

FROM ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE TO A SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL ROUTE: THE RESULTS OF THE #ROMANSWINEBANUBE PROJECT IN PÉCS

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The #RomansWineDanube project connected the Roman archaeological heritage, wine regions and local communities of the Danube Region so that cultural heritage assets could be presented not merely as stand-alone attractions, but as part of a sustainable, cross-border visitor experience. This paper presents the project's implementation in Pécs and its archaeological dimensions. It focuses on the Local Action Plan, Product Club collaborations, the Sopianae Revived! Roman Festival, the site-based story Aelia and the Chest of the Sun, visitor monitoring, and the [13th Training Academy of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe](#). The experience in Pécs shows that archaeological authenticity, experience-based interpretation, digital tools and community participation can reinforce one another in making visible and tangible the Roman heritage that otherwise remains partly hidden beneath the modern city.

Keywords: Sopianae, Roman archaeology, heritage interpretation, cultural route, sustainable tourism

ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE AS A BASIS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Pécs's Roman predecessor, Sopianae, became an important administrative, economic, cultural and religious centre in the province of Valeria in the 4th century AD. The Late Roman and Early Christian monuments of the city's northern cemetery were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2000. The burial chambers, memorial chapels, wall paintings, biblical scenes and Early Christian symbols are not only outstanding examples of funerary architecture and painting, but also sources for the religious and social world of a community that lived more than 1,600 years ago.

A distinctive feature of the [World Heritage site in Pécs](#) is that, by descending below the surface of the modern city centre, visitors can enter a partly hidden archaeological landscape at the Cella Septichora Visitor Centre, the Early Christian Mausoleum and the burial monuments on Apáca Street. Presenting the site is therefore always also an interpretative task: how can the Late Roman city, the topography of the cemetery, the use of the funerary structures and their visual world be made comprehensible in a way that creates a personal connection while maintaining scholarly authenticity?

#RomansWineDanube was not a research project. Its archaeological significance lay in using research results as the basis for joint interpretation, tourism, and community development. Implemented within the Interreg Danube Region Programme between 1 January 2024 and 30 June 2026, the cooperation brought together organisations from 11 countries. Its aim was to develop lesser-known sub-destinations, involve local communities, create sustainable travel solutions and test new tourism offers based on Roman heritage and wine culture.

LOCAL ACTION PLAN AND COMMUNITY COOPERATION

One foundation of the project's methodology was integrated destination management. A *Local Action Plan* was prepared in Pécs, treating the archaeological and World Heritage sites not as isolated institutions, but as hubs of urban and regional tourism. The plan was accompanied by *Product Club* meetings. At these meetings, heritage professionals, tourism service providers, cultural institutions, civil-society organisa-

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tions, researchers, artists, winemakers and local producers worked together to develop sustainable tourism, the local offer and the Roman Festival.

Archaeological heritage was therefore not presented to the partners as a finished product, but became a starting point for joint reflection. Participants explored how the accessible Early Christian cemetery complex could be connected with the Roman city no longer visible today, the Pécs and Villány wine regions, local gastronomy, crafts, and cultural and creative programmes. The project also included joint branding and souvenir development, a storytelling workshop, green travel offers, a knowledge-transfer package and local tourism monitoring. The common aim of these solutions was to build a network of cooperation around the archaeological site that could remain operational after the project ended.

SOPIANAE REVIVED: ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE HEART OF THE FESTIVAL

The most visible element of the implementation in Pécs was the *Sopianae Revived! Roman Festival*, held on 29–30 August 2025. The two-day event connected St Stephen's Square, the Cella Septichora Visitor Centre, the Early Christian Mausoleum, the Sétatér promenade and other city-centre locations. Alongside living-history parades, dance, theatre and musical performances, craft workshops, light installations, gastronomic programmes and wine presentations, archaeological interpretation was also presented through several dedicated programme elements (Fig. 1).

At Cella Septichora, *Ludus Funeris* evoked Roman funerary customs in dramatic form; the professional programme *Wine-Drinking Romans* brought together an archaeologist, a winemaker and an ancient historian to connect material culture, viticulture and wine culture with the world of feasting. The *Macellum* Roman market provided an interpretative framework for everyday life, trade and crafts. The World Heritage sites were free to visit on both days, and Cella Septichora and the Early Christian Mausoleum received



Fig. 1. Re-enactors at the opening of the *Sopianae Revived! Roman Festival*, in the surroundings of the Early Christian Mausoleum, Pécs, 2025 (photo: #RomansWineDanube project archive)

a total of 1,200 visitors. The special guided tours and thematic walks also indicated that an interpretative format tested within a festival could later become part of the permanent offer.

