

RESEARCH AND CONSERVATION OF THE PUSZTATEMPLOM IN LAJOSMIZSE

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Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 15 (2026) Issue 2, pp. 52–59.

The conservation of the ruins of the Pusztatemplom in Lajosmizse was completed in June 2026 as the seventh project in the ROM Vándor heritage preservation programme. The church was certainly already standing in the 14th century, although little is known about the area's medieval history. Archaeological investigations at the site, however, have a considerable history, extending back to the early excavations of medieval villages in the central Great Hungarian Plain. To plan the new restoration, archaeologists from the Katona József Museum in Kecskemét conducted research under the operational leadership of Gábor Wilhelm and the technical leadership of András Kristóf Fazekas. The conservation plans were again prepared under the direction of Bálint Kelemen.

Keywords: Middle Ages, church ruins, restoration, conservation

THE HISTORY OF THE VILLAGE OF MIZSE AS REFLECTED IN WRITTEN SOURCES

Present-day Lajosmizse has a relatively short history: in 1877, the inhabitants of Lajos, Mizse and Benepusztá officially decided to become citizens of a single, unified settlement, Lajos-Mizse. Although this decision was made less than 150 years ago, the place names and communities involved in the town's foundation point to a much longer history.

With the exception of the cataclysmic Mongol invasion, the region maintained its relative prosperity and continued to develop despite various difficulties until the first half of Ottoman rule, that is, until the end of the 16th century. The region was depopulated during the Fifteen Years' War (1591/1593–1606).

Only a few written sources are available regarding the medieval settlement of Mizse. The first record that definitely refers to the area in question – albeit only indirectly – dates from 1466 (BENEDEK & KÜRTI 2004, 25–27). At that time, a charter mentions the Cuman officials György and Márton of Mizse, from the Kara district, in connection with an ongoing investigation. On this basis, Mizse was a settlement in one of the smallest Cuman administrative units, the Kara-szék, whose centre is thought to have been near present-day Jászkarajenő. The local leading officials, at least judging by their names, were from Mizse. This is corroborated by a document drawn up three years later, in 1469 (BENEDEK & KÜRTI 2004, 28–29), in which King Matthias Corvinus reduced the land rent of the Cumans belonging to the Mizse district. In this instance, the name 'Kara' no longer appears; the district centre had clearly become Mizse. Another letter of attestation from the Palatine, dating from 1521—before the Ottoman occupation—records a boundary survey between the Cuman settlement at Mizse and the village of Vacs, together with the related legal proceedings (BENEDEK & KÜRTI 2004, 38–43). During the first decades of the Ottoman occupation, Mizse regularly appears in censuses and defter records as a tax unit belonging to the Kecskemét nahiye (Ottoman subdistrict). In 1546, 39 heads of families were recorded; in 1559, 26; in 1562, 33; and finally, in 1590, 32 (KÜRTI 2019, 207). These figures suggest that the new regime did not radically affect the lives of the local population and that decline had not yet begun. At the same time, the system of double taxation characteristic of the period did not spare Mizse either. From 1549, the settlement appears in the tax registers of the Diocese of Eger under the name *Kwnmyse* (Kunmizse). Mizse-szék (in the territory of the former Kecskemét-szék) and Mizse appear in the Eger tax registers right up until 1590 (BENEDEK & KÜRTI 2004, 72–78). We have no direct sources regarding the settlement's demise; however, based on events in the surrounding area and the fact that the village is no longer mentioned in documents from the early 1590s onwards, we can conclude that the settlement of

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Mizse ceased to exist at the beginning of the Fifteen Years' War, with most of its inhabitants fleeing to the nearby market towns (Kecskemét and Nagykőrös), or northwards to the Jászság region and the counties of Royal Hungary. The timeframe of our investigation ends here, at the end of the 16th century, as Mizse—the area surrounding today's ruined church—was never resettled. At the same time, it is worth mentioning another source, also from the period of Ottoman rule, dating from 1622 (BENEDEK & KÜRTI 2004, 79–80). At that time, the inhabitants of the destroyed villages in the surrounding area submitted a petition to Palatine Szaniszló Thurzó regarding their resettlement. It is interesting to note that this request was granted in the cases of Szabadszállás, Lacháza and Kunszentmiklós, but not in the cases of Bene, Lajos, Bösztör and Mizse; consequently, these remained wastelands, which were leased by Nagykőrös and Kecskemét.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN MIZSE

