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THE REGÖLY-SOMOLY CHURCH RUIN AND ITS CONSERVATION IN 2025

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On the outskirts of the village of Regöly in Tolna County, 3.5 km west of the village, stands a solitary tower on a strip of land between the two branches of the Somolyi Stream: the remains of the Gothic church of the medieval village of Somogy. The ruins underwent restoration sixty years ago, and small parts of the church site were excavated a quarter of a century ago. In 2025, Market Építő cPLC carried out conservation work on the tower and tidied up its surroundings as the fifth site included in the ROM Vándor corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme. This article provides a brief summary of everything we know about this interesting medieval church from an architectural history perspective, based on archaeological research and the new monument preservation work.

Keywords: Middle Ages, church ruin, monument, preservation

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The settlement known as Somogy in the Middle Ages is mentioned in documents from the end of the 14th century, but according to field survey data, it was already inhabited in the early Árpád Age. The medieval and Ottoman era history of the village, the modern written and cartographic references to the ruins, and the history of research at the site have already been summarised by several authors (K. Németh 2000, 156–157; Papp 2000, 167–168; Timár 2019, 410–411; Zslebics 2019, 8–9), so we will only briefly review them here. In 1389, King Sigismund gave the village to the Újlaki family, but he took it back in 1406 and donated it to Pipó of Ozora and his brother the following year. In 1425, Pipo ceded half of the estate to the Fehérvár chapter, but the other half already belonged to the chapter at that time. The village remained in the hands of the chapter until the end of the Middle Ages. The 1542 tax register lists 23 houses, but the following year it was deserted because its inhabitants had fled in fear of the Ottomans.

In Ottoman tax records, the *tahrir-defter*, the site is listed as a deserted village between 1546 and 1570, but by 1580 it already had 29 married and 17 unmarried male residents, while in 1590, 35 men were recorded. In the 17th-century censuses of the Esterházy estates, it was listed as a settlement inhabited by Rascians, at that time already under the name Somoly. According to a 1743 witness statement, towards the end of the Ottoman occupation, the Rascians of Tamási kept cattle and bees and grew tobacco in Somoly (K. Németh 2015, 221), and a serf born there remembered his father's burnt-down mill (Hungarian National Archives, Tolna County Archives IV. 1. b. General Assembly Documents 10.1341). By 1715, *Somoly puszta* had been annexed to the border of Regöly.

Its church is not mentioned in medieval documents. In one of the data series of the papal tithe register, a certain settlement called *Sonoh* was listed before the neighbouring *Kospa* and *Régen* (Regöly), which was identified by some researchers as the village of Somogy (Timár 2019, 410). According to the 1722 church visitation report, the sanctuary of the church was almost completely destroyed by then, but its northern side was still standing as high as a human, and its southern side was twice as high. We also know from other sources that around 1800, its remains were still larger than they are today. The parts outside the tower must have been dismantled at the beginning of the 19th century, because from 1824 onwards, only the tower is mentioned. Various legends about treasure (a stone goat, a golden carriage) are associated with the remains, and the site is a popular destination amongst illegal treasure hunters.

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RESEARCH HISTORY

In 1866, Flóris Rómer drew the ruins in a condition similar to today's (only the openings on the upper level of the tower were higher), but based on the surface traces, he was also able to record the contours of the sanctuary. In 1960, Gyula Mészáros, and in 1963, István Torma explored the village surrounding the church ruins, which stretches between two streams in a patch of approximately 200 m in length and similar in width (site ID: 22981). In 1962, István Papp, dean of Tamási, drew the attention of the National Monuments Inspectorate to the endangered building (*Fig. 1*) (Papp 2000, 168). The following year, Gyula Mészáros uncovered the foundations of the missing wall section at the collapsed north-eastern corner of the tower where the tower meets the nave (Mészáros 1964), and then, based on Klára Nándori's plans, the National Monumens Inspectorate carried out the necessary structural repairs. The missing parts – the wall crown, the north-eastern corner of the tower, and the arches missing from its arcades – were replaced with bricks, using cement mortar, which differed from that used in the Middle Ages (*Műemlékvédelem* 7:4 [1963] 251). The tower is a listed monument (registration number: 4250).

