. The ruin church from the southwest during the ruin conservation works in July 2023



Fig. 5. The ruin church from the northeast in May 2022



Fig. 6. The joint in the north wall of the nave with parts of an oblique surface in May 2022



Fig. 7. Vertical wall joint in the eastern section of the south nave wall



Fig. 8. The eastern wall of the nave at the sanctuary

(façade) sides; the difference is less conspicuous on the southern side, while the masonry protrudes from the wall face by about 5–10 cm along the eastern side of the joint on the northern façade. In the southern wall, where the masonry could be examined more closely, the joint line seems to run up to about 2.5 m, above which the wall is contiguous (Figs. 2, 8). However, the better discernible wall joint on the inner side of the northern wall includes 10 cm-long sections of a regular, vertical, flat surface inclined to the wall (Fig. 9), indicating that an oblique surface inclined to the wall forms a boundary between the two phases. The presence of such a surface in the wall is best explained by the fact that the first half of the wall was built onto an existing, oblique surface, then said surface (an earlier, existing wall) was demolished, and the construction of the nave wall was continued, in line with the previous section. The location of the two masonry joints is not symmetrical: the northern one is closer to the corner (at a distance of about 40 cm) than the southern one (about 120 cm). Regular surfaces, i.e., the remains of the medieval walls, can be observed behind the wall joints of the sanctuary on the eastern façade of the nave (Fig. 11), indicating that the sanctuary and the sacristy were built on the walls of the nave later.



## MEDIEVAL WRITTEN SOURCES

The settlement, Kövesd, was first mentioned in the estate census of the Tihany Abbey in 1211; thus, it was the abbey's property then. There is no mention of the church from the Middle Ages, save for the mention of the priest of Kövesd in a document, which has usually been connected by academia to this village. The village and the church were destroyed probably in the mid-16th century (SZAKÁCS 2021, 122; TIMÁR 2019, 243–244).

## HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPHS



Fig. 9. The western façade on a photo from the late 19th or early 20th century with fresco remains on the northern side of the western nave wall and the stub of the tower in the upper part of the façade (Historical Monuments Photo Collection 033.500aN, GEREVICH 1938, 57. t.)

Significant details that have since disappeared can be seen in a photograph of the western facade from the late 1800s or early 1900s (Fig. 12): the remains of the fresco in the northern half of the western wall, the fragment of the tower protruding from the western gable, a part of the cornice of the gable wall, the narrow window on the tower's third floor. A photo of the church nave, taken from the east around 1957 (Fig. 13), shows the interior of the nave, including the traces and remains of the vaults, before conservation.



Fig. 10. The interior of the ruin church from the east in 1947–57 (Historical Monuments Photo Gallery 48.247N)

## HISTORY OF RESEARCH AND RESTORATION

In the late 19th century, Flóris Rómer made notes about the fresco depicting St. Christopher, which was still visible on the west façade then (SZAKÁCS 2021, 122). Monument protection authorities took the ruins into state care around 1932.<sup>3</sup> In 1947, Miklós Visontai was commissioned by the respective ministry to conduct a survey of the ruins, which was followed by conservation works.<sup>4</sup> His drawings recorded the condition of the remains before the additions (Figs. 11–12).<sup>5</sup>

In 1957, Géza Fehér excavated the ruin church in preparation for the next phase of conservation works, which were led by Mihály Zádor (Fig. 14–15). He wrote about the wall remains excavated in the nave:

<sup>3</sup> According to the minutes of the National Committee for Monuments, in October 1932, “Károly Csányi proposed that a transcript be sent to the deputy office for the protection of the ruins at the railway station in Aszófő.” Archives of Historical Monuments, MOB Minutes.

<sup>4</sup> Archives of Historical Monument Plans 25007.

<sup>5</sup> HNM Archaeological Data Archive, Aszófő.

