

## RESEARCH AND CONSERVATION OF THE VARJASKÉR RUINED CHURCH

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*The ruined church of the desolated village Varjaskér lies on the outskirts of Somogyszentpál, surrounded by cultivated fields, in the abandoned 'Töröktemető'. Its conservation and the refurbishment of the surrounding area took place in 2024 as part of the ROM Vándor ['RUIN Rover'] heritage preservation programme run by Market Építő cPLC, under the direction of programme manager Péter Belec. Archaeologist István Molnár led the archaeological investigations, while Máté Stibrányi, PhD, conducted a geophysical survey of the area. Architect Bálint Kelemen led the conservation design team.*

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Following the exploration and conservation of monuments at Tök, Aszófő–Kövesd, and Tatabánya–Csákányospuszta, the ruin church of Varjaskér (Fig. 1) is the fourth project for the ROM Vándor programme. A prominent company in the construction industry, Market Építő cPLC has developed and implemented a comprehensive corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme that aligns with its activities, fits its creed, embodies its values, generates value, spans multiple years, and can be expanded nationwide. The main goal of the programme is the preservation and professional conservation of our built heritage, primarily Árpád Age (AD 1000–1301) ecclesiastical ruins, the refurbishment of their surroundings, and the promotion of these special monuments throughout the country. The programme has received several prestigious professional awards. In 2024, it won the Exemplary Monument Restoration award of the Hungarian National Committee of ICOMOS, the Media Architecture Award in the 'Built Environment' category, and in 2025, the grand prize in the 'Value-saving and Value-transferring Activities' category of the DoingGood CSR Award. The conservation and presentation of the Varjaskér ruin church was honoured with an ICOMOS award in 2025.



Fig. 1. The ruin church at Varjaskér after conservation (photo by Attila Gulyás, Market Építő cPLC)

## HISTORY OF THE RUIN

The name of the vanished Kér village refers to the tribe that had once settled there; its inhabitants initially protected the military route along the southern shore of Lake Balaton. It first appears in a charter in 1292 (IPOLYI et al. 1867, 393; BORSA 1995, 20, DL 40447), and later, in 1321, as *Ker* and *Keer* (NAGY, NAGY & VÉGHÉLY 1871, 1, 203). The church is already mentioned as part of the archdeaconry of Somogy in the 1333–1335 papal tithe register (FRAKNÓI & LUKSCSIS 1870, 70, 78, 82). According to a note from 15 February 1481, Bertalan, chaplain and priest of Kér, acted together with the vicecuratus of Kér and the parish priest of Szentgyörgy in the matter of the will of nobleman István of Szentkirály (BÁNDI 1986, 58, DL 18452). A tax register mentions the village church in 1536; the landlord at that time was Bálint Török (CSÁNKI 1894,

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619). In 1598–99, the village is mentioned as owned by István Török; in 1660, he was replaced by Miklós Zankó, while around 1703, the settlement and its lands were owned by Miklós and Boldizsár Zankó (CSÁNKI 1914, 170). In 1719, Varjaskér already had a new Baroque church; however, the former one, which had been ruined during the Ottoman occupation, was still remembered (DÓKA 1997, 139). In 1723, Varjaskér passed from the Zankó family to the Count Harrach family. Then, in 1733, it became the property of the Hunyady family (CSÁNKI 1914, 170). An ecclesiastical source written in Latin (BOGDÁN 2004, 9) reports on the ruined church in 1736: “outside the village but close to it stands an old, huge [*grandis*], partly ruined and abandoned church with a tower. Its ruins can be restored [*reparatione digna esset*].” A Latin *canonica visitatio* from 1743 (BOGDÁN 2004, 9) records a ruined church with a tower. “Outside the village of Varjaskér but close to it stands an old, huge, ruined and abandoned church with a tower. Who is its patron saint? No one knows.”<sup>4</sup> Prince Miklós Eszterházy owned the village from 1767 (CSÁNKI 1914, 170). In 1864, the ruin is mentioned again in the report of Varjaskér notary Váry (BOGDÁN 2004, 9): “...the front part of an old church still stands quite far from the village, almost at the marsh, together with the castle. According to legend, the Ottomans shot at it and the small fort in the marshland. This church is surrounded by a cemetery nowadays.” The nearby villages of Tótszentpál and Varjaskér were merged on 15 March 1928 (*Belügyi Közlöny* 1928:14, 279; *Uj-Somogy* 15 March 1928), first under the temporary name Tótszentpál, then from 3 June 3 as Somogyszentspál (*Somogyi Ujság* 3 June 1928, 5)

### CONDITIONS BEFORE THE CONSERVATION

The oldest drawings and photographs of the ruin date back to 1914. According to these, its appearance has hardly changed in the past century. At the start of renovation, lilac shrubs, a few trees, and trenches of illegal excavations surrounded the ruins, together with a large heap of rubble on the western side. Old tombstones and bricks lay scattered around. A ditch has bordered the rectangular plot; its entrance is still located on the western side, and it can be accessed by car via a dirt road that extends up to the plot boundary.

