

“...THEY DON'T WANT TO BE LOCKED UP IN THE CONTUMATZ, AND JUMP OVER THE FENCES...”

The Pricske quarantine institution in the eighteenth century

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When the archaeological research of the Pricske quarantine institution started in the summer of 2009, no one expected that quarantine would be such a topical issue due to a pandemic in 2020. Quarantine is not a novelty: in the Middle Ages, the mandatory isolation period was first introduced for maritime transport in the port cities of Ragusa (now Dubrovnik, Croatia), Marseille, and Venice. In the early eighteenth century, quarantine institutions were established along the borders of the Habsburg Empire as part of a sanitary cordon (cordon sanitaire). They protected the borders for almost 150 years and were meant to stop the spread of contagious diseases (especially the plague). The present paper is focused on the development of the quarantine system at the passes of the Eastern Carpathians. Furthermore, by the example of the excavated quarantine area at Pricske, I demonstrate what has remained of it at an archaeological site in Eastern Transylvania.

THE PLACE WHERE PEOPLE AWAIT HEALING

In the early eighteenth century, Transylvania was afflicted by the plague almost every year. It spread via trade relations with Wallachia and Moldavia. Consequently, there was a need for an organised health protection system and quarantine institutions. Such institutions were established along major commercial routes, at mountain passes and river valleys. A contiguous defensive line and *cordon sanitaire* connecting the quarantine institutions formed between the Eastern Carpathians and the Adriatic Sea. In Transylvania, the following quarantine stations were established (Fig. 1) towards Moldavia: Óradna (Rodna), Gyergyótölgyes (Tulgheș; after 1808), Gyergyószentmiklós–Pricske (Gheorgheni–Pricske), Csík–Gyimes (Ciuc–Ghimeș), and Ojtoz (Oituz; VOJKORI, 2009, 269–292; SECHEL, 2014, 65–66). Towards Wallachia, similar stations were established at Bodzavásár (Buzău), Felsőtömös (Timișu de Sus), Törösvár (Bran), Vöröstorony (Turnu Roșu), and Vulkán (Vulcan; SECHEL, 2014, 66). At the most important points, surveillance towers were erected, between which border guards (*plájász* in Hungarian) patrolled and directed travellers towards the quarantine establishments. The purpose of the *Pestcordon* thus created was to halt the spread of the epidemic along the borders of the Habsburg Empire. It was meant to protect not only lands under Austrian suzerainty from the plague, but the whole of Europe, as the disease was constantly devastating the Ottoman Empire (LESKY, 1972, 97–105).

Quarantine institutions appear under different names in written sources (*vesztegintézet*, *vesztegelőhely*, and *karantén* in Hungarian, *contumacia* in Latin, *carantină* in Romanian, *contumaz* in German). These terms refer to the building complex where individuals suspected of being infected with a contagious disease (such as cholera and the plague) and their goods were inspected and isolated, and they also served as the accommodation of the staff of the quarantine institution (POPOVICI & STOIAN, 2002, 25). In the eighteenth century, they were alternatively called ‘health surveillance houses’ (*egészségkémlőház* in Hungarian) and ‘the place where people await healing’ (*a hely, ahol a gyógyulásra várnak*, in Hungarian; PETRI, 1823, 481; BARTAL, 1901, 173). Initially, the period of isolation was forty days. People had to spend it at the quarantine institution together with their goods (NEGRU, 1972, 315). However, later, the length of quarantine often changed depending on the severity of the epidemics spreading from Wallachia and Moldavia: it could be twelve days, three weeks, twenty-eight days, forty-two days, or even eighty-four days in the most severe cases.

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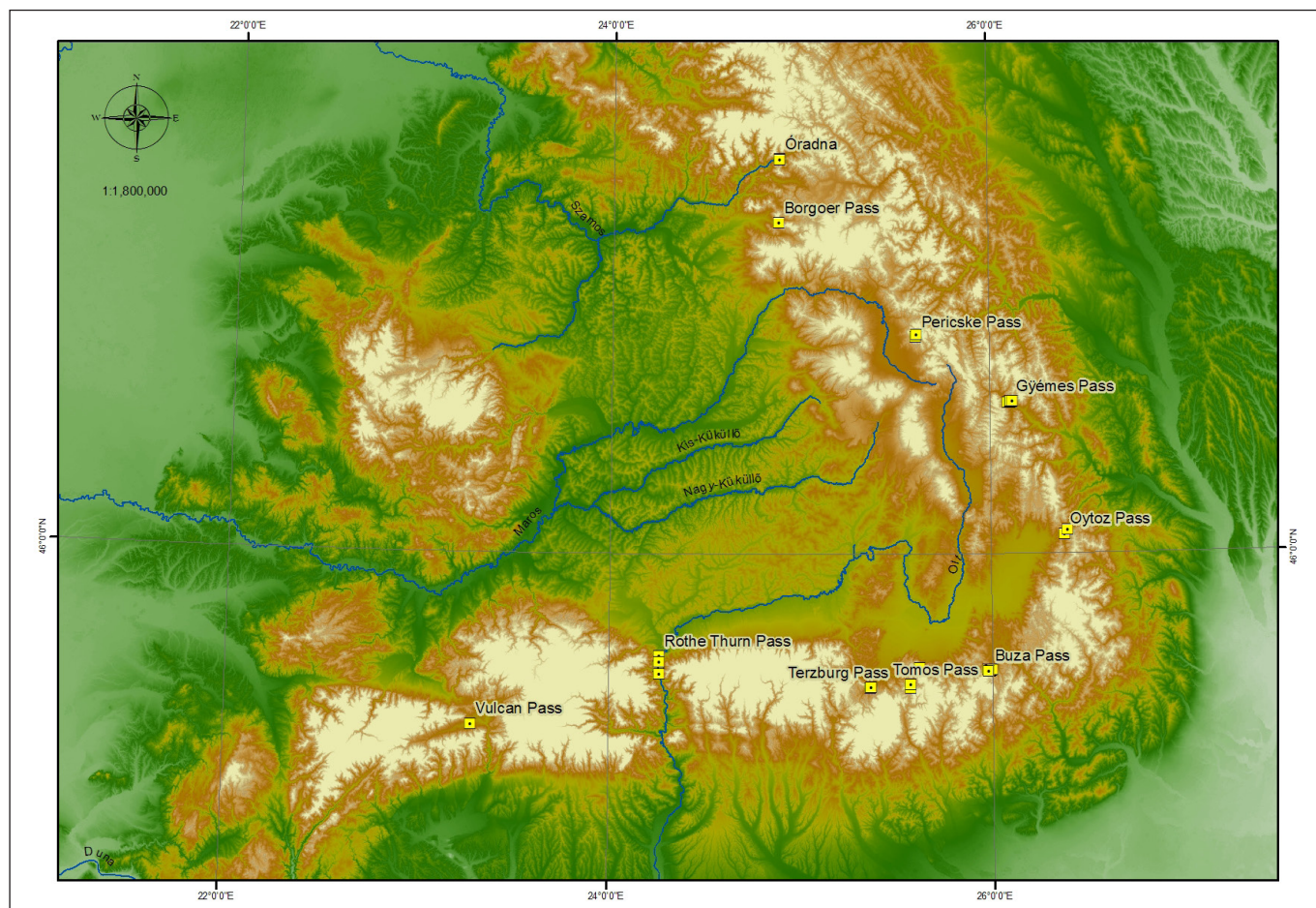


