

THE MEDIEVAL PARISH CHURCH OF BAIÁ MARE: PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH PROJECT

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Baia Mare (Nagybánya in Hungarian, a town today in Northwestern Romania) was an important mining town in medieval Hungary. It was called Rivulus Dominarum, meaning “Lady’s Creek.” The town owed its emergence and prosperity to gold and silver mining and related minting. The town, therefore, was an important economic centre, not only in the region but also for the whole Hungarian Kingdom. Once a large parish church stood near the main square, but it became almost entirely dismantled, only its tower standing since the second half of the 19th century. From 2012 to 2014, archaeological excavations were carried out in the parish church and its surroundings; the results allow us to outline a much more detailed picture of this significant medieval building.²

Keywords: church archaeology, medieval parish church, Baia Mare

BAIA MARE IN WRITTEN SOURCES

The earliest mention of the settlement dates back to 1329. Shortly after that, in 1347, the community living there gained extensive urban privileges, later confirmed and further expanded several times. At the end of the 15th century, the town was fortified with walls, the remains and traces of which are still visible today. Due to gold and silver mining in the area, the town became an important economic centre of the medieval Hungarian Kingdom (SCHÖNHERR 1910, 276–406; MAKSÁI 1940, 98–102, 182–183; NÉMETH 2008, 8–9, 17, 249–251; BALOGH 2018, 318–324).

The town’s parish church was dedicated to King St. Stephen; it was erected on a minor square just south of the main square. A privilege charter issued in 1347 granted the parish priest half of the grain- and wine-tithes, while the other half had to be used to construct a parish church. The charter confirming the town’s privileges in 1376 does not mention church construction, suggesting that the main building works were completed by that time. In 1387, the town council made an agreement with the parish priest. The agreement, signed in front of the Altar of the Holy Virgin, declared that the priest had to employ 14 chaplains and a competent preacher from his income to serve at the parish church. The town’s privilege charter was transcribed in the sacristy of the parish church in 1445, while in 1478, its chapels dedicated to the Holy Virgin and All Saints were given rights by the pope to grant indulgency. Additional 15th-century sources mention other altars dedicated to St. Maurice, Mary Magdalene, and St. Valentine, respectively (SZŐCS 2018).

PREVIOUS RESEARCH OF THE PARISH CHURCH

By today, St. Stephen’s Church got almost completely destroyed; only the southwestern tower has been preserved, which locals today call Stephen’s Tower. Next to the tower, a part of the western gate with Gothic-style carvings has survived, too. Art historian Imre Henszlmann highlighted the architectural and artistic values of the church building only 17 years after its demolition. He underlined the artistic similarities with St. Elisabeth’s Church in Košice and explained their analogy with a vital trade route crossing Baia Mare, connecting Northern Poland, Silesia, and Upper Hungary with Transylvania and lands east of that towards the Levant (HENSZLMANN 1864, 127–129, 150–151). A collection of written sources related to the church, Stephen’s Tower, and the persisting remains were presented in detail by Gyula Schönherr, a historian born in Baia Mare

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² The processing and evaluation of the excavation results have not yet been finished. From 2017 to 2020, the author’s work was supported by a Bolyai Grant from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

(DÉCSÉNYI 1892). These data were completed and reinterpreted by art historian, historian, and archivist Károly Szász, also born in Baia Mare, in his work compiled mid-20th century but published only in 2000. He focused primarily on the two stone carvings recovered from the parish church, representing Christ on the Mount of Olives and the Arrest of Jesus (the latter also known as “Kiss of Judas;” SZÁSZ 2000). More recently, but before the excavations, another art historian, Szilárd Papp, surveyed the related sources and, based on an extended set of analogies, gave a detailed analysis of the building’s artistic details and art historical importance within both the close and broader regions (PAPP 2011). Papp found analogies to the details of the western portal on St. James’s Church in Levoča (Lőcse in Hungarian), St. Michael’s Church in Cluj (Kolozsvár), and the choir and sanctuary of the parish church in Sebeş (Szászsebes). Moreover, in accordance with previous interpretations, Papp determined the two stone carvings of the Passion cycle as having been created on Parler style but narrowed down their dating and linked the artefacts to the end of the first building phase of St. Stephen’s Church.

RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

The site of the parish church and the surrounding park was rehabilitated, the works having been preceded by archaeological excavations between 2012 and 2014.³ The excavations revealed persisting foundations, floors, and internal details of the church building, the relics of lesser buildings, and some graves of a churchyard cemetery. However, the rescue excavation only included the areas directly endangered by reconstruction works (Fig. 1).⁴ The narrow timeframe and resources enabled us to unearth the archaeological layer



Fig. 1. Baia Mare, P-ța Cetății. Survey map of the excavated area

³ The excavations were carried out by the Historical and Archaeological Museum of Maramureș County, Baia Mare. The field team was led by dr. Dan Pop and comprised Marius Ardeleanu, Sorana Mișca, Bogdan Bobăna, and Péter Levente Szócs (archaeologists); Zamfir Șomcutean, Dragoș Conțiu, and andrian Ghinea (field technicians); Mária Kis, Dorian Ghiman, Emőke Kádár, and Ligia Szendrei (conservators). For a survey of the results, published in Romanian, see Szócs & POP 2020.

⁴ The presented illustrations were designed and made by members of the excavation team (see footnote 3).

sequence down to the subsoil only at some points, as mostly, we had to stop at construction depth. Consequently, the excavation of the parish church building and its surroundings cannot be considered complete. Nonetheless, currently, this is the most comprehensive, properly documented field research of this monument, one that has provided us with essential information regarding the church building's arrangement and the chronology of its building phases.

A thick infill layer consisting partially of the church building's debris was visible everywhere in the excavation area, both in and outside its ruins. We have discovered the persisting remains of the church building, including parts of the last floor, under this layer. These structures were heavily disturbed in the 20th century by pipelining works. The damage was quite extensive in places, rendering the reconstruction, dating, and interpretation of the revealed ruins difficult or, in some cases, even impossible.

THE CHURCH BUILDING

The discovered walls belonged to the church building's foundations and elevation walls. They were built of crushed stone save for the inner and outer façades, which were made of ashlar with crushed stones compacted between them. In places, only the traces of the one-time ashlars could be seen as those were removed from the wall when the building was dismantled and became reused in other constructions. The masonry of both the elevations and the foundation is of good quality. The unearthed foundations outlined a rectangular nave with two side aisles and a tower (Stephen's Tower) slightly off the line of the western and southern façades at the southwestern corner. The south-eastern corner at the end of the southern side aisle was polygonal, supported by two buttresses, while the north-eastern corner at the end of the northern side aisle was rectangular. The choir was rather long, divided into three sections, and had a polygonal ending (*Fig. 2*). A sacristy was attached to the northern side of the choir; its ground plan could not be clarified. Furthermore, we have outlined the foundations of the western portal, the southern and northern porticos, and further side-chapels attached to the main building.