Only the western part of the rising walls of the church has survived (*Fig. 2*). It was made of bricks and some sandstone blocks. Its average thickness is 80 cm, and its height is approximately 6.5 metres. Bricks had fallen out of the wall structure, especially near ground level. Marks of erosion could be observed in its outer layer, and moss grew in places. The wall, as a whole, was compact and had good core strength, but its stability under wind load could not be proven.

Extensive brick fallout with elements indicating a former door could be observed south of the buildings' longitudinal axis on the façade. Pieces of the slanted doorframe were clearly visible on both sides under the nest of the lintel beam on the inner side, at shoulder height, and the imprint of the former bar lock beam could be seen in the northern doorframe. The stumps of two buttresses could be seen at the ends of the western wall, as well as the remains of the northern and southern walls from the east and beam nests on both sides of the wall. High up on the southern edge of the western façade, approximately at the height of the top of the former buttresses, was a deep groove, which may have nested a belt cornice that did not run completely around the building. A patch of the original plastering survived in the northern part of the eastern wall, next to the stump of a former dividing wall.



*Fig. 2. The ruin before conservation  
(photo by Bálint Kelemen, Közti cPLC)*

<sup>4</sup> Translation.



## ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

The ruin of the Varjaskér church, located near Somogyszentpál, is situated within the Somogyszentpál–Töröktemető archaeological site (NRAS ID 48700) and is a protected monument (Monument Register ID 4533/8092). Despite the tall standing wall ruins, they have not been thoroughly researched; in addition to a few on-site inspections and surface find collecting surveys, only an amateur excavation was conducted there in the 1960s. Unfortunately, we only learnt about the latter from reports published decades later, which contained several unlikely and now unverifiable claims (BOGDÁN 1981, 1987).

The archaeological excavation carried out by a team from the Rippl-Rónai Museum in Kaposvár on 17–18 April 2024 covered only a small area. Fieldwork commissioned and funded by Market Építő cPLC, with an aim to gather information for monument conservation planning.

Trench 1, measuring ca.  $3 \times 1.5$  m, was marked out at the one-time western entrance (*Fig. 3*). The disturbed, 50–80 cm thick topsoil layer had to be removed from the sloping present surface first to reach the foundation wall under the door, which was unfortunately damaged by modern people scavenging for building material. A large patch of the original surface, measuring two palms, was discovered in the southern corner and marks the start of the surviving plaster layer at the foot of the wall, indicating the original level of the threshold. The wall sections next to the door were heavily damaged, but in some places, a sloping wall face, marking the entrance that widened eastward, could still be observed. This phenomenon could be followed underground, extending above the level of the threshold. The foundation was built of bricks laid in mortar, along with brick fragments and a few pieces of stone.

The area in front of and below the stumps of the diagonally positioned buttresses at the corners of the western wall was examined with  $2 \times 1.5$  m survey trenches (Trenches 2 and 3; *Fig. 4*). The foundations of the buttresses were mostly exploited in modern times, but it could be established from the remains that they were built at the same time as the western façade of the church, i.e. the presumed tower, using a similar technique (some stones laid between bricks set in mortar). The buttresses were 1–1.1 m long; the bottom of the northwest foundation was found a metre below the level of the threshold, and the bottom of the southwest one was 1.4 m deeper than the level of the threshold. Trench 3 also covered the foundation of the south-western corner, which was slightly less deep than that of the adjoining buttress.

Small mounds were visible in front of the western façade and inside the former church. As they could cover walls, Trenches 4 and 5 were set out to cut through them. Both contained disturbed, mixed soil, perhaps from the 1960s excavation.



*Fig. 3. Excavation of the doorway  
(photo by István Molnár, Rippl-Rónai Museum)*



*Fig. 4. Excavation of the northern buttress  
(photo by István Molnár, Rippl-Rónai Museum)*

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

A complex archaeological geophysical (magnetometer and Ground Penetrating Radar, GPR) survey was conducted in the area of the church and its close surroundings.<sup>5</sup> The magnetometer survey of the surroundings yielded few results but proved to be suitable for excluding traces of any other former buildings near the church. The GPR survey yielded significantly better results for the underground wall remains, including the foundations of a relatively large (18 × 7 m) east-west-oriented church with a rectangular chancel east of the still-standing western church wall.