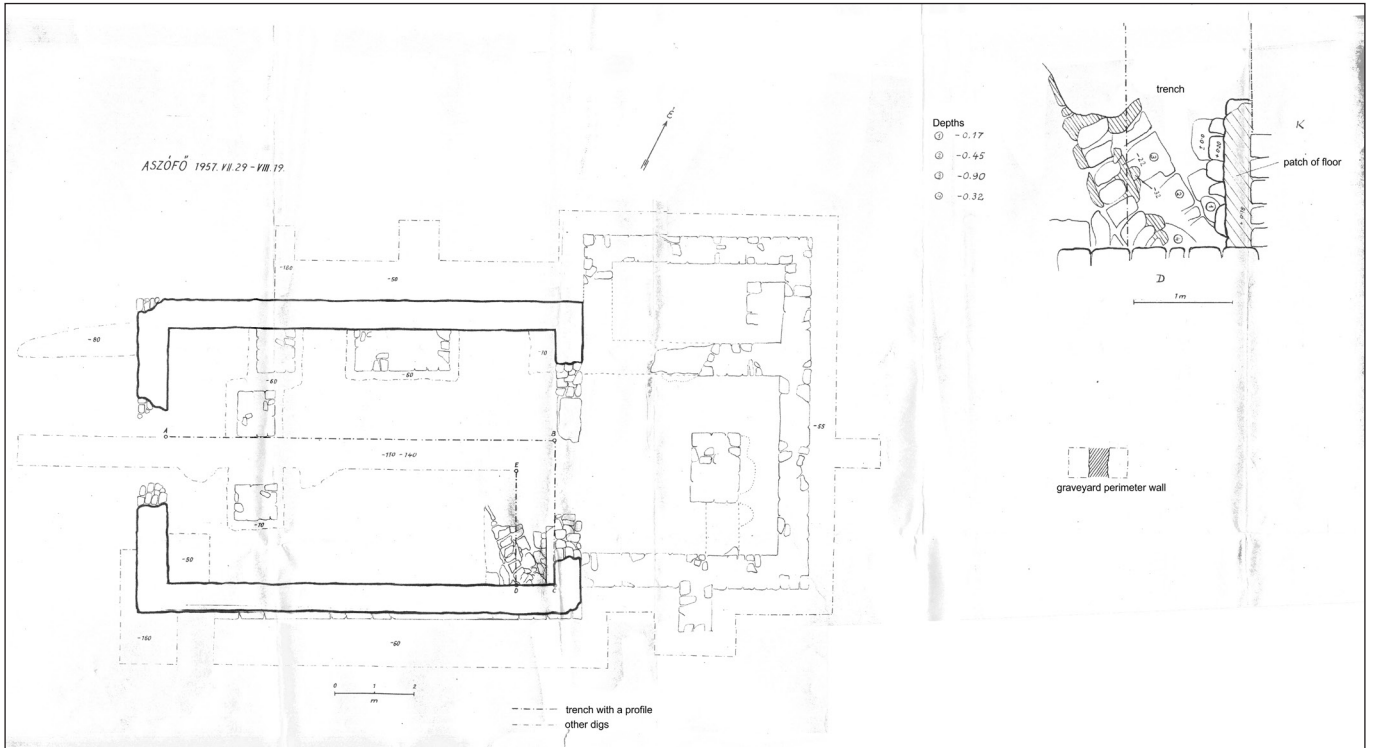


Fig. 11. Survey map of the excavation by Géza Fehér, 1957–58 (Archaeological Data Archive of HNM)

