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BOOK REVIEW
BERNÁT RÁCZ: THE TWELFTH-CENTURY MOSAN RELIQUARY OF PÉTERMONOSTORA

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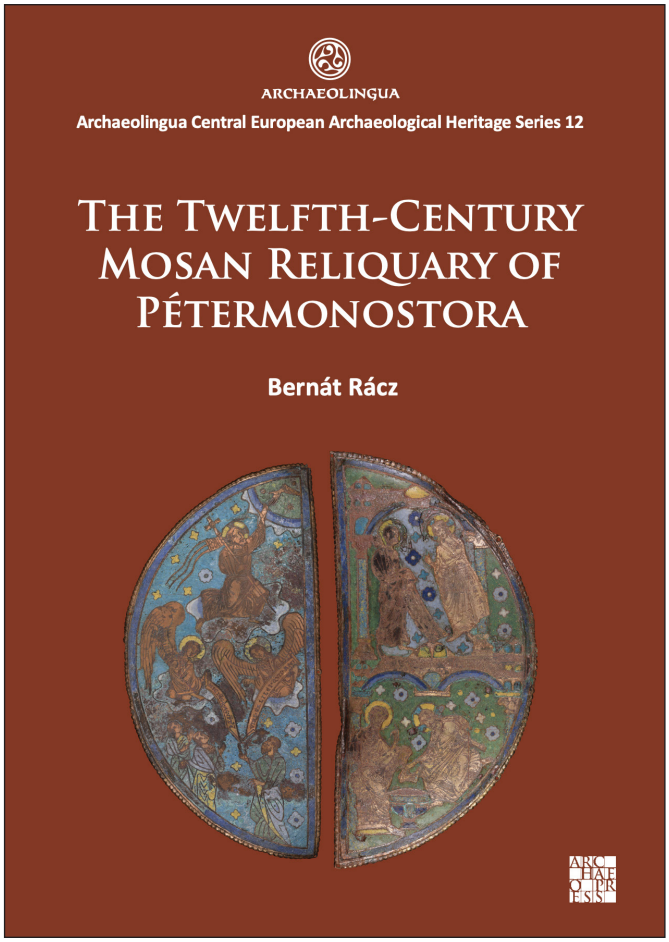
The archaeology of destruction is one of the most complex issues in the research of material evidence connected to historical periods. Destroying and preserving objects and pieces of art seem to be contradictory concepts, but destruction layers at archaeological sites often produce exceptional finds that are conserved by a 'desertion process' caused by sieges, fires, or the devastation of an invasion. The monastic site and the deserted medieval settlement at Pétermonostora near Bugac (Hungary) belong to this category, and the recent archaeological excavations led by Szabolcs Rosta produced outstanding finds from the medieval period. One of the most important turning points in Hungarian history was the Mongolian invasion in 1241–1242, when a considerable part of the country was wholly devastated. Written sources, medieval chronicles, and eyewitness accounts describe the plundering and pillaging, the torching of villages, and the massacre of their inhabitants, leading to the depopulation of several regions of the country. One of the most affected areas was the Great Hungarian Plain in the central part of the Kingdom of Hungary.



Rácz, Bernát (2025).
The twelfth-century Mosan reliquary of Pétermonostora.
Archaeolingua – Central European Archaeological Heritage Series 12. Archaeopress, Archaeolingua.
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During the past one and a half centuries, archaeological research in Hungary has repeatedly tried to identify the traces of destruction—the remains of battlefields, the unburied dead, and the torched settlements. However, with the exception of a few isolated finds, very few traces of the invasion have been identified in the archaeological record. For example, traces of the devastation caused by the Ottoman invasion in the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries were clearly identified during the early archaeological investigations of medieval villages in the Kecskemét area conducted during the 1930s, while the destruction in the wake of the thirteenth-century Mongolian invasion was not unambiguously documented. However, there has been an unexpected increase in the number of archaeological sites where direct evidence of the destruction caused by the Mongolian armies has been identified during the past two decades, especially in more recent years. The investigation of Árpád Age settlements has brought to light the remains

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of unburied dead and of people who perished when their houses were torched. The destroyed houses still contained the typical tools and artefacts of daily life, as in one of the houses excavated near the battlefield of Muhi. Most of the settlement sites with archaeological evidence of the Mongolian invasion first came to light during salvage excavations preceding motorway construction. Large-scale, development-led archaeological research provided an unprecedentedly great chance of discovering villages that had been destroyed to the extent that even the inhabitants of nearby settlements were unable to bury the dead. However, the excavation of these sites did not produce exceptional pieces of artwork, as such objects were not part of the material culture of village people of the period.

The archaeological excavation of Pétermonostora was carried out after a complex historical and archaeological investigation of the written evidence and the archaeological sites in the research territory of the Kecskemét Museum. Many years of research, excavation, and the dedicated work of the museum's team produced the most significant collection of liturgical objects and pieces of artwork connected to a monastic site near Bugac. One of them was a reliquary covered by large plates with enamel decoration and other fragments that once also belonged to this object. The recovered part of the site represents today the most complex archaeological assemblage connected to a monastery destroyed during the Mongol invasion of Hungary.

It is not often in art history that an archaeological find sets a new direction for research. The likelihood of such a discovery occurring in East Central Europe is relatively low. The chances of it occurring in the middle of Hungary, in the Great Plain, where few medieval remains can be found since the Ottoman Wars, are even lower. But no one could have expected that the largest known enamel plaques of the Meuse region would be found in an excavation there. However, finding objects is only one side of the coin. The fact that we now have a book about a world sensation in our hands is not just down to luck. It took a determined archaeologist who purposefully pursued his vision to uncover a monastic site he had identified. It also required a sober understanding on the part of the archaeologist excavating the site that a thorough, professional analysis of the vast archaeological complex requires specialists in each field of research. Above all, it required an art historian with the training, talent, and diligence to interpret such an extraordinary find correctly. In this case, the meeting between an unexpected and highly significant archaeological find and its dedicated researcher is in itself uncommon. It is exceptional that a young art historian should be given this opportunity. Bernát Rácz has interpreted the unique enamel works in the context of an MA thesis defended in the Medieval Studies programme at the Central European University (Budapest–Vienna), with an erudition worthy of the artefact's scientific value. In the present monograph, we have a multifaceted approach to the subject, which testifies to both the young author's talent for art history and his ability to place an unexpected find in its historical context.

This is very well demonstrated by the chapters of the book, which present the history of Pétermonostora, the pieces of art excavated by the archaeological investigations, as well as the impact of the destruction caused by the Mongol invasion. The detailed analysis of the reliquary presents the problems of the form and style in the context of similar metal objects and contemporary manuscript illuminations. The author also discusses the questions of Mosan and Limoges enamel art with the stylistic and technical issues. Finally, it also presents the social background of the reliquary, the question of patronage, and the possible connections with the court of Béla III, king of Hungary. All these are presented together with high-quality illustrations featuring the details of the objects, many possible reconstructions, and the available parallels.