Based on the survey results, the church has at least two building phases. Based on the foundation walls, one was a typical 11 × 7 m church with a rectangular chancel with two buttresses in the western part of the nave. Additionally, the foundation of a 7 × 7 m square tower, built against the western wall of the church and reinforced with massive buttresses at the corners, is visible on the survey; the ruin that still stands today is identical to its western wall. Additionally, a large room, a sacristy or chapel, was constructed against the northern side of the chancel. The foundation levels from different periods can be clearly distinguished in the survey results: while the foundations of the early church are visible to a depth of 1.8–2 m, the foundations of the tower and the addition on the northern side can be observed about half a metre deeper, to a depth of 2.3–2.5 m. This also means that the walls of the church have been preserved in relatively good condition underground, at a depth between 0.5 and 2–2.5 m.

Despite significant visible surface anomalies west of the still-standing wall, no trace of a wall foundation was visible on the survey map, indicating that the uneven ground there is likely due to an illegal excavation pit. The northern section of the brick perimeter wall surrounding the cemetery and the church also appeared in the GPR results. The foundation of this wall is much shallower than the church wall and can only be observed to a depth of 0.5–1 m. Its eastern end turns slightly eastward, which may indicate that the entrance to the cemetery was located there. Based on the survey, there were no other buildings within the churchyard; only smaller anomalies—probably related to graves—could be identified there.

## BUILDING HISTORY OF THE CHURCH (FIG. 6)

The building history of the church was reconstructed from data gleaned from historical research, archaeological excavations, and geophysical surveys.



Fig. 5. GPR survey of the Varjaskér church area (-1 m depth slice map) with interpretation (by Máté Stibrányi, Munifex Ltd)

<sup>5</sup> The magnetometer survey was made using a SENSYS MXPDA 5-channel magnetometer system, with geophysicist Mihály Pethe processing the data. The GPR survey was conducted using an ImpulseRadar CO4080 ground-penetrating radar; data was processed by geophysicist Zsombor Klembala.