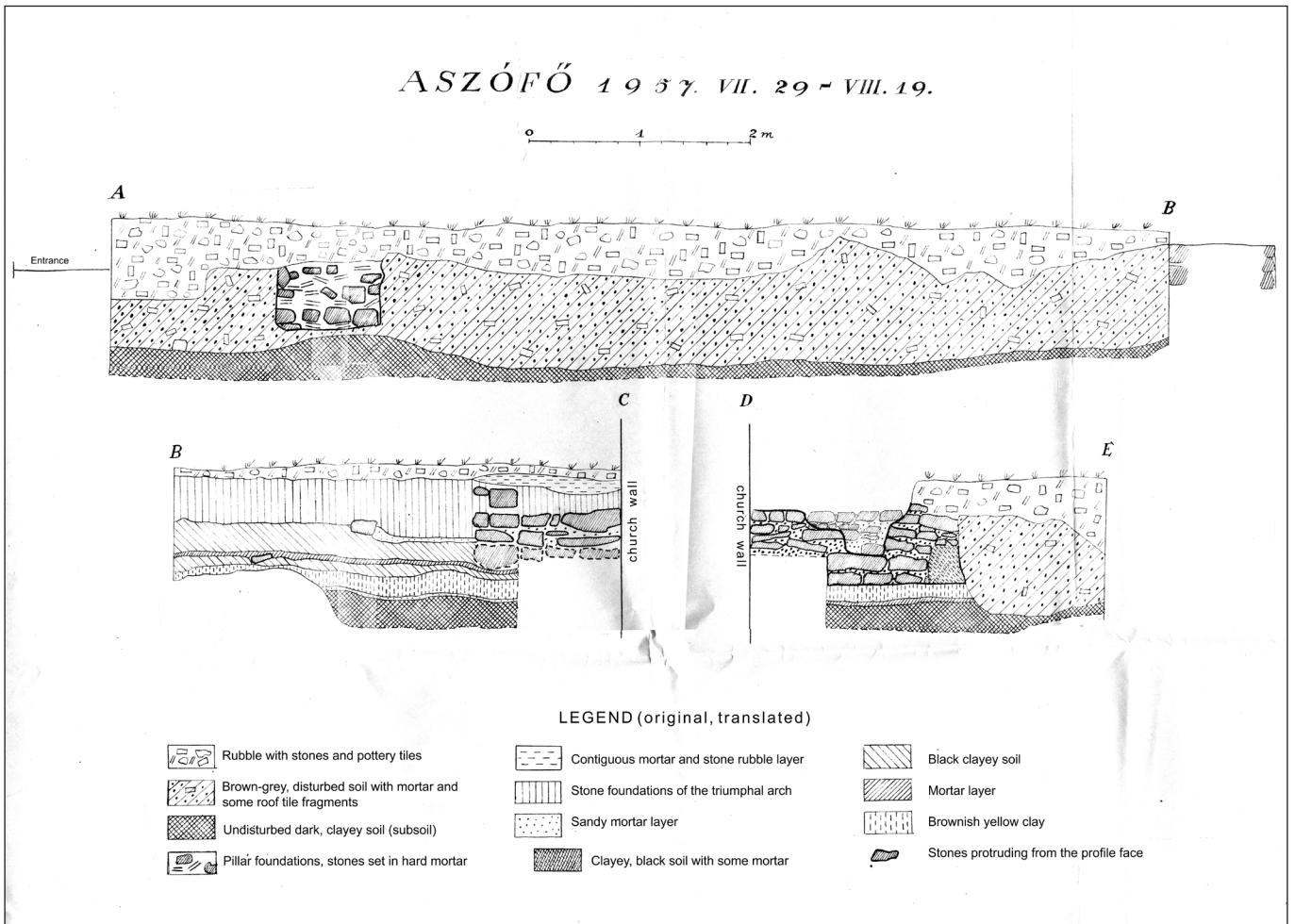


Fig. 12. Profile drawings by Géza Fehér, 1957–58 (Archaeological Data Archive of HNM)