The church ruins came to the attention of archaeologists in 1930–1931. We can reconstruct the results of the first excavations from an article by László Papp published in the *Néprajzi Értesítő* in 1931 (PAPP 1931). Kálmán Szabó, the legendary museum director of Kecskemét, systematically researched the medieval material culture of the Great Plain – and, in particular, that of his immediate homeland, the region between the Danube and the Tisza. A summary of this work is his monograph entitled *Alföldi magyar nép művelődéstörténeti emlékei*, published in 1938 (SZABÓ 1938). With regard to Kálmán Szabó's research – apart from a few scattered newspaper reports – this book is our sole source due to the destruction caused by the Second World War. Kálmán Szabó certainly surveyed the church ruins and published a floor plan of them (Fig. 1) (SZABÓ

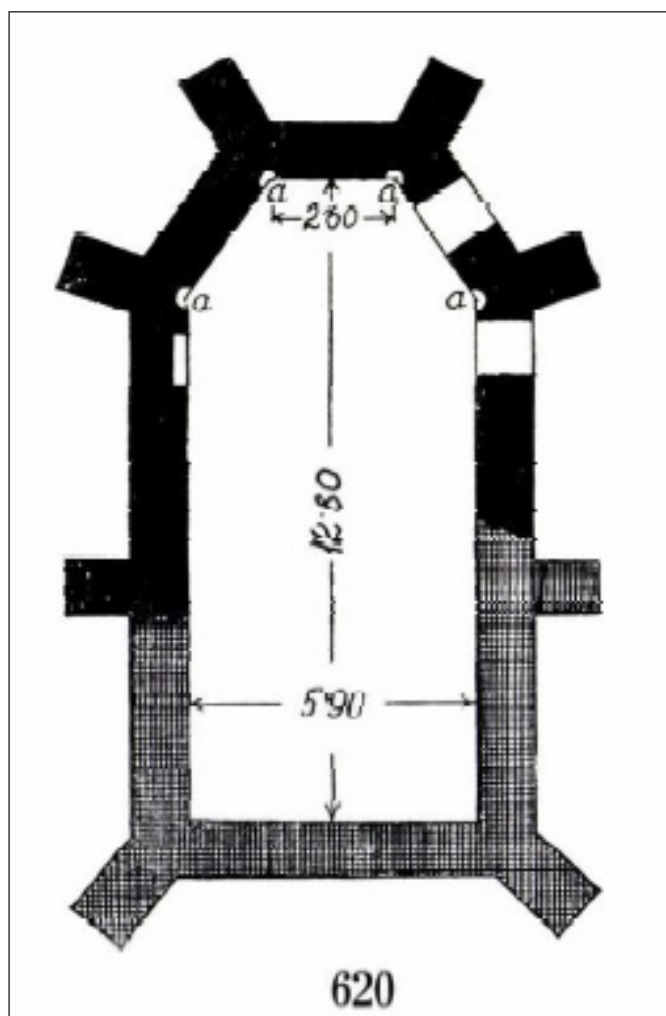


Fig. 1. Floor plan of the church in Mizse, based on Kálmán Szabó (SZABÓ 1938, 131)



Fig. 2. The location of the tabernacle in the wall structure (photo: András Kristóf Fazekas)



Fig. 3. A scene from the excavations in the 1930s (photo: unknown, from the collection of László Kürti)



Fig. 4. Otto Braasch's aerial photograph (2008) of the church (above) and the former village – now visible as vegetation patterns (University of Pécs, Pécs Aerial Archaeology Archive – ref. no.: 034202)

1938, 129, 132), and described the ruins, including the location of the pastophorium, which is still visible today (Fig. 2), and the sockets for the corbels that once supported the vault ribs. We have a snapshot of the excavation itself, showing the survey of the sanctuary in progress, whilst the human bones visible on top of the mound bear witness to the excavation of the graves (Fig. 3). The aforementioned monograph contains only scant information about the cemetery and the results of the archaeological research. Szabó writes that large, raised disc-shaped earrings, characteristic of the Cumans, were found in Mizse as well as at several other sites (SZABÓ 1938, 46). We know of a further object recovered from a grave: a woman's headdress, which was a wreath made of metal wire, bent into a five-petalled flower shape and decorated with tiny beads.