Fig. 1. Quarantine institutions in Transylvania (by Antal Kosza)

THE BEGINNINGS

The establishment of quarantine institutions was closely connected with the organisation of the border guard system in the 1860s (SZÁDECZKY, 1908, 585; GÖLLNER, 1973, 26; EGYED, 2016, 389). However, archival research in recent years has yielded new data, which revealed that the question is much more complex and goes back to earlier times. Pursuant to the 1728 decree of King Charles III of Hungary (1711–1740), sanitary stations were established along the border of Transylvania and the Romanian Principalities (LESKY, 1972, 97; POPOVICI & STOIAN, 2002, 33–34). Beginning with 1731, travellers and their goods were isolated on the borders, and experienced surgeons were dispatched to the places of quarantine. However, all this did not seem to have happened in the framework of an organised institutional system (National Archives of Romania, Harghita County Office, F 27, IV/36, 1–2).

The construction of the quarantine institutions started in 1732. On 11 January 1732, the Royal Gubernium of Transylvania sent a circular to the seats along the border to construct appropriate buildings at the places of quarantine. They were instructed to make beams, slats, shingles, and planks, and to transport them to pre-defined locations (Pricske and Gyimes/Ghimes; National Archives of Romania, Harghita County Office, F 27, IV/37, 1–2). It was under the reign of Maria Theresa, in the early 1760s, that the second wave of establishing quarantine institutions began in connection with the organisation of the Szekler border guard system. The latter was meant to defend the eastern borders, control trade, give protection against epidemics spreading from the east, restrict migration, as well as the suppress espionage, smuggling, and various trespasses. Following Maria Theresa, Emperor Joseph II also issued decrees on the development of the border defence system. The measures about quarantine lost their significance in the second half of the nineteenth century. By this time, the development of public health care and proper hygiene had already stopped the spread of major epidemics which were still devastating in the previous centuries.

THE QUARANTINE INSTITUTION AT PRISKE AS REFLECTED IN WRITTEN SOURCES²

The Pricske quarantine institution is located 12 km from Gyergyószentmiklós (Gheorgheni) and approximately 1.5 km north-east of Pricske Peak (1545 m), at a site called Kőházak ('Stone Houses'; Fig. 3). This is the highest point of the Gyergyó (Giurgeu) Mountains, from where the area can be easily overseen. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Austrians built a small fortress here, the excavation of which will not be discussed in the present paper (DEMJÉN, 2016, 139–145). The 1732 order for the establishment of a quarantine institution at Pricske was communicated by Gregor Sorger, Bishop of Transylvania and councillor of the Gubernium. The written order mentions the location of the Pricske quarantine (*ad passum St. Miklos seu Perecske*) and discusses in detail the materials required for the buildings and their quantities (National Archives of Romania, Harghita County Office, F 27, IV/37, 1–2). As the builders could not find oak beams of the right size, they were instructed to use beech beams and place stones under the solebars (National Archives of Romania, Harghita County Office, F 27, IV/39, IV/43). The only source about the completion of the constructions is an administrative map made in 1735 by military architect Johannes Conradi de Weiss, which shows the six buildings of the *Contumatz* in *Piritske* (Fig. 2).

During his 1773 travel in Transylvania, Emperor Joseph II visited the quarantine station at Pricske and described the conditions he saw there in detail: the buildings were poorly built, and had neither a surgeon nor a prison. There were as many as eighty-one people at the quarantine station at that time (BOZAC & PAVEL, 2006, 650–654, 722). In 1778, they started to re-organise the quarantine institutions and re-evaluate the sanitary situation of the provinces of the empire (Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, *Siebenbürgische Akten*, 251/6, 330–373). In connection with Pricske, the idea of transforming the quarantine into a cross-border reception point (*rastel-lum*) under commercial and military administration emerged (KISS, 2005, 82; BALÁZS, 2007, 72, 158, 368). This idea was finally rejected and it was decided to partly restore the buildings. It was then that the plan to build a prison, a chapel, and a chaplain's house was finally abandoned (Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, *Siebenbürgische Akten*, 251/6, 349–350). According to a written source from 1797, there were not enough guards any longer and discipline became rather lax, too (National Archives of Romania, Harghita County Office, F 27, LVIII / 36). With the re-organisation



Fig. 2. The Pricske quarantine institution on a map from 1735. Source: maps.hungaricana.hu (Downloaded on 2 October 2020.)



Fig. 3. The location of the Pricske quarantine institution in relation to Gyergyószentmiklós/ Gheorgheni on the First Military Survey. Source: mapire.eu (Downloaded on 1 October 2020.)

