

One of the earliest paintings of Hungary: mural fragments from the Visegrád decanal church¹

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We know only little about the earliest paintings in Hungary, due to their rarity and fragmentariness. Therefore it was a great marvel when excavations in 1977-78 uncovered two 11th century buildings in Visegrád, near Sibrik Hill. Archeologists led by Mátyás Szőke found a small church with a semi-arched apse, and a later, square-ended one built over the first building. Mural fragments were found on the excavated apse wall and a strip on the South wall – nine meters long and one meter high, continuing round onto the West wall. The decoration showed animal figures enclosed in circles and panels with imitations of marble. Apart from the in-situ frescos mentioned above, thousands of mural fragments were unearthed, where the author of this paper had been working since 1995, putting together the pieces of fresco-fragments and thus attempting to get a better understanding of the iconographical programme and stylistic relationships of these very early paintings. The paper is an introduction to this rich material for a better understanding of one of the earliest surviving paintings in Hungary.

The town called Visegrád is located 30 kilometres North of Budapest, where the Danube cuts across the Visegrád mountains. The settlement is first mentioned in a charter issued in 1009 for the Bishopry of Veszprém as part of the diocese. In this earliest source, the bishop referred to it as “Visegrad civitas”, ie. Visegrád county, the predecessor of the counties that later became Pest and Pilis.² This county, along with the counties of Esztergom located above and Fejér below it, covered the areas on both sides of the river Danube. Its seat was a castle converted from a late-Roman fortress on the Sibrik hill, called Visegrád (“higher-lying castle”) by the Slavs living in the neighborhood at the end of the 10th century.³ The first parish church on Sibrik Hill was established along with the bailiff centre, which was set up in the early era of the Árpád dynasty. It was protected directly by the bailiff castle and its serfs. Parish priests launched the construction of churches with the help of bailiffs, and the two groups also acted together in enforcing Sunday as a public holiday, when everyone was required to go to church. Later, following the emergence and consolidation of the Church as an organisation, the parish priests based in the bailiff centres became the leaders of the episcopal districts.⁴

Therefore, the earliest churches in Visegrád can be linked to the above mentioned region close to the Sibrik hill area, but soon further churches and monasteries were established in the region. Among these churches and monasteries the most interesting

from the perspective of mural paintings is the one with the frescoes discovered on the Sibrik hill, East of the bailiffs' castle at the side of the castle hill. This is the so-called decanal church dated from the 11th century, built on the walls of the St. Stephen era parish church. This paper is an introduction to this mainly unpublished material, which can be considered as one of the earliest high quality mural fragments from Hungary.

The decanal church⁵

When the St. Stephen era parish church was replaced, they used it as a foundation for a larger church with a straight apse. The only nave of this latter church was divided into two parts by a timber apse screen. However, of this structure only the imprint of its sleepers in the South wall and the two postholes of its central door remained. (Fig. 1.)

In the Eastern section, three altars were constructed. In front of the main altar, in a tomb covered by a stone slab, an aristocrat could have been buried – based on the size of the tomb, possibly a child. In the Western part, a wide chancel tower was elevated with an incorporated celestory. Above two Corinthian columns of the ground floor underneath the celestory, the vault arches were held by shoulder stones decorated with carvings in the shape of a palmette.⁶

Onto the parapet of the first floor, five small, octagonal columns could have been placed according to Gergely Buzás's reconstruction. These columns might have supported the walls of the tower along the entire width of the nave, distributing the load on shoulder stones decorated by palmettes and ribbons. (Two fragments of the stone capitals were also published in the *Pannonia Regia* exhibition catalogue, cat. I-17, I-19).⁷

An external staircase led to the celestory from the South side, and a spiral staircase to the top floors of the tower.