In 2008, Otto Braasch carried out an aerial archaeological survey of the area. The vegetation patterns visible in the photographs provide evidence of the settlement's existence: the image reveals a settlement comprising at least two streets (Fig. 4).

Thanks to Papp's aforementioned paper, we know more about the excavation of the settlement, situated north-west of the church and dated to between the 14th and 16th centuries based on the artefacts found (PAPP 1931, 149–150). We have floor plans for three buildings, two of which can be interpreted as two-room dwellings. One of these is particularly interesting: in this building, too, two rooms can be distinguished, divided by plastered clay walls, and according to László Papp's interpretation – given its central location close to the church – this house may be interpreted as both an administrative and community space associated with the Cuman district administration.

Following a local initiative, András Fülöp carried out an excavation in 1995 to determine the building's floor plan (KJM Reg. Ref. 64.3.). The research revealed that, since the 1930 excavation, significant sections of the church's walls had been destroyed due to demolition work by local farmsteads and the effects of the

weather. The trench containing the rubble from the removed foundation walls of the north wall was uncovered, as were the foundations of the south-east wall and a collapsed section of that wall. The foundation of the building's south-west end wall had been so disturbed during the wall removal that its exact line could not be determined. In his report sent to the Hungarian National Museum, András Fülöp suggests an earlier phase, dated to the Árpád Age, noting a clay layer along the entire length of the northern foundation trench. According to his observations, this feature does not appear elsewhere. An important finding of this excavation is that the length of the church given by Kálmán Szabó cannot be regarded as accurate. It is likely that the presumed church plan was drawn up in the 1930s based on the identifiable foundations and walls. During András Fülöp's research, a total of eight burials, including one dated by a coin of King Sigismund of Luxembourg, were uncovered. The graves of two young girls are particularly noteworthy, as both were buried with a headdress. There were also graves outside the church, but no superposition with the foundations was observed.

Since 2011, systematic metal-detecting surveys and fieldwalking have been conducted in the area, coordinated by the Katona József Museum in Kecskemét (PÁNYA 2026, 53).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS RELATED TO THE RESTORATION

As part of the ROM Vándor Programme, and to preserve the medieval ruined church at Mizse, we carried out foundation excavations at three locations on the outer side of the church's sanctuary: at the junctions of the sanctuary and the standing pillars, with the trenches running perpendicular to the sanctuary walls. The aim of the research was to determine the construction technique of the foundations and to assess their condition (a 3D survey of the trenches is available at the KKJM Sketchfab platform: <https://sketchfab.com/kkjm/collections/lajosmizsei-templom-ea7ff73d23f34821b62d61bd953e525d>). The foundations of both the sanctuary and the pillars typically consisted of grey clay 35–54 cm thick, covered with a 60–80 cm layer of rubble, upon which the rising walls were built. In every case, we excavated down to the bottom of the clay foundation, which was typically dug into a brown sandy layer containing large quantities of scattered human bones, pottery and modern rubbish.

Trenches 1 and 2 are particularly significant from both architectural-historical and archaeological perspectives. In Trench 1, a grey clay foundation ran north to north-east from the sanctuary's foundation, clearly projecting beyond its line. It may represent an earlier or contemporary structure or building phase that was later demolished (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Trench 1 after excavation, showing the foundation extending from the sanctuary (photo: András Kristóf Fazekas)



Fig. 6. After excavation of Trench 2, showing Feature 1, a burial running beneath the sanctuary (photo: András Kristóf Fazekas)

Trench 2 yielded the most important archaeological discovery: the two femurs and the left tibia (the right tibia was missing) of a young individual, lying in anatomical order with an NNE–SSW orientation (Fig. 6). The grey clay foundation of the sanctuary was clearly built over the burial, meaning that the grave is older than the construction. The grave may be a remnant of an earlier cemetery, possibly dated to the Árpád Age. As there were no datable finds associated with it, a precise dating will require scientific analysis. A 16th-century silver-plated copper counterfeit denarius was also found in a secondary position within the test trench, alongside a large quantity of pottery and fragments of human bones.