² For written documents on the Pricske quarantine station in detail, see DEMJÉN, 2016, 145–150.

of the border beginning in 1808, the Pricske quarantine institution lost its former role, the buildings were abandoned, and a new quarantine started to be constructed in Gyergyótölgyes/Tulgheș (National Archives of Romania, Harghita County Office, F 26, 264, 1). The archives of Vienna and Budapest preserve numerous plans and section drawings of Transylvanian quarantine stations, especially dating after the second half of the eighteenth century. However, about the Pricske quarantine institution, no ground-plan has been discovered so far.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION AT THE QUARANTINE

The ruins of major stone buildings can be still clearly seen in the field at the place called Kőházak ('Stone Houses') today (*Fig. 4*). However, the remains of buildings are not only hidden under the mounds that are visible in the terrain but during the drought, the soil marks of several other buildings may also be observed. Geomagnetic and ground-penetrating radar surveys were carried out in the area, based on which altogether twelve buildings could be identified. They were arranged in two relatively regular rows in the eastern and western parts of the site (DEMJÉN & GOGÁLTAN, 2015a, 397–398; DEMJÉN, 2016, 152–153).

The archaeological investigation of the quarantine area was conducted between 2009 and 2013, and in 2015 (DEMJÉN & GOGÁLTAN, 2015, 369–377; DEMJÉN & GOGÁLTAN, 2015a, 395–407; DEMJÉN, 2016, 135–194; DEMJÉN, 2018). We unearthed a total of six buildings: four residential buildings and two outbuildings (stables). During the excavations, the remains of three buildings consisting of three rooms and a two-room residential building came to light.

The floor plans of the buildings with three rooms (*Fig. 5*, No. 2, 5, and 6) followed the same concept. They only differed in terms of orientation (buildings No. 2 and No. 5 were oriented east–west, while residential building No. 6 was oriented north–south) and the outbuildings annexed to them subsequently. There were no major differences in the size of the buildings: their length ranged from 15.2 m to 15.6 m and their width from 6.3 m to 6.6 m. In each case, the entrance was in the middle of the building. It could be archaeologically observed in building No. 5, where the remains of steps carelessly made from



Fig. 4. The remains of the quarantine institution in the field (2009)



Fig. 5. Buildings with three rooms: A: building No. 5; B: building No. 2; C: building No. 6

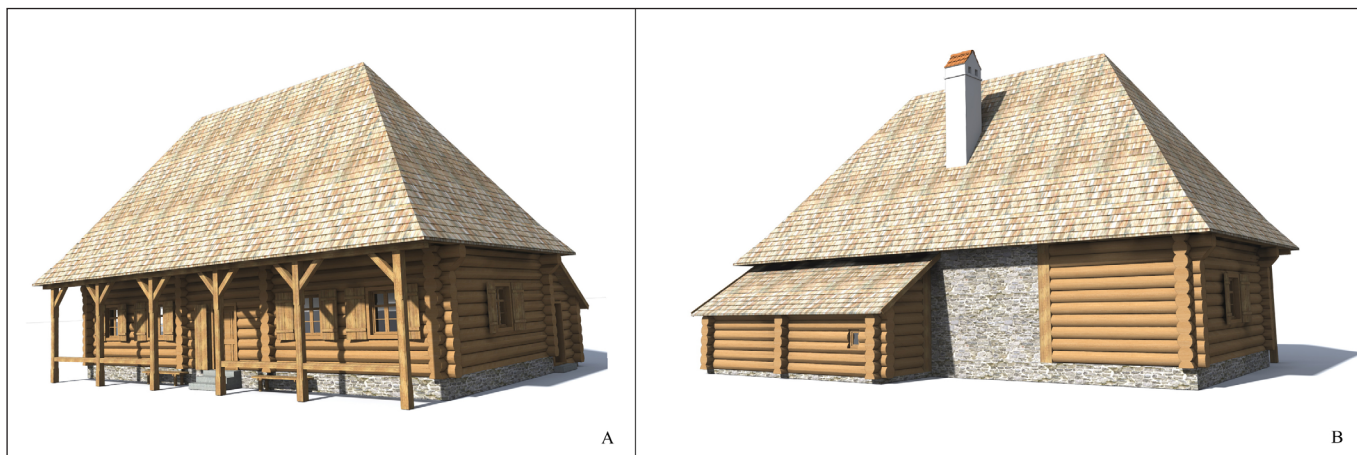


Fig. 6. Graphic reconstruction of building No. 2 (by László Györfy, Larix Stúdió)

rocks were discovered, as well. The room in the middle probably functioned as a kitchen, and this hypothesis is supported by the legend of the plan of the Tömös quarantine institution surveyed in 1824. The living rooms found on the two sides of the building could be approached from the kitchen.

The structure and construction of the buildings were also identical. The walls separating the rooms and the foundation of the south wall of the building were thicker in the immediate vicinity of the stove. The stone walls separating the rooms were carefully laid. They were plastered and whitewashed on the inside. Based on the observations, the walls in these parts of the buildings were apparently built of stone because they supported the chimney (Fig. 6/B). In other parts of the building, the walls were somewhat thinner and were possibly made of timber.

Remains suggesting the existence of a wooden porch were observed in two cases. In the south-west corner of building No. 2, we discovered a post-hole lined with rocks, and we found a similar post-hole in the northern corner of building No. 5. Presumably, there could have been a porch on the western and northern sides of the buildings, respectively (Fig. 6/A).