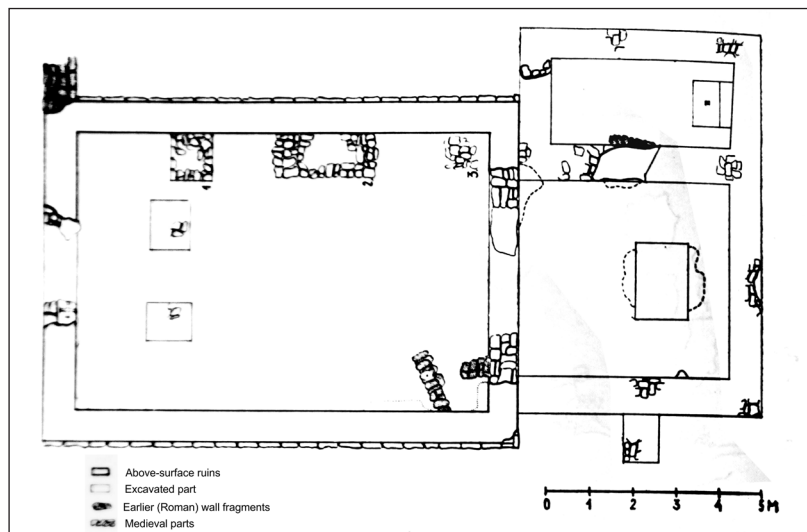


Fig. 13. Survey map by Mihály Zádor, 1959–60  
(after ZÁDOR 1960, 200, fig. 34)

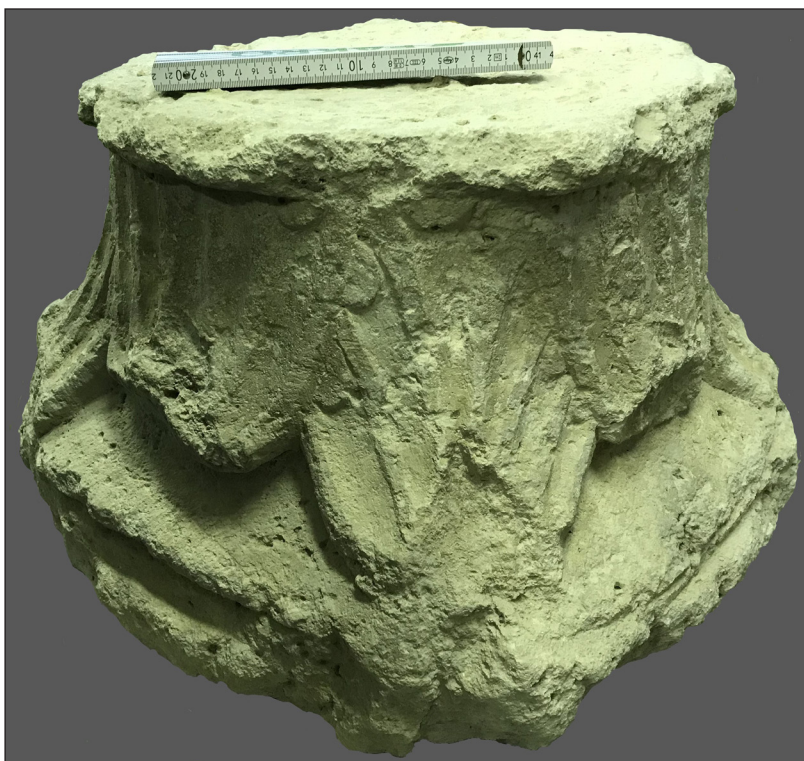


Fig. 15. The column capital in the Tihany Museum from Aszófő to Tihany Museum, upside-down in the photograph (Laczkó Dezső Museum)



Fig. 14. The sanctuary niche unearthed in 1957  
(Laczkó Dezső Museum)

‘A wall section with a strong foundation independent of the structure of the Romanesque church but running into its southeastern corner was unearthed in the trench next to the triumphal arch by the southern wall of the nave.’<sup>6</sup>

In his study published in 1960, Mihály Zádor presented in detail the survey results and the ruin conservation works conducted in 1957–58 (ZÁDOR 1960). He mentioned a curved wall section discovered in the sacristy, writing, “the curved wall section found at the northern wall

of the sanctuary testifies to an earlier semicircular apse”. This wall section can be recognized in the sketchy ground plan published by Zádor (Fig. 13) but is absent from the field documentation by Géza Fehér. In the catalogue of the Tihany lapidary collection, Sándor Tóth presents a column capital with leaves, dated by Tóth between AD 1200 and 1250, from Aszófő (SZAKÁCS 2021, 122–123), together with a sanctuary niche frame found during the excavation. Most recently, Zsolt Béla Szakács published a detailed summary of the research on the ruin church (SZAKÁCS 2021).