In 1999, a treasure hunter's pit disturbed a short section of the north nave wall and the buttress con-

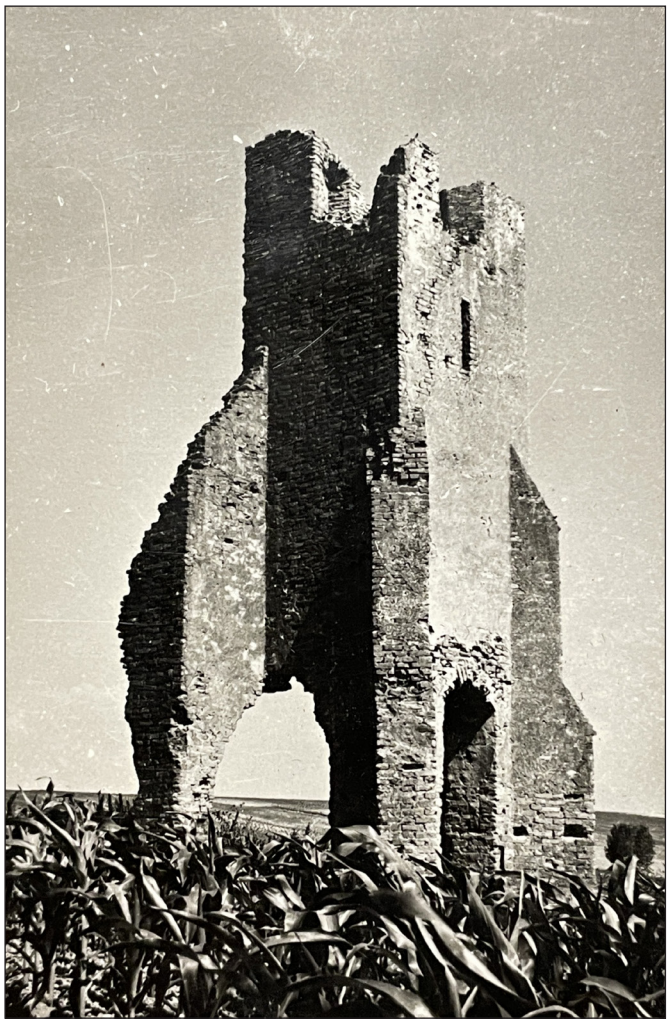

Fig. 1. The tower before the 1963 restoration (MÉM-MDK Photo Archive 61472)