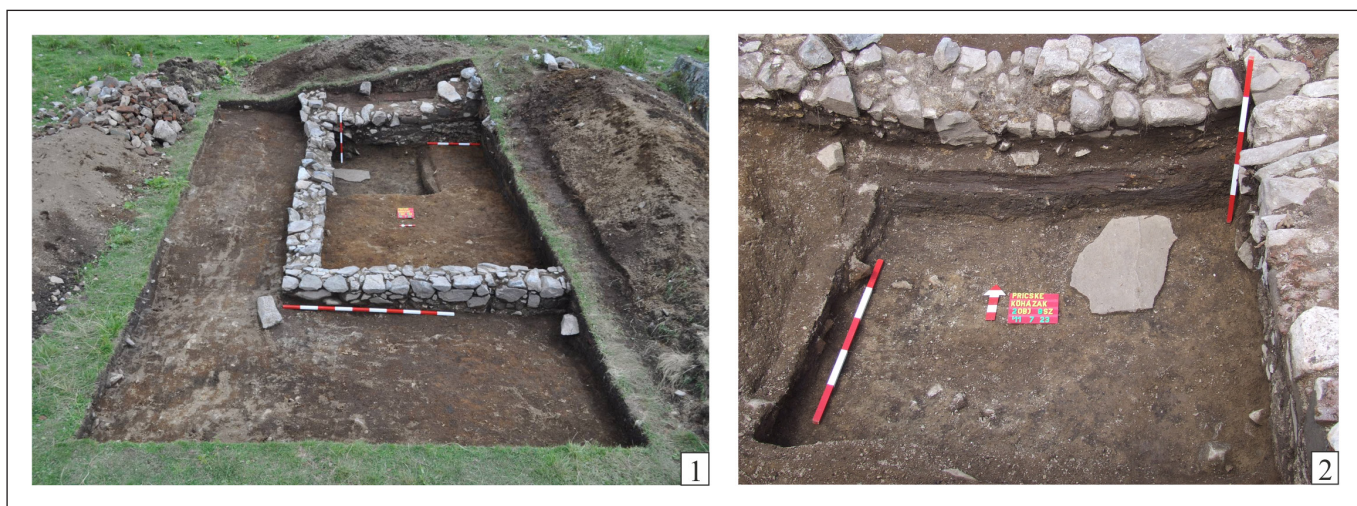


Fig. 7. 1: The western room of building No. 2 with a storage pit in the north-east corner; 2: The storage pit

One of the buildings (marked No. 2) had a rectangular storage pit measuring 1.60×2 m. It was dug under the floor in the north-east corner of the western room (Fig. 7/1). The sidewalls of the storage pit were lined with horizontal planks. Additionally, in the north-western and south-western corners, the remains of vertical beams could be observed, which supported the side walls. In the north-eastern corner of the storage pit, a large stone slab was placed on the bottom of the pit (Fig. 7/2).



Fig. 8. 1: The western room of building No. 5 with a post-hole in the northern corner; 2: The western room with the foundations of outbuildings; 3: The pit of the latrine

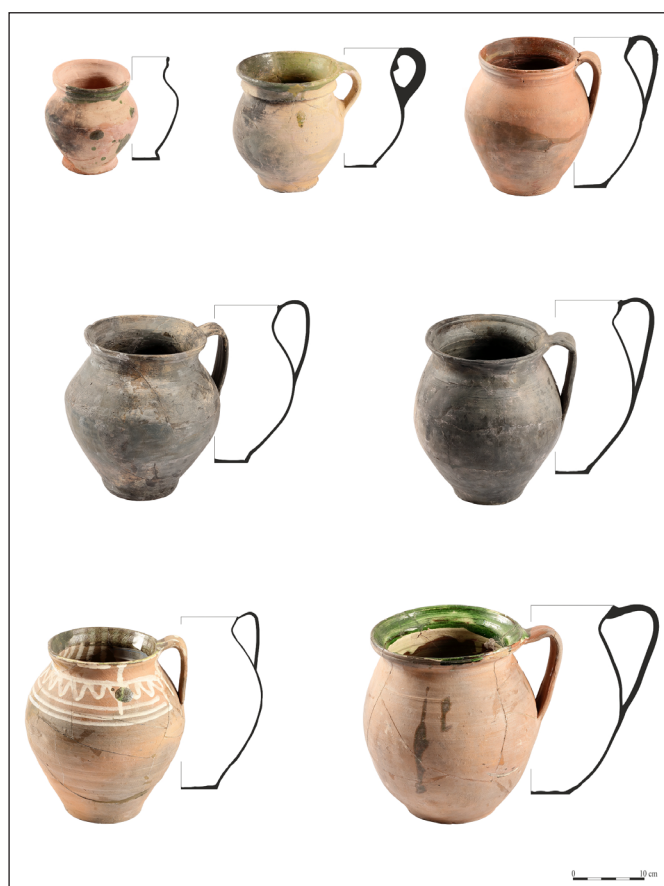


Fig. 9. Ceramic vessels discovered in the latrine
(photo by László Dezső)

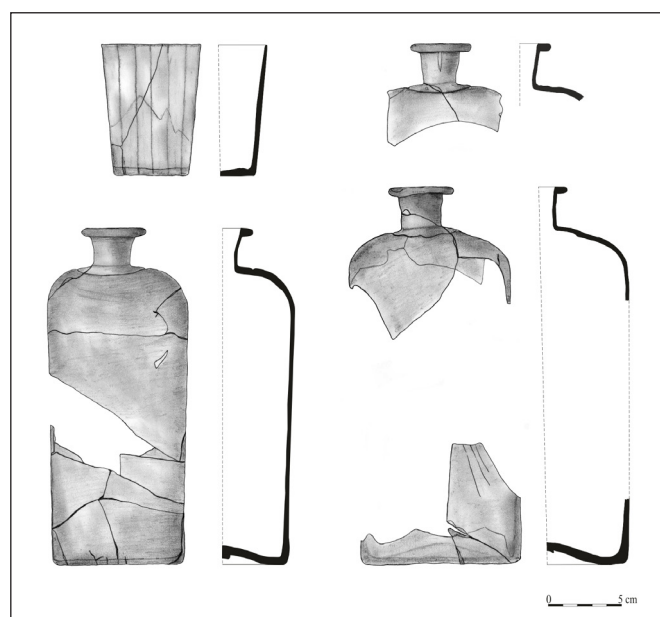


Fig. 10. Glass finds discovered in the latrine

To the south wall of building No. 5, a 7 m long and 1.8–2.0 m wide outbuilding was annexed subsequently (Fig. 8/1). The two-room building must have had timber-framed walls over the dry stone foundation. In one corner of the eastern room, the pit of a latrine was discovered (Fig. 8/2), which yielded a large number of finds dating from the second half of the eighteenth century (fragments of ceramic pots, glass bottles, and a glass beaker; Figs. 9 and 10). Their dating is also confirmed by a copper coin of Maria Theresa minted in 1780, which was discovered in the western room of the building (Fig. 11).