The architectural stone elements mentioned above were transferred from the former permanent exhibition of the Tihany Museum in 2017 and have been kept since in the Dezső Laczkó Museum (Figs. 14–15).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Field diary, 13 August 1957.



## RESEARCH OF THE ROMAN VILLA COMPLEX<sup>7</sup>

The Roman finds discovered during the excavation of the ruin church of Kövesd in 1957 have evidenced quite early that the past of the remains started way before the Árpád Age. At the beginning of the 21st century, aerial photographs by Otto Braasch revealed that a large Late Roman *villa* estate stretched on the shores of Bázsa Bay, the details of which were brought to light by non-destructive archaeological research (aerial archaeology and ground-penetrating radar survey) in recent decades (SZABÓ 2017, 173–179).

### 6. THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH RELATED TO THE CONSERVATION OF RUINS CARRIED OUT IN 2023

In the summer of 2022, Salisbury Archaeological Ltd carried out a ground-penetrating radar site reconnaissance survey in the area of the ruin church. Based on the results, the orientation and location of the ruin church seem to align with the Roman *villa*. The most significant part of the wall remains discovered by geophysical research is around the ruin church, outlining a building of central arrangement in the central axis of which the medieval church was built (Fig. 16). The walls on the northern and southern sides of the nave symmetrically outline a roughly square room and two attached apses in the north and south. The medieval sanctuary occupies the eastern side of the central room, while a section of the wall at its southern edge was interpreted as a part of the eastern apse. The building aligns the eastern edge of the large courtyard at its southeastern corner.

The wall remains observed on the eastern, southern, and south-western sides of the church building were interpreted as its perimeter wall.

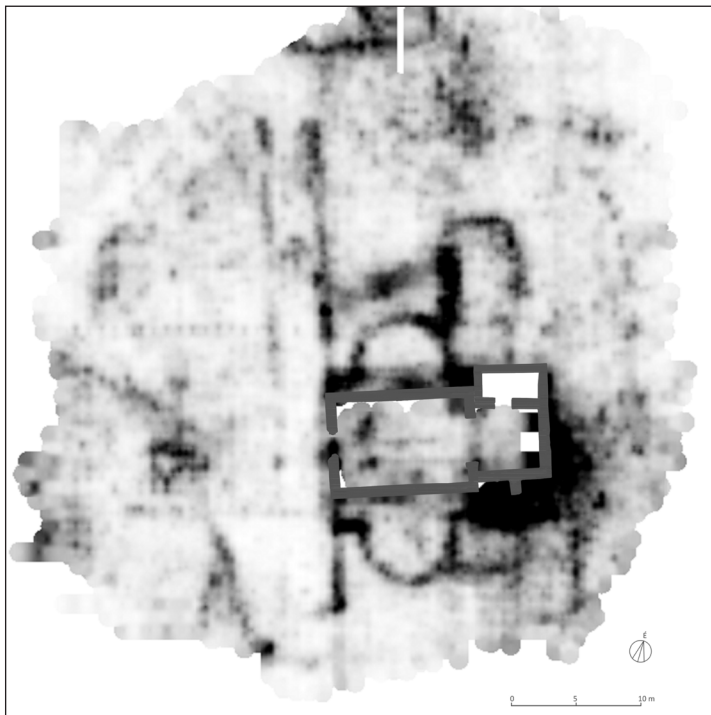


Fig. 16. GPR survey depth profile image at 1.3–1.5 m with the ground plan of the ruin church (GPR survey by STIBRÁNYI & KLEMBALA 2022, Salisbury Ltd)



Fig. 17. The nave with the floor level deepened by builders but before excavation on 17 July 2023

In the summer of 2023, contractors excavated about 15 cm of the floor level as part of the conservation works (Fig. 17). Due to the circumstances, archaeological research was limited to examining details already discovered during previous research but lacked satisfactory documentation and a sufficiently detailed survey. In connection with the foundation wall found earlier in the southeastern corner of the nave, the main question was whether it could be connected with the wall joints observed in the rising wall section, thus contributing to understanding the two phases of the nave. It was also necessary to clarify the exact position of the wall section in the sacristy that was only included in the architecture-historical publication. We did not intend to excavate either deeper or in a larger area than previously.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Máté Szabó for the summary of the research results.