Whilst digging the holes for the trees to be planted as part of the project, three archaeological features were uncovered along the road leading to the church from the south-west. All of them contained pottery suitable for dating. Preliminary dating places them in the Late Middle Ages, and they were almost certainly associated with houses in the former village of Mizse.

CONDITION PRIOR TO RESTORATION

The ruins of the Pusztatemplom stand on a state-owned plot of land, expropriated from farmland, on the outskirts of Lajosmizse, north of the town, on a ‘ridge’ rising slightly above the flat, lowland surroundings, where the former village once stood. A paved road leads almost all the way to the ruins. Only the final part, some 100 metres long, is a dirt road, but even this is easily passable by car. To the south of the ruin lies an orchard; otherwise, the site is surrounded by agricultural land. In the immediate vicinity of the ruins,



Fig. 7. The sanctuary viewed from the east before restoration (photo: Bálint Kelemen)

a sign affixed to a stone block draws attention to the historic monument. Wire fences run along two sides of the site, and security cameras powered by solar panels mounted on posts stand at two opposite corners. On the neighbouring plot, there is a bench with a table, a rubbish bin, and a fireplace (Fig. 7).

Today, the surviving remains of the former single-nave Gothic church comprise the north-west wall and the sanctuary walls, which form three sides of an octagon and stand to an average height of 5 metres, together with the sanctuary’s three pillars. The wall thickness is approximately 90 cm at the plinth and approximately 80 cm above it. The ground slopes away from the church in all directions.



Fig. 8. The interior of the church before restoration – showing the heterogeneous infill masonry of the pillars from 1999 (photo: Bálint Kelemen)



Fig. 9. The north wall prior to restoration – cracks running through the wall, spalling on the plinth, crumbling wall crown, and heterogeneous pillar infill dating from 1999 (photo: Bálint Kelemen)

The material of the medieval masonry (as with the vast majority of churches in the Danube–Tisza region) is porous meadow limestone quarried nearby, though brick infill can be observed in places (scattered across the vault of the tabernacle and on the pillars). The outer and inner wall facings consist of regular ashlar, whilst the core of the walls is made up of smaller, amorphous stones. Carved stone (vault ribs, decorative elements, fittings) can no longer be found on site. The pillars were reinforced in 1999 with freshwater limestone, utilising some of the original masonry stones, and the tops of the pillars were capped with a cast, arched cement covering. The medieval masonry had lost its binder at the level of the wall crown; the remaining patches of original plaster were severely crumbling, and the surface of the masonry was soiled and showed signs of biological damage (moss). Some sections of the masonry fell out, primarily at the plinth, in the middle of the wall and at the exposed ends. Structural cracks had also appeared in the masonry, mainly in the north-western wall. Unfortunately, graffiti had defaced the ruins in some places, which is why the local council installed a CCTV camera (*Fig. 8*).

The external plinth ran along the pillars as well, and its outline was clearly visible. In places, we could also observe the remains of the external and internal plasterwork. The lower sill of a former window, situated at a height of approximately 3.8 metres in the north-western nave wall, is clearly identifiable. However, there was no trace left of the southern window that could be observed by Kálmán Szabó in the 1930s. On the interior side, within the sanctuary, the positions of the lower corbels supporting the former cross vault were clearly visible, as was the position of the central corbel at the end of the north-western wall. On the interior side of the north-western wall, the remains of a wall niche (*pastophorium*) are visible, which may have started at the level of the lower wall course. On both the outer and inner sides of the walls, there are regularly placed scaffolding holes, averaging approximately 20 × 20 cm in size. Their bases were aligned with the wall course (*Fig. 9*). We have no precise data on the church's other elements (floor covering, furnishings, doors, windows, decorations, cornice, roof shape, etc.). A theoretical reconstruction was made in 2018; however, many of its details are highly hypothetical.