The kitchen found in the middle of the building had a brick floor, while the lateral rooms had wooden floors. In each building, the imprint or remains of beams supporting the planks of the floor could be observed.

All of the three rooms in the buildings were heated. Based on the unearthed foundations, various stoves appear to have been built. The walls of



Fig. 11. A copper coin issued by Maria Theresa in 1780
(photo by László Dezső)



Fig. 12. 1: Reconstruction of the stove found in the western room of building No. 2 (by Nándor Laczkó); 2: Foundation of the reconstructed stove



Fig. 13. 1–2: Foundation of the stove found in the western room of building No. 5; 3: Traces of plastering and whitewashing

brick fireplace also known from ethnographic sources (Fig. 12/1). In the western room of building No. 5, based on the floor plan and vernacular parallels, we could reconstruct a tiled stove with a spare fireplace (Fig. 13; SABIÁN, 2003, 72–78).

Based on contemporary analogues, in the case of all three residential buildings, the oven in the central room (i.e. the kitchen) could have been a table-like structure with an open fireplace at the top and a brick chimney constructed above. Its contemporary analogues can be seen in the Haydn House in Kismarton (Eisenstadt, Austria; Fig. 14/2). Its Transylvanian analogue is depicted by the 1824 section drawing of one of the guardhouses belonging to the quarantine institution in Alsótömös (Timișu de Jos, Romania), and a similar one can be seen on the plans and section drawings made of the buildings of the quarantine station in Zimony (Zemun, Serbia) in 1774 (National Archives of Hungary, Plans–Section T1, No. 107/3; Fig. 14/3).



Fig. 14. 1: The foundation of the fireplace unearthed in the kitchen of building No. 2; 2: The kitchen of the Haydn House in Kismarton/Eisenstadt (photo by Elek Benkő); 3: Detail of a building from the Zimony/Zemun quarantine station (source: MOL, T1, No. 107/3)

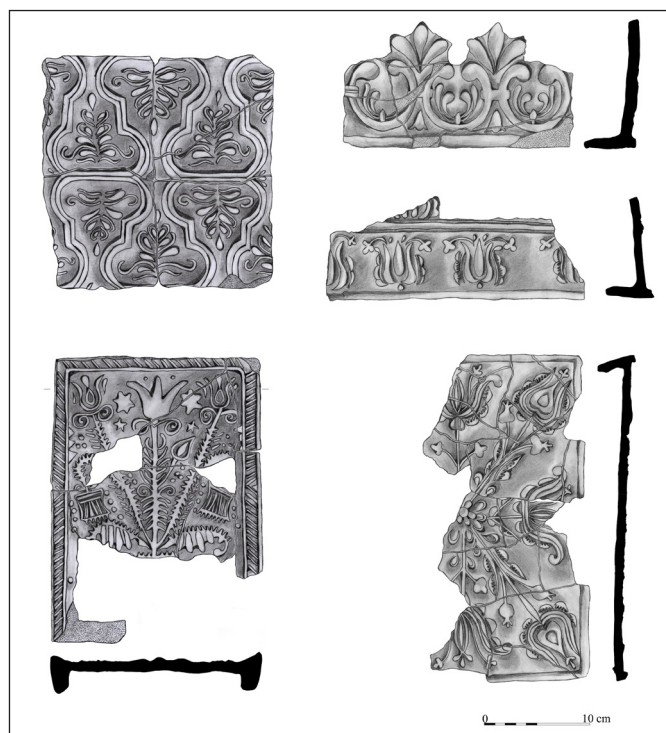


Fig. 15. Types of stove tiles discovered in the quarantine area



Fig. 16. Building No. 4

The debris found around the foundations of the stoves and the area surrounding the buildings yielded several stove tiles decorated with endless patterns, as well as geometric and vegetal motifs, together with top tiles belonging to them (Fig. 15).

In the south-western part of the quarantine area, we discovered the only building that consisted of two rooms (building No. 4), which must have differed from the other buildings because it was constructed later. The building was 11.5 m long and 5.40 m wide (Figs. 16–17) and also had a stable (indicated with No. 3 in Fig. 22). The building had a stone

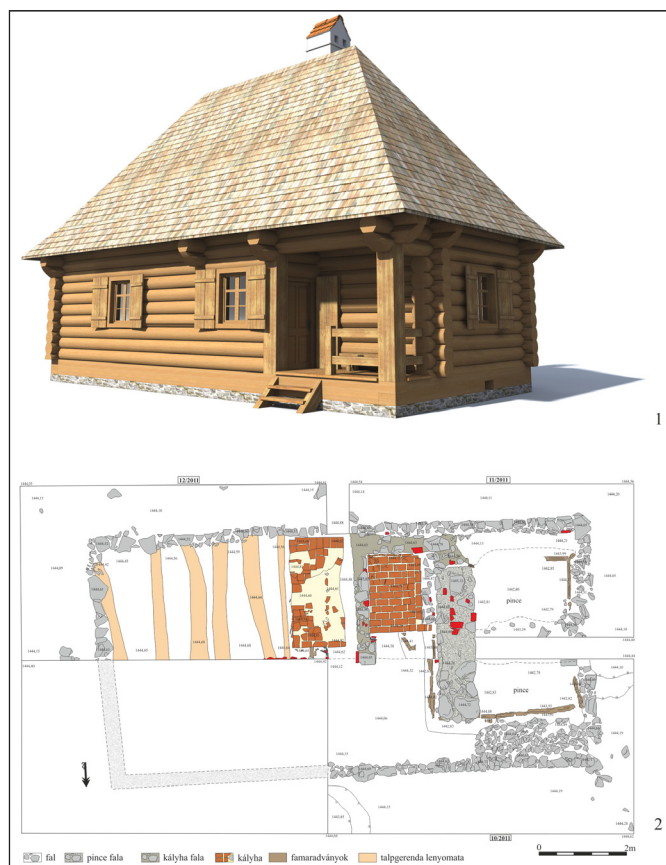


Fig. 17. 1: Graphic reconstruction of building No. 4 (by László Györfy, Larix Stúdió); 2: Ground-plan of the building