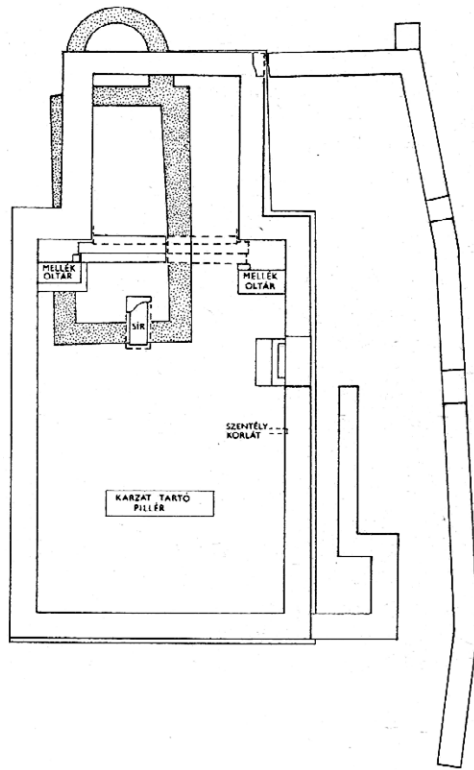


Fig. 1. Ground-plan of the churches. Drawing: Mátyás Szőke. Szőke, 1986, 7.

According to the observation and opinion of Gergely Buzás, the whole edifice to the West of the church was erected due to a change of plans during the construction. Following the completion of the chancel of the church, the rich interior decoration was finished. (We can assume this as it is possible to observe traces of red painting on one shoulder cornice.)

There was a veranda in front of the Southern gate of the church, used for burials. In some of its graves prestigious gold jewellery was found. One of these graves was covered by a sawed Roman column as a tombstone. In front of the Southern entrance of the veranda, a pile-structured timber house was erected. Traces of wooden buildings of a similar structure were also found in front of the Western entrance hall. Graves belonging to the priests of the church were located behind the sanctuary. In one of their tombs, an 11th century tin cup and paten were discovered, whereas in another a penitence iron belt was found.⁸

The church cemetery was located to the West of the building. Among the coin findings in the new cemetery tombs, which was separate from the old cemetery, the earliest ones belonged to King Solomon (1063–1074) and to Prince Géza. At one grave dated by a coin from the era of King St Ladislaus (1077–1095), it was observed that the excavation had already crossed the mortar layer of the second church building with the straight apse.⁹ Based on these observations the church is dated to the 11th century, probably during the reign of King Solomon.

Shortly after its completion, this church was abandoned in the 12th century, not allowing for a long time frame to be used. Some of the graves were exhumed, and its stones started being taken away. This can be proved by the fact that amongst the ruins of one of the side-altars, a 12th century coin was found. It was at the time of the 13th century great castle building activity following the Mongol invasion that the ruins of the building were finally dismantled, for the stones to be used in the construction of the residential tower of the lower castle.¹⁰

Murals of the decanal church

The earliest remains of Hungarian painting art are generally little known, which is partly due to the rarity of these remains, and partly to frequent repainting and fragmentaryness. Information about them is also only accessible for a narrow professional audience as they are published in specialised publications, if anything at all.

Therefore in the 1970s it was a great sensation when at the Visegrád Sibrik Hill excavations, painted mural fragments of amazing freshness turned up from the remains

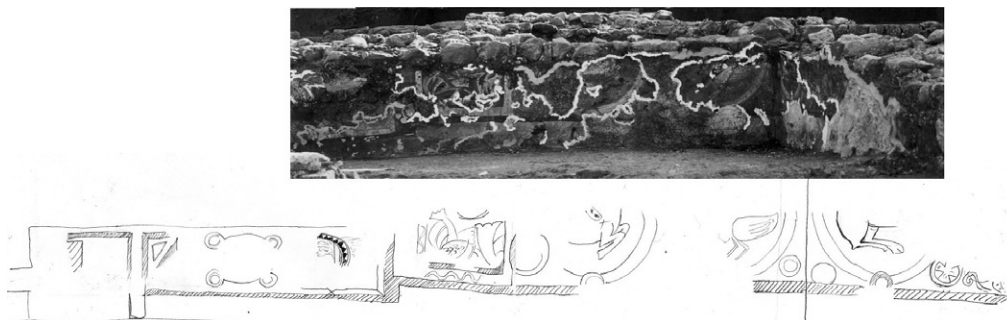


Fig. 2. In situ fragments on the Southern and Western parts of the wall of the nave. Photo: Hungarian National Museum, 1978. Drawing: Beatrix Mecsi