PLANNED CONDITION, CONCEPT AND USE OF MATERIALS

The concept focused on the technical repair and stabilisation of the ruins while preserving their inherent aesthetic and historical values and their natural, harmonious relationship with the landscape. It also included small-scale contemporary additions, which will hopefully enhance the site's value. During the conservation work, we repaired the joints. After cleaning the wall surfaces (removing dirt, vegetation and graffiti), we



Fig. 10. The ruins after restoration – with a thin layer of plaster applied to the surface of the previous pillar reinforcements and new infill masonry (photo: Bálint Kelemen)



Fig. 11. The interior of the ruins after restoration – with the wrought-iron cross on the sanctuary wall (the temporary installation in place of the altar is not part of the restoration) (photo: Bálint Kelemen)



Fig. 12. The sanctuary viewed from the east after restoration – with the previous pillar reinforcements and new infill walls finished with a thin layer of plaster matching the surface texture (photo: Bálint Kelemen)

dismantled the loosened, crumbling wall crown and masonry only as far as necessary, down to the solid masonry, and rebuilt them using the original stones. The rebuilt wall crowns slope by 5 per cent in two directions and follow a naturalistic ruin profile. For the ashlar, we applied the programmed anastylosis method (reconstruction using existing, original pieces) during the dismantling and rebuilding process. We preserved the sockets of the former corbels and the beam sockets; at structural cracks, we used a concealed, so-called ‘dry-system wall repair’ technique with stainless steel spiral rods (Mapei Steel Dry). Interventions were localised, and damaged surfaces were repaired using specialist conservation methods. For the rendering, bricklaying and jointing mortars, we selected a cement-free trass mortar with a yellowish colour similar to the original (MAPEI-Antique Allettamento) (Fig. 10).

During the restoration work, in an unexpected and welcome turn of events, several local residents brought back original ashlar blocks (porous meadow limestone), which we refitted into the smaller sections of the wall higher up, in keeping with the characteristics of the historic masonry. Because the ‘returned’ stones were not enough to fill in the larger holes near ground level, and as no nearby active quarries producing porous meadow limestone are known, we used rubble of the same freshwater limestone as in the 1999 pillar reinforcements, matching the texture of the historic wall fabric as closely as possible by aligning the joints and using stones with proportions similar to the originals (Fig. 11). Both the 1999 additions and the new infill masonry were finished with a uniform thin render following the surface contours. As a result, the surface of the earlier pillar reinforcements, which were technically solid but aesthetically questionable, and the new infill sections now have a uniform appearance. Thus, the medieval and modern masonry are clearly distinguishable from one another, and the appearance of the additions has been standardised.

We replaced the heritage plaque, which had no value, whilst retaining its stone pillar, with an information board used in the ROM Vándor project. We revitalised the surroundings of the ruins using simple landscape architectural techniques, extending this work to the neighbouring plots owned by the local authority, thereby enhancing the monument’s presence. We replaced the diseased trees in the thinned-out row and planted additional European dwarf cherry trees among the remaining ones. This ‘densification’ has highlighted the path leading to the ruins. On the other side of the path and the row of trees, further away from



Fig. 13. Glass votive lamps in the beam holes (photo: Bálint Kelemen)

the ruins, we designated the car park on the grassy area. We dismantled the two previous sets of benches, the rubbish bin and the fire pit, and in their place (using the foundations of the benches) we installed a single, large bench-table made of locust (*Fig. 12*).

As at every ROM Vándor site, small-scale contemporary additions have been made here too, helping to ensure that the restored ruin can also serve as a space for spirituality, contemplation and prayer. As part of this, a slender wrought-iron cross has been placed on the inside of the sanctuary, whilst glass votive lamps with a uniform design have been put into the beam holes. Following the ‘Path of Light’ at Aszófő–Kövesd, the ‘144 Candles’ at Tatabánya–Csákányospuszta, the ‘Gate’ at Somogyszentpál–Varjaskér, the ‘Garden of Eden’ at Regöly–Somoly and the ‘Sound Tower’ at Ádánd–Hetye, the Pusztatemplom ruins at Lajosmizse have joined the series of restored sites under the name ‘Altar Wall’ (*Fig. 13*).

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