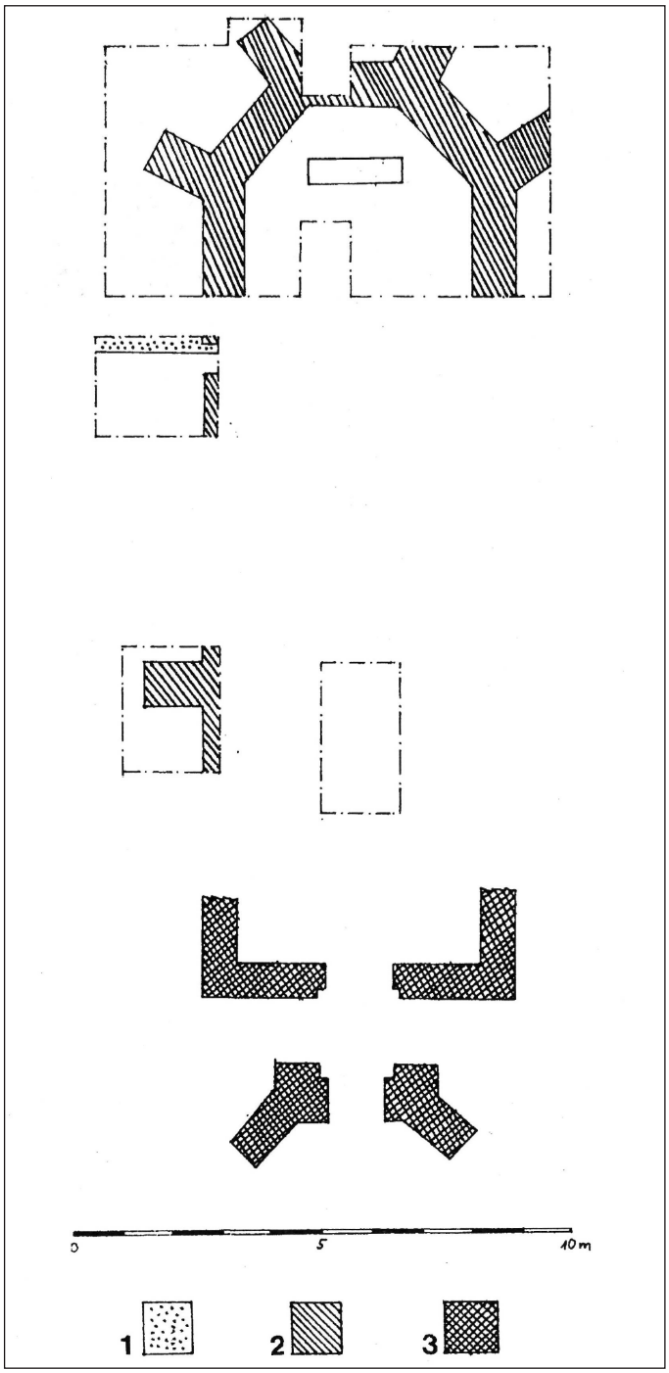

Fig. 2. Ground plan of the standing walls and the excavation, 1999. 1, Excavated foundation trench; 2, excavated walls; 3, standing walls (K. Németh 2000, 170, 2. kép)

nected to it. János Gábor Ódor and András K. Németh then excavated the octagonal sanctuary, which was enclosed by three sides of an octagon and had buttresses at the corners. It was 4.75 m wide and built of brick, with a 2-metre-long altar foundation. A few courses of bricks from the sanctuary also survived. Based on the excavation results, the floor of the sanctuary was covered with tiles, its walls were decorated with painted plaster, and its windows were partially glazed. There were no signs of an earlier building period, but the painted plaster bricks built into the closing wall of the sanctuary indicate partial destruction and subsequent repair. The interior length of the church was 19.5 metres, and the nave was 5.25 metres wide, based on the wall fragments connecting to the tower. Only the removed eastern wall of the sacristy built on the north side was found (*Fig. 2*). Twelve graves were uncovered in the cemetery surrounding the church (K. Németh 2000, 159–160; K. Németh 2001).

In 2017, architecture student Judit Zslebics conducted a detailed survey of the tower and made numerous observations regarding its construction. She demonstrated that the plaster on the eastern side of the tower differs from that on the other sides (which, however, does not indicate two construction periods). She observed wide horizontal strips resulting from the different times at which the plaster was applied, and also documented numerous vertical cracks caused by ground movement. At this time, the remains of a window sill were discovered in south nave wall, 112 cm above the gallery floor level, which may have served to illuminate the gallery (Zslebics 2019). Prior to the 2025 conservation work, Miklós Rácz prepared architectural history documentation.

CONDITION BEFORE CONSERVATION, ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OBSERVATIONS

The church ruins are located on a circular ‘island’ of approximately 40–50 m in diameter, situated in the middle of a ploughed field, 400 metres from the main road (Road 65). It can only be accessed via a 1.5-kilometre-long dirt road from the main road, but even this was partially constructed only during the conservation work. The ruins are surrounded by a few small and large bushes and trees. Before restoration, the surface of the site around the church building was uneven, with foxholes, traces of centuries of treasure hunting, and the collapsed trenches of the excavation carried out a quarter of a century ago. The remaining walls are not visible on the surface; based on excavation data, they are covered by a soil layer at least 40, but more likely 70–80 cm thick.