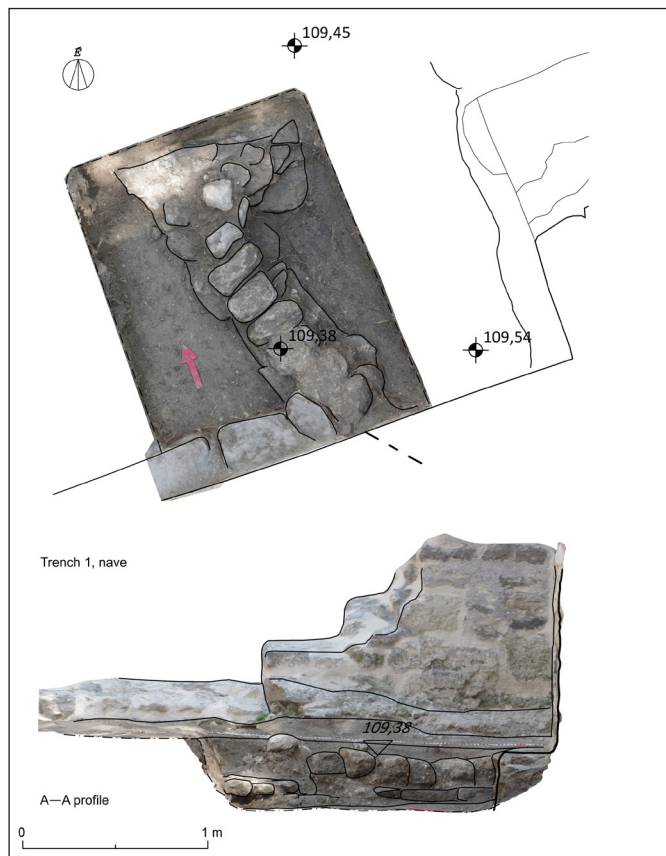


Fig. 18. Survey map and profile of the nave from the authentication excavation on 17–18 July 2023 (field archaeologists: Dóra Oláh, Laczkó Dezső Museum, Miklós Rácz. Photogrammetry and surveys by Miklós Rácz)

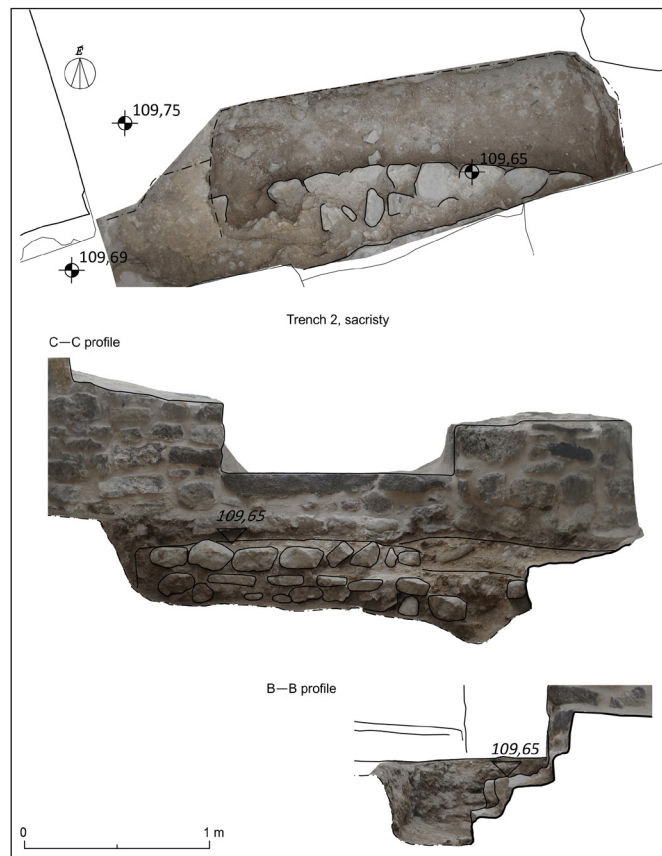


Fig. 19. Survey map and profile of the sacristy from the authentication excavation on 17–18 July 2023 (field archaeologists: Dóra Oláh, Laczkó Dezső Museum, Miklós Rácz. Photogrammetry and surveys by Miklós Rácz)