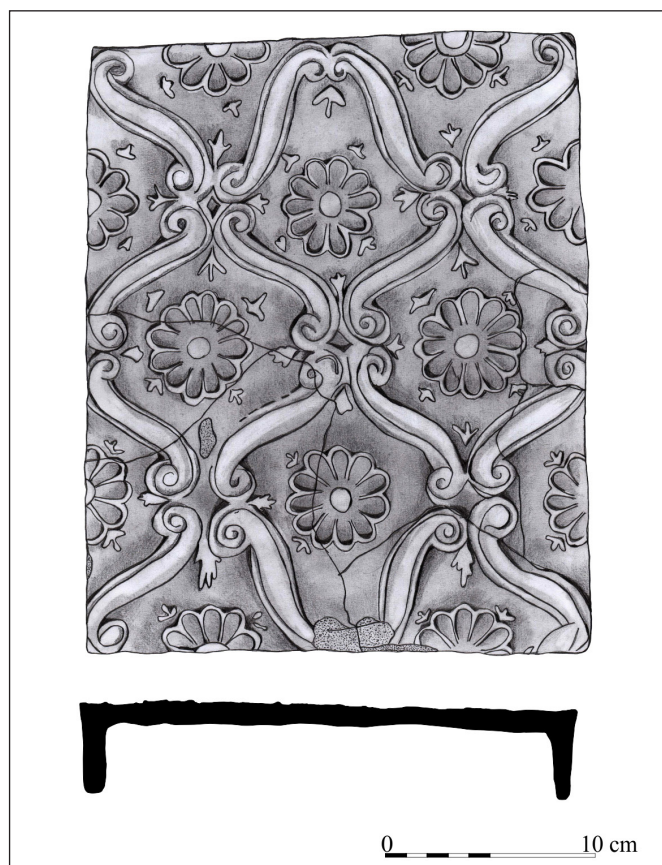


Fig. 18. Stove tile divided by spindle-shaped grid pattern from the cellar of building No. 4

foundation laid without mortar and must have had timber-structured walls, and its entrance may have opened from the north-west side. In both rooms, the floor was made of wood planks. Both rooms of the building were heated. The room in the east may have had a prismatic stove, while the other room must have had an open fireplace with a chimney. A 1.81 m deep timber-lined cellar measuring 3.60×2.20 m was dug under the western room. In the back-fill of the cellar, we discovered the stove tiles of the demolished stove of the building (Fig. 18). The stove tiles and pottery shards found in the back-fill of the cellar suggest that the building was used in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The remains of two outbuildings (stables) came to light in the quarantine area. One of them (building No. 1; Fig. 20/1) belonged to a multi-room building that was not subjected to archaeological investigation. The other, smaller stable was used by the dwellers of building No. 4 (building No. 3; Fig. 19), as it was located only five metres north-west of that residential building. The stables comprising two rooms had dry stone foundations and must have had timber-framed walls. Their entrances were probably on the south. The eastern room of both stables had no foundation on the southern side, from which we can infer to that they were partly open, shed-like structures. Their contemporary analogues are shown by the 1784 survey of the quarantine station in Pancsova (Pančevo, Serbia) (MOL, T62, No. 64/1; Fig. 20/2) and the 1791 survey of the Gyimesbükk (Ghimes-Făget, Romania) quarantine (BIRÓ, 2010, 30–39).

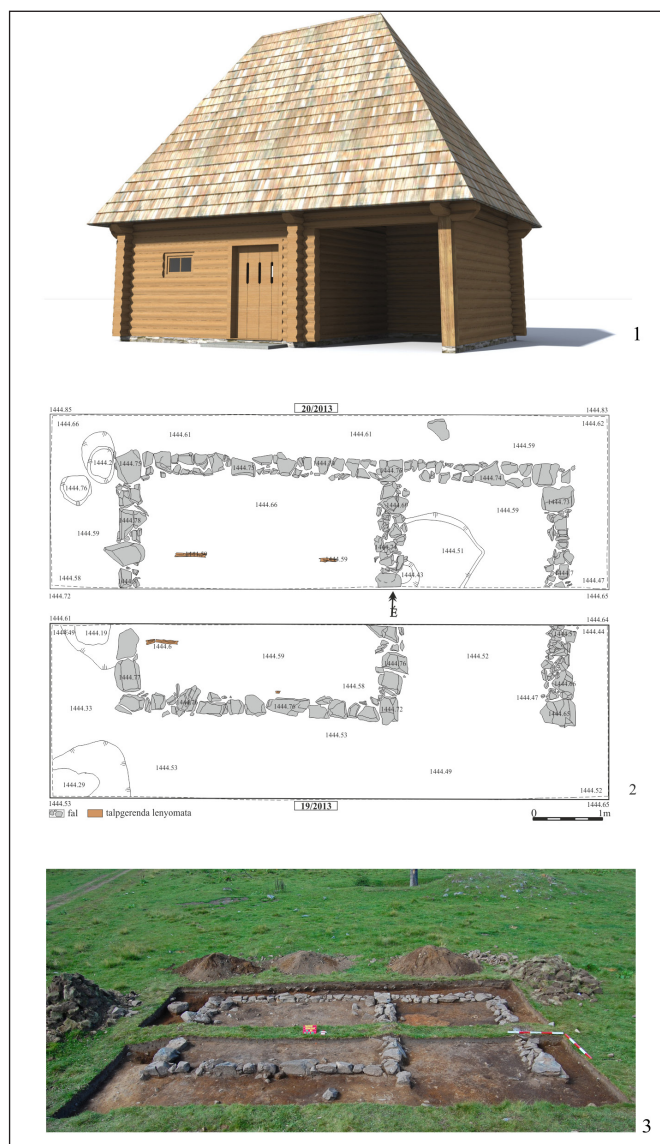


Fig. 19. 1: Graphic reconstruction of stable No. 3 (by László Györfy, Larix Stúdió); 2–3: Plan of the stable