The still-standing western corners of the four-storey tower were reinforced by two buttresses with three steps each (*Fig. 3–4*). The ground floor of the tower is open on all four sides, of which only the southern opening with a pointed arch remains in its original state. A gate opened from the ground floor of the tower to the church, as evidenced by the visible remains. Based on the imprints, the ground floor was covered with a barrel vault, and the first floor could be accessed through a door (restored in 1963) opening from the gallery. On the second floor, there is only an opening on the east side (the aforementioned door opening towards the gallery), above which, on the third floor, the door opening to the nave attic can be seen, while the west side is only pierced by a narrow slit window. The top floor is open on all four sides with large windows (Csejdy 2006). A slight setback between the first and second floors on the eastern side of the tower indicates the position of the nave’s ceiling (*Fig. 4.7*). The remains of the nave walls show the notches of the western support beams of the gallery (*Fig. 4.6*). Frost has damaged the upper part of the tower since its restoration in 1963, destroying some bricks of the medieval masonry, and leaving the unplastered wall surfaces weathered in many places (Zslebics 2019, 13–19).

The surface of the medieval brickwork is largely well preserved and intact, but numerous damaged, fragmentary bricks were visible on the plinth sections and especially on the upper part of the tower (*Fig. 3–4*). The laying method of the medieval masonry, as far as it can be observed in the intact and examinable wall sections, which are generally no longer than 2 metres, is characterised by the alternation of two stretchers and one header. The characteristic bond is interrupted in many places, either by the insertion of brick fragments or by the insertion of several stretchers or headers. However, it seems that the aforementioned bond was largely followed.

Figs. 3–4. Surveys of the tower's walls, 2025 (by Kvalitron Ltd, Tibor Szappanyos – KÖZTI cPLC). 1, Detail of a window frame and a window sill; 2, beam pockets of the scaffolding; 3, construction-related horizontal gaps in the plaster; 4, position of the construction-related gap on the inner wall face; 5, large beam pocket, perhaps for a lifting mechanism, likely bricked up during construction; 6, beam nests of the gallery in the corners of the two long walls; 7, a setback – the position of the ceiling; 8, construction-related joint in the wall. Arrow indicates the direction of the extension

Rows of small beam pockets can be seen in the walls on several levels (*Fig. 3–4.2*), aligning with the gaps visible in the otherwise continuous plaster coating of the wall (*Fig. 3–4.3*).

On the western façade, at the level of the second-floor windows, there is a large opening, probably a beam pocket, which was bricked up during construction and may served the fastening of a lifting mechanism (*Fig. 4.5*).

Two vertical construction joints of different heights can be observed on the inside of the west wall of the nave, approximately 1 metre below the second floor level (*Fig. 3.4*), and on both sides of the east outer wall of the tower, below the third floor level, indicating the multi-phase construction (*Fig. 4.8*). It appears that, at least in the sections between the windows, the walls were not raised evenly, but temporary gaps facilitated moving between the exterior and interior of the tower and the transporting of the (lifted) building materials.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH DURING CONSERVATION

The earthworks related to the preservation were accompanied by archaeological observation. In order to carry out the gardening work, the area of the nave and the sanctuary was levelled using machinery and filling all depressions. During this process, no built heritage elements were found due to the aforementioned level differences, and only a few scattered human bones were collected. Deeper earthworks were only carried out in one place: to ground the newly installed lightning conductor on the tower, a ca. 70 cm deep trench was dug around the ruins, which met the northern rising wall of the nave at a depth of approx. 30 cm. A dense patch of debris was found at a similar depth on the southern side (in these places, the lightning rod was placed at a shallower depth).

As part of the landscaping of the church hill, the root zone of the overgrown shrubbery was removed under monitoring with metal detectors. Due to its popularity, the area around the church has been a popular target among treasure hunters—as attested by the scarcity of metal finds, typically collected from the root zone. Among these, a few small, misshapen pieces of bronze, from a bell probably damaged in the fire that destroyed the church, must be highlighted; they were found at the southern side of the tower. Although found in a more distant part of the village and on another occasion, a rare, unusually large, 12 cm diagonal Nuremberg-type book corner frame, which may once have been part of the church's furnishings, is also worth mentioning (*Fig 5*).