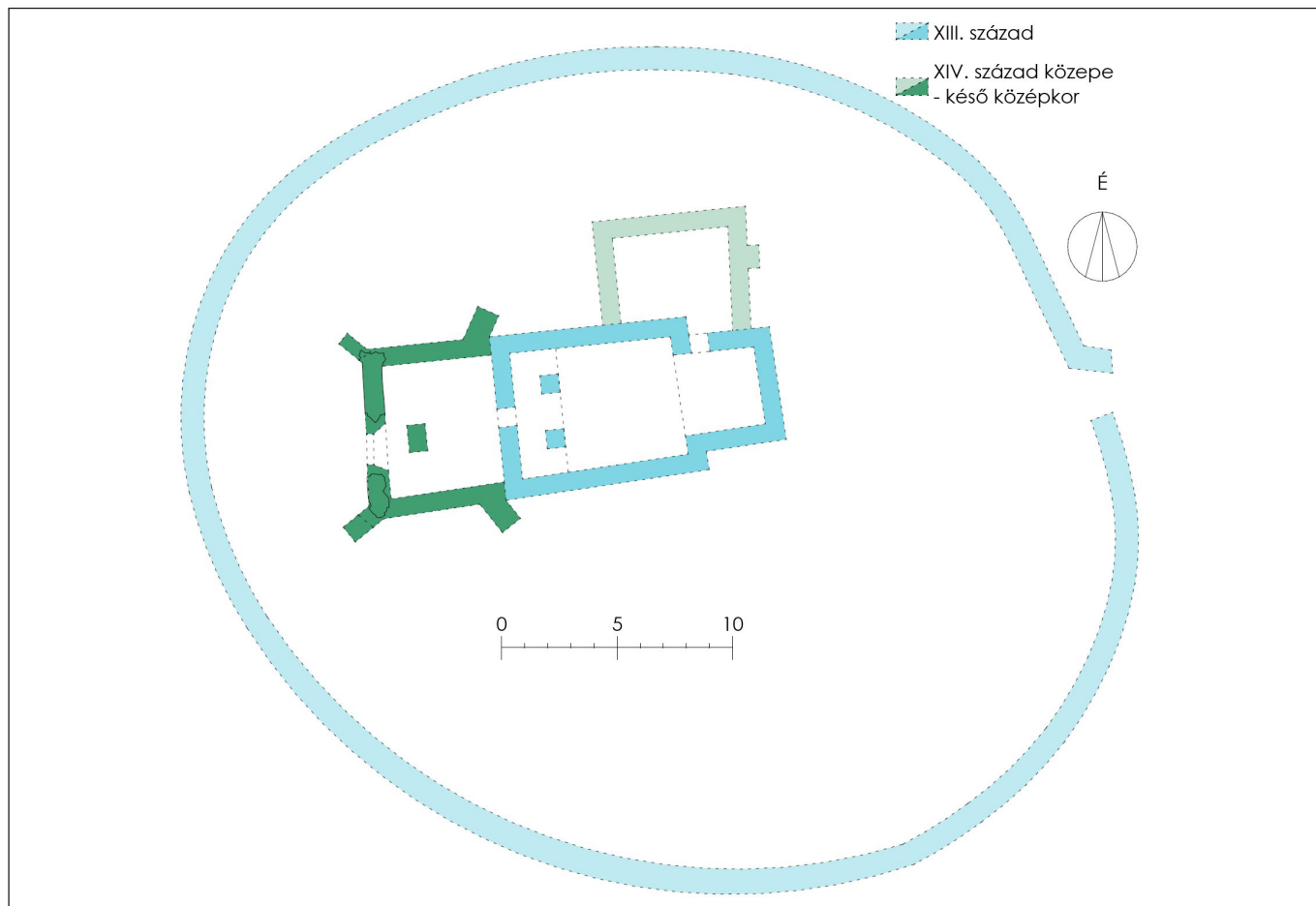


Fig. 6. Building periods of the Varjaskér church. Shades of blue: 13th century; shades of green: mid-14th century–Late Middle Ages by Bálint Kelemen and Gergely Patak, Közti cPLC)

### 13th century

The perimeter wall of the graveyard and an  $11 \times 7$  m brick masonry village church, with a rectangular chancel wall and a patron's gallery on the western side, were likely built during the first building phase. The remains of charred beams found near the gallery suggest a timber gallery structure and/or a roof with beam slabs. The floor of the nave may have had wood block paving.

### Mid-14th century — Late Middle Ages

In the later construction period(s), a sacristy with a deeper foundation was built against the northern wall of the chancel, and a  $7 \times 7$  m square structure with corner buttresses and a door opening to the west was erected on its western side. The western brick wall of the latter is the one still visible today. Both the western extension of the village church, featuring a gallery and a tower, and the construction of a sacristy were typical of the era. The last document to mention the church as still standing and operating is the 1536 tax register.

The church was likely destroyed during the Ottoman occupation; its first mention as a ruin dates back to 1719. In the Modern Era, its plot was used as a cemetery, which has since been abandoned.

## RESTORATION OF THE RUINS

The basic restoration concept (and the *ROM Vándor* programme) focused on the technical conservation of the ruin, as well as the preservation of its inherent aesthetic and historical values and its natural and harmonious relationship with the surrounding landscape, with minimal contemporary additions that, according to our intentions, increase its value (Fig. 7). The most important task was the conservation of the ruin by



Fig. 7. The restored ruins are surrounded by mounds marking underground wall remains. The mounds will be overgrown by grass over time (© Market Építő cPLC)



Fig. 9. Equinox  
(photo by Bálint Kelemen, Közti cPLC)



Fig. 8. Indication of the door/stabilising structure (photo by Péter Molnár, Market Építő cPLC)

cleaning the wall surface and the joints, unbuilding and rebuilding the loose wall sections, and replacing the missing patches, while preserving the natural contours of the wall with as little as possible structural and proportional additions. Only a single new structure has been built to stabilise the ruin and indicate the location and scale of the one-time church door using contemporary means. This element marks the sacred focal point of the church and serves as an information board. This door/stabilising structure has been built of a 2 cm thick corten steel sheet, the colour of which harmonises with that of the brick, while its texture resembles the heterogeneous surface of the original brick wall (Fig. 8).

The foundations of the former perimeter walls, church walls, and sacristy walls, which could be identified around the ruin based on the archaeological geophysical survey, have been marked by low earth mounds. The continuous line of the cemetery wall, running across the lilac shrubbery, is indicated by a cleared strip. The surroundings of the ruin have also been given a new lease of life: the lilac shrubs have been pruned, and the area has been graded and grassed. It is particularly interesting that during the spring and autumn equinoxes, the light of the setting sun shines through the doorway in the axis of the church to the eastern wall of the chancel (Fig. 9).

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