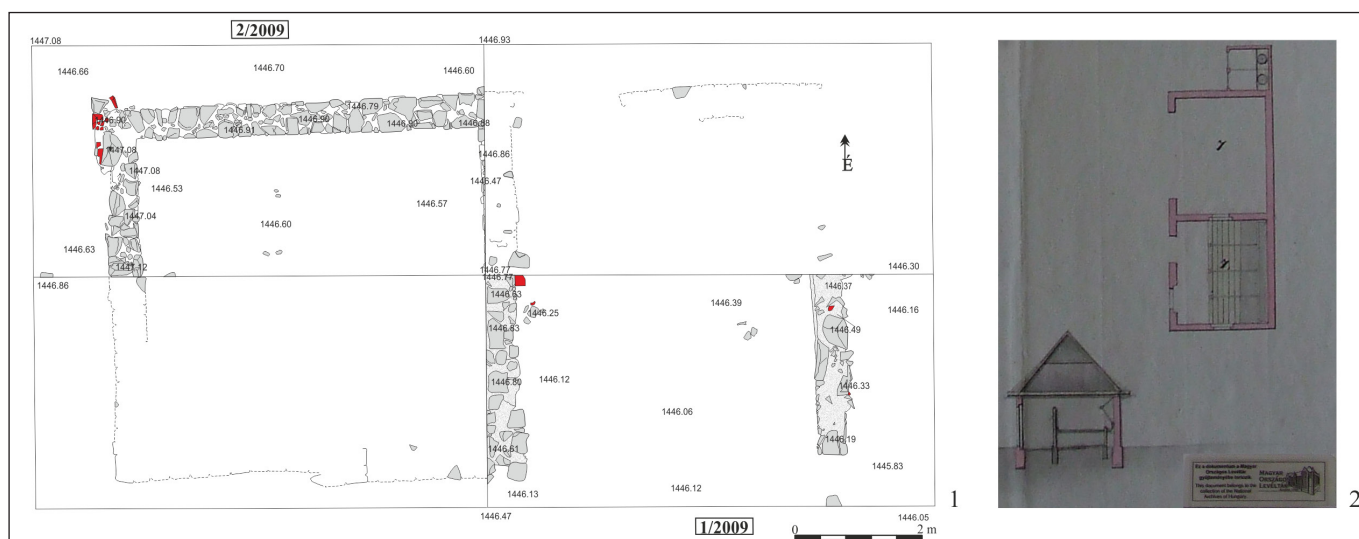


Fig. 20. 1: Ground-plan of stable No. 1; 2: Detail of the plan of a stable in the quarantine at Pancsova/Pančevo from 1784. Source: MOL, T62, No. 64/1

The research results suggest that the Pricske quarantine institution had its heyday in the second half of the eighteenth century, which is also supported by written documents. In addition to the fragments of stove tiles, the archaeological excavations brought to light several kitchen utensils (cooking vessels: pots, three-legged pans; tableware: bowls, plates, jugs, fragments of glass bottles and beakers, as well as lots of table knives and pen-knives). There were also items belonging to clothes (buttons, belt buckles, fittings, and beads; *Fig. 21*), and fragments associated with weapons (flints and bayonet fragment). Numerous pipe fragments have also been unearthed, indicating that smoking was a form of pastime in the quarantine (DEMJÉN, 2018a, 221–252).

SUMMARY

The archaeological excavations conducted between 2009 and 2013, as well as in 2015, provided important data for understanding the structure, construction, and interior layout of quarantine buildings established along the border (*Fig. 22*). We were able to reconstruct the layout and buildings of an eighteenth-century quarantine institution at Pricske with the help of relevant written documents, cartographic representations, the comparative study of ground-plans and section drawings of contemporary quarantine institutions, interdisciplinary research and, last but not least, archaeological investigations.

The buildings of the Pricske quarantine institution were arranged in two regular rows along the eastern and western sides of the site. We excavated two residential buildings in the eastern part and two residential buildings with two outbuildings in the western part (one residential building and one stable differed from the others because they must have been built later). The dwelling houses stood apart from each other. They had more than one room and were heated in each case. The walls of the three-part buildings were built of stone near the fireplaces, while the other walls could have been timber-framed. The layout of the buildings clearly showed that each house had outbuildings, a stable, a storage room, and a latrine. It was difficult to decide whether the excavated buildings were the shelters of the quarantine personnel or the travellers and merchants to be isolated from one another were also accommodated there, or perhaps they served both purposes. It is not possible to determine either, in which building were the director, surgeon, officers, servants, and other professionals accommodated. According to written sources, the quarantine at Pricske had neither a chapel nor a prison. Although written documents suggest that plank fences separated the buildings from each other – which are also shown on the floor plans of contemporary quarantine institutions –, these could