Fig. 5. Large book corner frame from the village site (photo by Tamás Retkes)

We already knew about the existence of lintel beams in the interior of the western slit window on the third level of the tower, but we could not access them before. Thanks to the scaffolding, we were able to observe that the lintel was made of three closely spaced, roughly hewn beams, each of a diameter of about 10 cm. Only the imprint of the beam facing the wall surface could be observed in the mortar of the beam socket, only a burnt stump remained of the middle one, while the innermost one survived intact, although its central part, which was not protected by the wall, visibly thinned by fire that once burned in the tower. András Grynaeus and András K. Németh removed the stump and took a core sample from the intact beam. Both crossbeams were

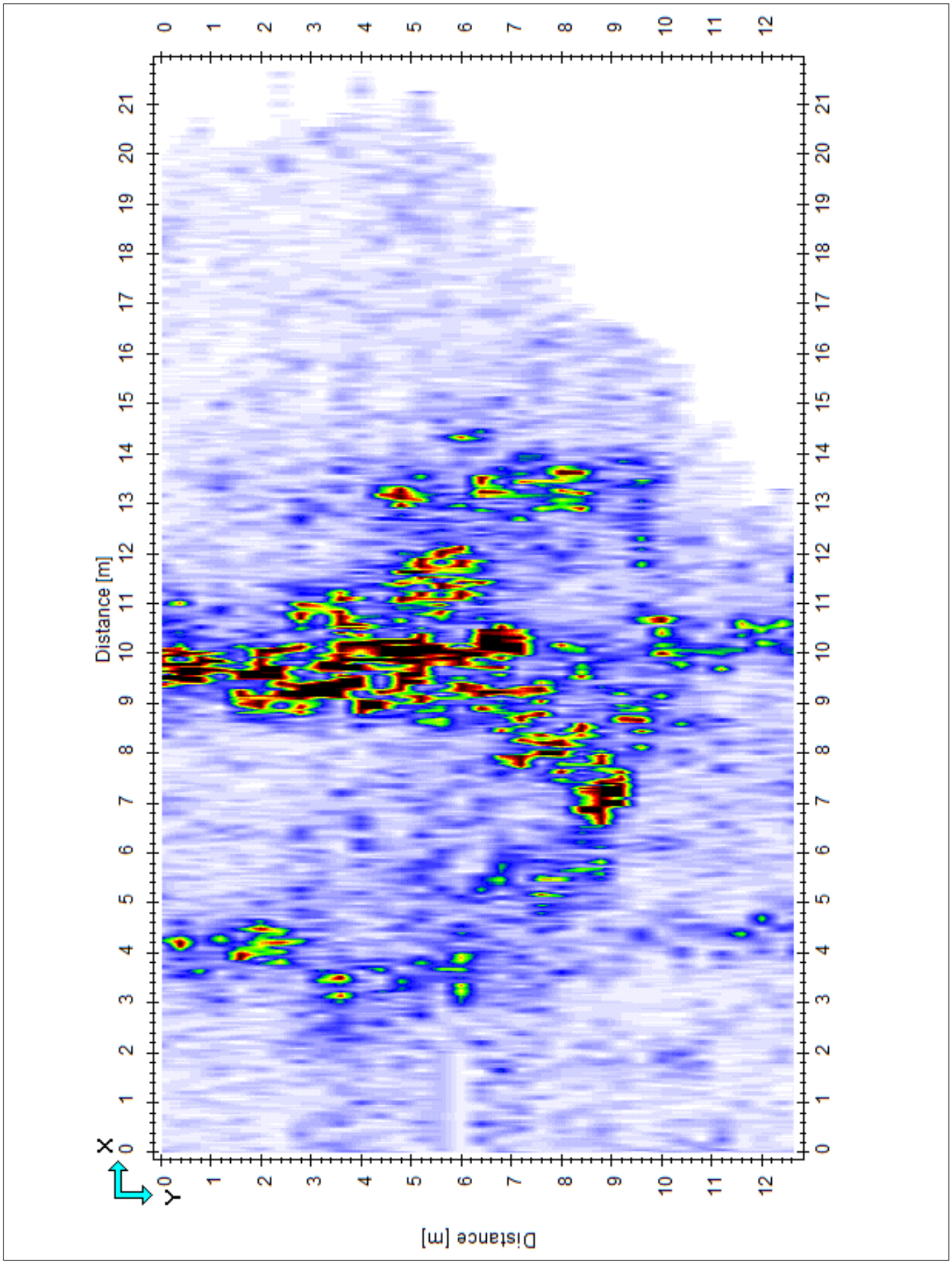

Fig. 6. Ground-penetrating radar survey of the nave (by Róbert Lóki)

made of debarked pedunculate oak, a species preferring wet habitats. Unfortunately, the wood samples were unsuitable for dating due to the small number of growth rings (Grynaeus 2025).

At our request, Róbert Lóki conducted a ground-penetrating radar (GPR) survey on the levelled area of the church; conditions of terrain only allowed work west of the sanctuary (*Fig. 6*). The survey did not provide any data on the previously assumed separation between the nave and the inner plane of the sanctuary, but it did reveal that the sacristry, the extension of which was unknown, was approximately 4 metres long and 3 metres wide. Its western wall appeared as a very wide anomaly, while the northern wall appears to extend westward beyond the line of the western wall (indicating perhaps a buttress). On the survey, an approximately 3-metre-long, half-metre-wide southern protrusion, possibly the southern entrance, emerged in the eastern part of the southern nave wall. The interpretation of the arched(?) anomaly inside the nave, in line with the sacristy, remains a question (Lóki 2025).

In summary the surviving brick tower was built in Gothic style at an unknown date around the 14th–15th centuries (K. Németh 2000, 164). Fieldwork has revealed that the tower and the excavated sanctuary were built at the same time. The Hungarian population left the village at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, and although Rascians still lived in Somoly in the 17th century, it remains a question if they used the building. In any case, the tower stood abandoned since the resettlement of the area in the early 18th century; at that time, most part of the nave still stood.