The *Aelia and the Chest of the Sun* programme, aimed at children and families, was a particularly good example of archaeological site-based storytelling. In the fictional framing story, Aelia, the daughter of a master potter in Sopianae, searches for the pieces of the key to the chest containing the Sun. The three trials were linked to real heritage sites and archaeological themes: wine and funerary banquets in the Wine Pitcher Burial Chamber, Roman inscriptions and units of measurement in the Garden of Gravestones, and the colours and symbols of wall painting in the Early Christian Mausoleum. The live-acted adventure was supported by the Sopianae Roman Walk application; demand for the programme exceeded available places.

To measure its impact, the project also used a multilingual visitor questionnaire accessible via QR code. The 19-question survey examined visitors' perceptions of the festival and Pécs. Aligned with the *Local Tourism Observatory's* logic, the tool not only enabled retrospective evaluation but also provided data to refine the target-group definition, communication, and services for future programmes.

INTERNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER BETWEEN PÉCS AND OSIJEK-BARANJA

The 13th Training Academy of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe, held in Pécs and Osijek-Baranja County from 2 to 5 June 2026, served to present the project's results at European level. It was the first cross-border edition in the history of the Academies; more than one hundred Cultural Route managers and heritage, tourism and cultural professionals took part in the programme.

The opening took place at Cella Septichora, where international participants explored the Late Roman cemetery complex on night tours by headlamp (*Fig. 2*). The professional programme addressed the management of Cultural Routes, scientific cooperation, sustainable tourism, accessibility and youth engagement. Participants travelled by train from Pécs to Beli Manastir and then, at sites in the Baranja wine



Fig. 2. The 13th Training Academy of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe at the Cella Septichora Visitor Centre, Pécs, 2026 (photo: #RomansWineDanube project archive)



Fig. 3. Participants in the 13th Training Academy during the VR Classroom testing programme at the Kodály Centre, Pécs, 2026 (photo: #RomansWineDanube project archive)

region, examined how archaeological heritage, local products, gastronomy and lower-impact mobility can be organised into a single cross-border visitor route.

The significance of the Academy went beyond conference organisation. The World Heritage site in Pécs became at once a professional learning environment, a representative destination on the Cultural Route, and a showcase for the project's methods. The programme demonstrated that interpreting archaeological monuments, involving local service providers and testing public transport in practice can all form part of the same destination-development process (Fig. 3).

RESULTS AND LEGACY

At the project's final conference in Ljubuški, Bosnia and Herzegovina, on 18 June 2026, the *Product Clubs*, Local Action Plans, Local Tourism Observatories, joint branding and marketing activities, capacity building and innovative tourism solutions were summarised as the principal elements of the integrated destination-management framework. The partners signed a Letter of Sustainability, committing to continue the cooperation and carry the results forward (Fig. 4).

From Pécs's perspective, the most important result was not a single event or digital product, but a cumulative development process. The Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route was certified as a Cultural Route of the Council of Europe in 2015; today it connects 23 archaeological sites and 12 wine regions across ten countries. In 2018, Pécs's World Heritage sites, represented by Zsolnay Heritage Management Nonprofit Ltd., joined the Route as its first Hungarian member. The first major joint international development was the *Sopianae Roman Walk* application, which made 23 buildings and sites of Pécs's Roman city and cemetery accessible through 3D reconstructions, maps, audio content and digital city walks.

#RomansWineDanube added the next layer to this digital foundation. It complemented the Roman city



Fig. 4. Presentation of the results of the #RomansWineDanube project at the final conference in Ljubuški, 2026 (photo: #RomansWineDanube project archive)

made visible by the reconstructions with community cooperation, living-history programmes, a site-based story, links to wine and gastronomy, cross-border routes and measurable visitor experiences. The lesson from Pécs is that the long-term social use of archaeological heritage does not require the simplification of scholarly content, but rather its presentation through multiple, authentic and participatory approaches.

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