On 17 July 2023, authentication was carried out on the wall remains and the foundations within the gate in the previously excavated area. The wall section from the 1957 field documentation was found about 10 cm below the current surface in the southeastern part of the nave (Figs. 18 and 21). The topmost layer of the wall remains consisted of a row of roughly same-sized stones placed next to each other, their long sides attaching along the western face of the wall. The top of this row of stones roughly corresponds to the top of the foundation of the southern nave wall. The two walls were joined: the foundation of the nave's wall was built on the edge of the foundation of the other, earlier wall. The place of the vertical wall joint in the rising wall of the nave corresponds to where the foundations are joined (Fig. 21). Different, more angular worked stones in red sandstone became visible in the layer below the uppermost stone row on the western edge of the foundation. On the remaining sides, the lower surface was found in a narrow strip on the eastern side of the upper stone row and was bound by a slope in the north. The excavation did not reach deeper than this surface; based on the data obtained, it is impossible to decide to what extent the observed outlines represent the degree of subsequent destruction and demolition and to what extent the built form of the foundation.

The wall section indicated on the 1958 survey drawing of the ground plan by Mihály Zádor (but



Fig. 20. Groundwall in the southeast part of the nave with wall joint on nave wall on 17 July 2023





Fig. 21. Detail of the foundation wall in the sacristy on 17 July 2023



Fig. 22. Excavation at the gate, eastern view, on 18 July 2023 (by Dóra Oláh)



Fig. 23. The nave of the ruin church after conservation in August 2023 (by Péter Belec)

missing in Géza Fehér's excavation documentation) was discovered in the sacristy on the northern side of the northern wall of the sanctuary at a depth of approximately 10 cm (Figs. 19 and 22). This wall section makes an acute angle with the sanctuary wall, continuing under it in the east; clearly, the sanctuary wall was built on the remains of this wall. The row of stones observed next to the northern side of the sanctuary wall is missing further west, but the one below that is continuous and could be followed until the western wall of the sacristy (except for a short section where even this lower row has a gap in it). The northern side of the wall is curved: the outer face was built of roughly worked stones 15–20 cm in size, while the wall core structure is irregular.

During the deepening of the floor level, two large stones were unearthed on each other, protruding from the wall face at the foot of the inner side of the sanctuary's southern wall; these could be interpreted as the remains of some masonry. The rectangular block stands at an angle to the wall, and its two vertical faces are at a 45-degree angle with the sanctuary wall; its eastern face reaches the internal face of the southern sanctuary wall at 1.43 m from the eastern sanctuary wall.

During the excavation on 18 July 2023, the foundations inside the gate opening were unearthed and documented (Fig. 20). The carved stone with a cross identified in 1957–58 was not found under the southern half of the opening.

### SUMMARY OF RESEARCH RESULTS (FIG. 3)

#### *The Roman Period predecessor of the building*

Based on the current research, the authentication and survey of the foundations in the interior of the church (known from the previous excavations), together with the newly observed phenomena in the rising walls,

allow one to infer an important, hitherto unknown building phase. The new geophysical survey provided fundamental new information for a comprehensive interpretation of the history of the building; by comparing all available results, the earliest building phases of the church can be outlined at least hypothetically.

The apse part excavated on the northern side of the sanctuary is approximately the same size as the two apses of the presumably Roman building with a central floor plan on the geophysical survey image. No rising wall of this apse is connected to the existing walls of the 13th-century nave, which indicates that it had been demolished by the time of the construction of the latter at the latest. Based on that, the eastern apse is probably earlier than the 13th century, and, based on its position, it is most likely the part of the Roman building.