CONSERVATION WORKS IN 2025

The conservation plan designed by Bálint Kelemen (KÖZTI cPLC) based on the results of a preliminary evaluation survey included measures to repair the standing walls and reinforce the structure of the ruins. The walls were professionally cleaned and conservated; the missing parts were patched with reused bricks and a special mortar for repairs. A row or two of bricks were dismantled of previous completions of the cornice and wall stubs with horizontal closures and rebuilt; the new closure is sloped.

The cracks on the western, northern, and eastern walls of the tower, as well as the connection between the medieval wall and the 1963 addition on the northern and southern stumps and western wall of the church, were joined together using dry wall joints, i.e. by fastening 10–12 mm diameter stainless steel spiral rods in holes drilled at an angle into the wall.

In addition to the conservation of the ruins, the vegetation in the area of the church was groomed, the surface of the church grounds was levelled, and the floor plan of the church, as determined by archaeological research, was marked with a flower bed (*Fig. 7*). As Péter Belecz, the director of the programme, put it, the basic principle of the architectural and heritage conservation programme was the technical renovation of the ruins, the preservation of the aesthetic and historical values inherent in the monument, and the preservation of the natural, harmonious relationship between the poetic ruins and the landscape. One of the special features of the ROM Vándor programme is that it not only preserves the condition of the sites involved

Fig.7. The tower and its surroundings after the 2025 restoration

but also reinterprets the sacred and communal role of the ruins using restrained contemporary architectural methods in keeping with the spirit of each place. At Regöly, two unique, restrained contemporary architectural elements have been integrated into the structure: a steel lightning rod, which serves both a technical function and as a cross, and a suspended metal sculpture inside the tower, which, when viewed from the centre of the chimney, forms a soaring dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit.

As part of the landscaping work, a 700-metre-long access road was built to the ruins.

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