of the 11th century decanal church. Several documentary and newspaper articles have written about this occurrence.¹¹ However, after the sensation was over, the enthusiasm ceased a bit and focus shifted to the conservation and protection aspects,¹² and only in 1994, at the *Pannonia Regia* exhibition did they appear again in the spotlight.¹³ Academic investigation of the unearthed findings of paintings during the excavation has been in progress since 1995. What increases the difficulty of the work is that apart from the relatively intact paintings on the lower wall sections of the church, there are thousands of tiny fragments in addition. These were found in various sections at the excavation, and the academic investigation and reassembling of these little pieces requires great patience and care.

In this paper I provide a short report about the still ongoing research to draw attention to one of Hungary's oldest wall paintings, which is worthy of greater publicity and visibility. The 11th century church murals excavated from the Visegrad Sibrik hill church in 1977 to 78 can be divided into two main groups in terms of where they were found. The most spectacular details of the painting remained in the Southern part of the wall, up to the height of about 1 metre from the ground. On the Southern walls of the sanctuary there are also some fragments showing geometric patterns in the length of 1.6 metres. On the Southern and partly on the Western parts of the wall of the nave, in a length of 9 metres, painted fragments remained in the bottom parts.¹⁴ These mural fragments that remained in situ display round or square framed fields with animal figures (deer attacked by a tiger or a lion (?), a bird, etc.) or marble-imitation surfaces. (Fig. 2) In the line of the columns of the gallery there are interlocking fish-tails (Fig. 3), and in the nave an inlay of colorful marble-imitation tiles can be seen.



Fig. 3. Fragment of interlocking fish-tails.
Photo: Hungarian National Museum, 1978

The other – more exciting – parts of the findings are the fragments that come from the higher sections of the church walls. These fragments, coming from the archaeological excavations underground, can be regarded as parts of a pictorial programme, which due to its iconographic significance is much more important than the fragments from the lower sections of the church wall. However, due to their fragmentariness it is very difficult to reconstruct the iconographic programme they represent.

The shades of fine grades of ocher and light green colours, the brilliantly used white highlights that were found on a fragment showing a man's head recall the illusionism of the classical heritage of Byzantine painting that transferred traditions of early romanesque art.¹⁵ (Fig. 4) This is a unique piece finished in a Byzantine painting style, which spread across Europe in the 11th century.

Unfortunately, from this era there have been no similar, high-quality paintings found from the surrounding countries to date; thus we can only suppose the greatness



Fig. 4. Fragment of a male head. Photo: Attila Mudrák. Drawing: Beatrix Mecsi



Fig. 5. Fragment of a female head. Photo: Attila Mudrák. Drawing: Beatrix Mecsi

and importance of the visual programme, based on assembling smaller and larger fragments into one.

I was able to extend the fragment of a female head with further details. This finding was displayed at the *Pannonia Regia* exhibition (1994), in the Hungarian National Gallery and then at the international touring exhibition “Europe’s Centre at around AD.1000” (2000–2002) in the Hungarian National Museum in Budapest, and later in Krakow, Berlin, Mannheim, Prague and Bratislava.¹⁶ Behind the figure of this woman the loose yellow brush strokes that the background decoration was painted with is very likely to be a representation of a decorative curtain. (Fig. 5) Another detail of a female head mostly captures attention with a rich hairpiece. Unfortunately, no face has been found yet among the assembled details that would have fit into this fragment.

Besides the images, traces of inscriptions were also found among the details of figural mural fragments, but understanding them requires more concentrated work. Comparing these letter types with tables of mediaeval letter types can bring us closer to comprehending them, and the relations of these murals with other paintings.

The Visegrád ‘decanal church’ must have been a very important church, which can be proved on the one hand by the fact that the church, regardless of its small size, had very high quality decorative paintings (in that period it was very rare to paint a church fully).¹⁷ On the other hand its sculptural fragments can be connected to construction works made for the royal court, so it is highly possible that the same sculptors were working at the royal constructions in Tihany, Veszprém and Pilisszentkereszt¹⁸ as in Visegrád. The research of relations of style and historical aspects within this significant archeological find is still ongoing, hopefully bringing us closer to the relics from an early era that deserves to be known by a broader audience.