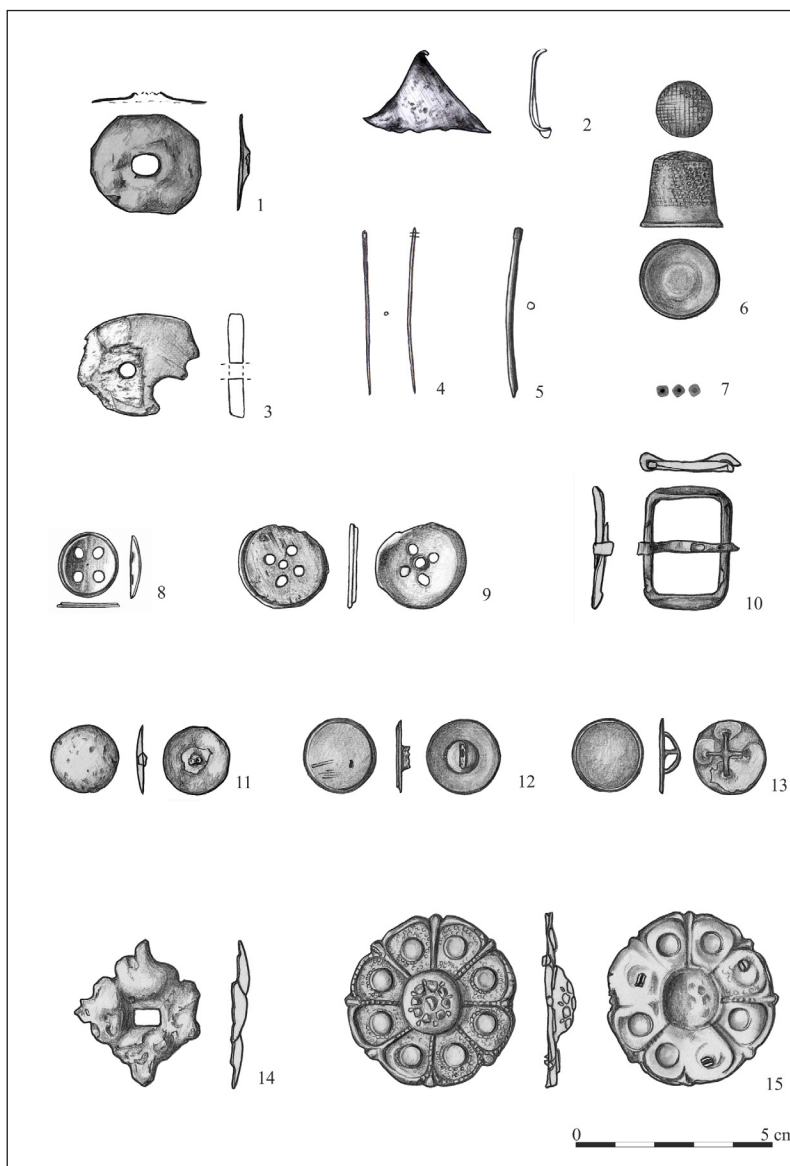


Fig. 21. Finds from the quarantine area

not be observed during the excavations near any of the buildings.

The unearthed archaeological finds (DEMJÉN, 2018a, 221–252; DEMJÉN, 2019, 179–204) provided an insight into the daily life of an eighteenth-century quarantine station via the objects used, highlighting a lesser-known aspect of contemporary material culture. At the same time, the investigations also offered important data about the material culture of eighteenth-century Eastern Transylvania, since the available written sources can be linked to archaeological finds and modern pictorial representations. The animal bone material found among the archaeological finds reveals the eating habits of the contemporary army serving on the border (TUGYA, 2016, 195–210).

In the modern archaeology of Romania, the excavation at Pricske is a novelty, given that it was a planned excavation of a site dating to a period which falls outside the traditional time frames of archaeology customarily accepted in the region. As we know when the quarantine institution was used (1732–1808), the unearthed artefacts can also be precisely dated. Accordingly, in the future, it will be possible to date more accurately those finds from urban excavations that have been identified as modern but could not be more closely dated.

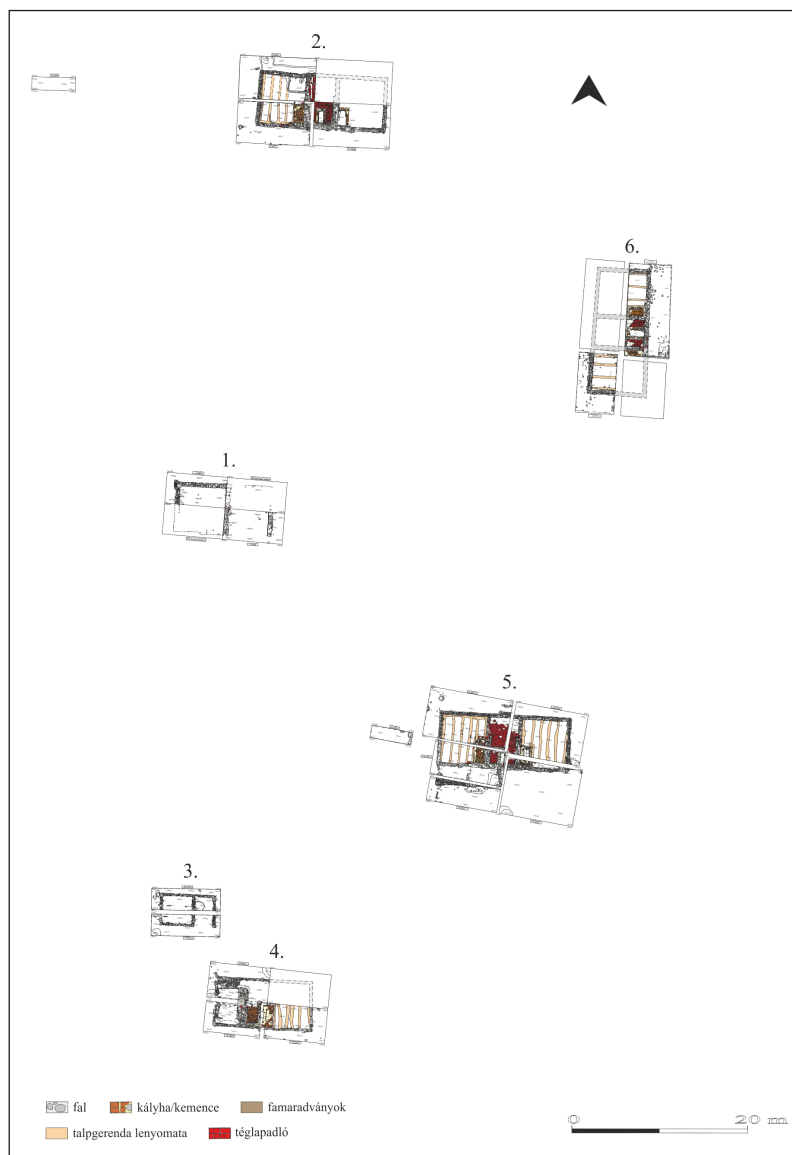


Fig. 22. General plan of the excavations conducted in the quarantine area

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