The three-apse building could have been a burial chapel (*cella trichora*) containing a burial chamber. However, similar separate building units with apses on three sides of the central room also served profane functions (e.g., as a *triclinium* or dining room). Since the original purpose of the three-apse building is currently unknown, it has also remained a question of whether using the Roman building parts also meant a continuation of the sacred function of an earlier place of worship. Based on the results, one can only state with certainty that this church is one of the few examples of building continuity connecting the Roman Period and the Middle Ages in Pannonia.

#### *The Árpád Age church: the pre-13th-century medieval building phase*

The construction of the 13th-century nave was phased, relying on an existing building, evidenced by a foundation wall section in the southeastern part of the nave and two vertical wall joints in the rising walls of the nave. The southern wall joint aligns with the western face of the inclined foundation section, while the regular vertical plane in the northern wall joint is more or less symmetrical to the direction of the foundation. Although not enough for reconstructing a floor plan, these two details can be best interpreted as an interior space bordered by symmetrically inclined or arched walls. Completed with the apse sections under the sanctuary, these sections add up, even if not accurately, to a structure with a circular floor plan, which may support the hypothesis that the building that already stood there when the 13th-century additions were made had a central, presumably circular floor plan, and it had been built by complementing the existing eastern apse of the previous Roman building. It was probably a church building used by the community of the related village in the early centuries of the Árpád Age, built on the still-standing remains of the eastern apse of the Roman building.

The observed irregularity in the floor plan is perhaps due to the fact that it was built by complementing an existing apse. During the construction of the 13th-century church, the former small round church building was kept initially, likely to keep the church serviceable; first, the nave was built on it up to at least about 2.5 m, and then it was demolished before the construction of the triumphal arch and the sanctuary started.

#### *First half/middle of the 13th century*

The nave still standing today was built with a gallery and a tower. Its sanctuary may have had a smaller floor area than is visible today, and its floor plan was square or possibly semicircular. During its construction, the former central church building on the eastern side was probably kept for some time.

The gallery was made up of a three-section, probably rib vault supported by corbels (the corbel and rib fragments discovered *in situ* indicate rib vaults in the lower part of the gallery). The design of the small circular window between the top of the western gate and the pointed-arch-row cornice is unknown.<sup>8</sup>

The rib-vaulted western gallery dates to around the mid-13th century; it has an excellent and still standing analogy in the Reformed church in Abatújszina (Seňa, Slovakia). The column capital from Aszófő in the Tihany Museum is also worth reassessing in connection with the gallery. Its material seems similar to the pointed-arch-row cornice of the Kövesd ruin church. The description of the ‘baptismal font’, cited by M.

<sup>8</sup> A noteworthy observation by architect and designer Bálint Kelemen about the small circular window is that the longitudinal axis of the church nearly corresponds to the direction of the sunset during the autumn equinox, and at this time, the sunlight falls through the small window onto the altar before sunset.



Zádor, found at the western foundations at the northern nave wall and transported to an unknown museum in the 1940s may refer to this stone. Close analogies to the vault rib fragments found during the excavation and the column capital are known from the early-13th-century parts of the Benedictine Abbey of Pannonhalma (TAKÁCS 1996, fig. 59; 2018, fig. 170–236, 366, 373, 382).

#### *Late Middle Ages*

The nave and the triumphal arch were preserved, and a new, larger sanctuary and sacristy with a sacrament niche was built in the place of the former sanctuary. The transformation of the sanctuary cannot be dated more precisely, and no observation has helped clear the chronological relationship between the sanctuary and the sacristy, its lack making it more likely that the foundations of the two belong to a single phase. The late Gothic sacrament niche indicates a construction or renovation; however, it has remained a question whether this was the one involving the construction of the new sanctuary or just a minor alteration.

#### *Mid-16th century*

The village and the building were destroyed in the middle of the 16th century by the Ottoman conquerors (TIMÁR 2019, 243–244), and the ruined walls of the sanctuary became gradually completely interred by debris.

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