Notes

- 1 This paper was published in Hungarian language in *Ars Perennis*, ed. Anna Tüskés, (Budapest: CentrArt Egyesület, 2010), 19–23. based on the lecture of the author at ELTE University at the 2nd Conference of Young Art Historians, Budapest, 27–28 November 2009.
- 2 György Gyórfy, “Budapest története az Árpád-korban” (History of Budapest in the Age of the Árpáds), in *Budapest Története* (History of Budapest), ed. László Gerevich (Budapest, 1973), 219–349.
- 3 Mátyás Szőke, *Visegrád. Ispánság Központ* (Visegrád. Bailiff Center), *Tájak Korok Múzeumok kiskönyvtára* 244. (Budapest, 1986), 1.
- 4 Szőke, 1986, 4–5.
- 5 See Gergely Buzás’s detailed explanations: Gergely Buzás and Orsolya Mészáros, “A középkori Visegrád egyházainak régészeti kutatása” (Archaeological Research of the Churches of Mediaeval Visegrád), *Magyar Sion* New Series 2 (44.) (2008) Nr. 1: 71–103.
- 6 Buzás, 2008, 71.
- 7 Sándor Tóth, “I-17. I-19. catalogue entry,” in *Pannonia Regia. Művészet a Dunántúlon 1000-1541* (Pannonia Regia. Art in Transdanubia 1000-1541), ed. Árpád Mikó and Imre Takács, (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Galéria, 1994), 218.
- 8 Buzás, 2008, 72.

- 9 Buzás, 2008, 72.
- 10 Buzás, 2008, 72.
- 11 Márta Sárvári, “Visegrád vallomása” (Testimony of Visegrád), *Delta* (1979) Nr. 2: 10–13; Károly Kiss, *Ebek harmincadján* (‘Abandoned’) (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1982), 213–228; Károly Kiss, “A Sibrik-domb titka” (The secret of the Sibrik-hill), *Magyar Nemzet* n.d.; Károly Kiss, “Dialektikus műemlékvédelem?” (Dialectical monument protection?), *Magyar Nemzet* 47 (1984) Nr. 53: 10; László Császár, *Nemzeti Kincseink sorsa* (The Fate of Our National Treasures), *Magyar Nemzet* 47 (1984) Nr. 53: 10.
- 12 Restorer: Ferenc Rády. Ferenc Rády, “The Decanal Church at Visegrád: Discovery and Removal of the Eleventh-century Frescoes,” in *Case studies in the conservation of stone and wall paintings: preprints of the contributions to the Bologna Congress, 21–26 September 1986*, ed. N.S. Brommelle and Perry Smith (London: IIC, 1986), 101–104; Building design for protecting the ruins: Ferenc Erdei (OMF), 1986.
- 13 Melinda Tóth, “III-1. catalogue entry,” in *Pannonia Regia. Művészet a Dunántúlon 1000–1541* (Pannonia Regia. Art in Transdanubia 1000–1541), ed. Árpád Mikó and Imre Takács (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Galéria, 1994), 218; Melinda Tóth, “Falfestészet az Árpád-korban. Kutatási helyzetkép” (Mural Painting in the Árpád-era. A state of Research), in *Ars Hungarica* 23 (1995) Nr. 2: 139.
- 14 Mátyás Szőke, “A visegrádi várispánsági központ kutatása” (Research of the Visegrád Bailiff), *Dunakanyar, A Dunakanyar Intéző Bizottság Tájékoztatója* 17 (1980) Nr. 2: 35–37.
- 15 M. Tóth, 1995, 139.
- 16 *Európa közepe 1000 körül 2.* (Europas Mitte um 1000 / Art in Central Europe Around Year 1000), ed. Alfried Wiczorek and Hans Martin Hinz (Stuttgart: Theiss, 2000), 584–587.
- 17 M. Tóth, 1995, 139.
- 18 Szőke, 1980, 35–37.