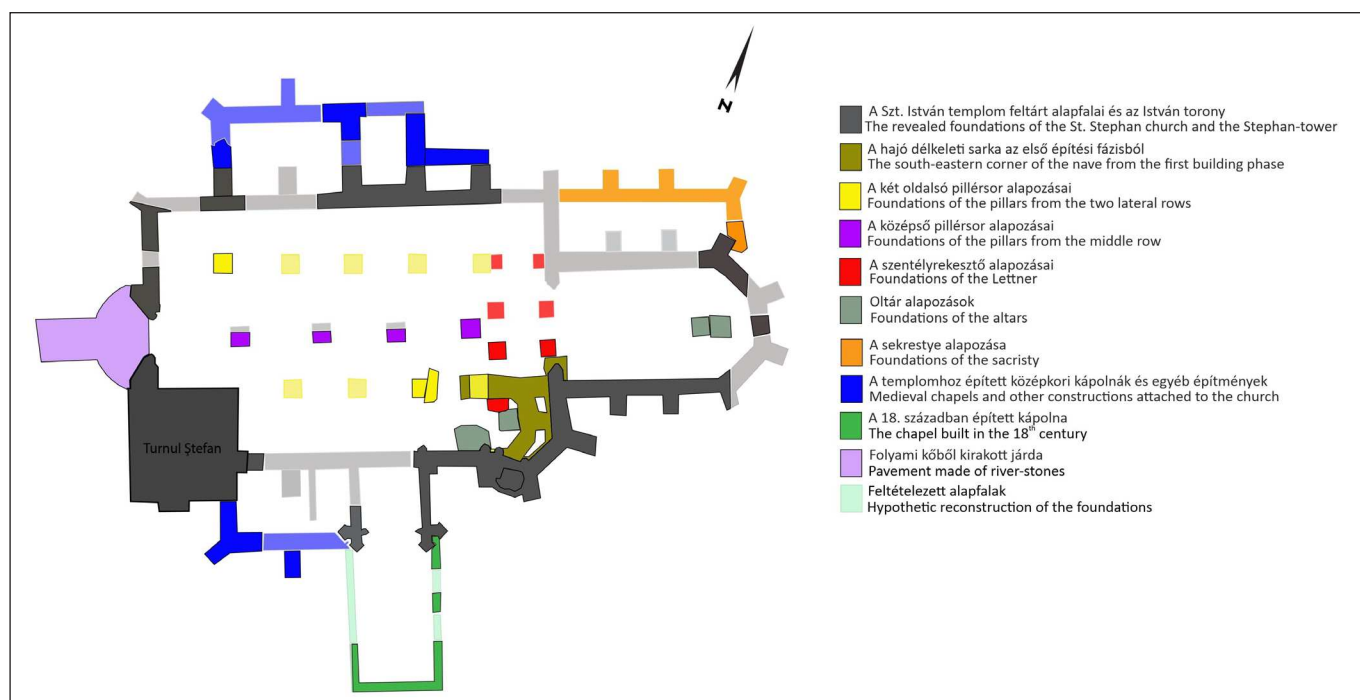


Fig. 2. Reconstruction of the ground plan of St. Stephen's Church

The excavation confirmed and, in some detail, specified our current knowledge, based on 18th- and 19th-century drawings, of the church building's arrangement. The most significant result was determining the positions of different architectural features, including buttresses, pillars, and altar foundations. We have



Fig. 3. Remains of the nave's and side aisles' stone floor



Fig. 4. Plinths of the northern side aisle's northern exterior wall

identified a semicircular walking surface paved with river stones in front of the western portal, 0.80–1 m below the current surface. It sloped slightly toward the Crișan (Magyar) street. In the interior of the church building, a floor made of stone slabs, also incorporating reused medieval tombstones with inscriptions, corresponded to this outdoor pavement (Fig. 3). Despite most parts of the stone slab floor had been destroyed by gas and electric pipelines and ground rods of lightning conductors, we were able to date it to the early modern period and identify as the last floor phase of the church building.

On the northern side, someplace, the elevation walls were preserved two ashlar-row high. Furthermore, parts of the plinth, compiled of nicely carved cascading oblique and cylindrical elements, connecting foundations and elevation walls, were also preserved in this section (Fig. 4). Moreover, we found the foundations of the northern portico in this zone; it was attached to the exterior walls of the parish church building, and its floor was made of brick. By the eastern side of the portico, a small chapel was created with a rather simple method: a wall was erected between two buttresses, enclosing the gap between them (Fig. 5). We also found the foundations of an additional chapel on the western side of the northern portico. This chapel was wider than the portico and stretched to the westernmost buttress of the northern side aisle's northern exterior wall.

According to 18th- and 19th-century drawings, a row of pillars existed once along the main axis of the nave. We discovered the foundations and parts



Fig. 5. The northern side-chapel, created between two buttresses



Fig. 6. Foundation of a pillar in the central row

of shafts of these pillars, and it was clarified that they belonged to the last building phase of the church building, as their foundations comprised reused bricks and stone carvings, including a tombstone with inscriptions (*Fig. 6*). Stratigraphic observations also confirmed the pillars' dating: their plinth corresponded to the latest stone floor of the church. These observations confirmed a hypothesis by Szilárd Papp about the present two-nave structure being the result of early modern transformations. The available archaeological record, however, does not enable a more precise dating (PAPP 2011, note 28). Upon checking our archaeological observations with the related written sources, it could be assumed that the transformation can be linked to the major reconstruction after a great fire in 1552 when the whole roof became destroyed and the building remained uncovered for several years. All this happened at a time when Protestantism gained support in Baia Mare (during the 1540–50s), and the local protestant congregation took over the ruined church building. All these factors might have been at work behind the radical transformations. After that, no notable structural modification took place during the building's lifetime except for some reparations after another fire in 1769 (SZÁSZ 2000, 21–33). Those works included the construction of a chapel next to the southern portico and creating stone pavements in front of the western façade and in the southern portico.

BUILDING PHASES OF THE CHURCH

Persisting parts from the earliest building phase of the church building were discovered on the southern side of the southern side aisle and by the south-eastern corner (*Fig. 7*). Only there differed the building's outline in the first phase from the later one: the early foundations in that area were situated 1–2 m westward. In both the early and late phases, the south-eastern corner was supported by buttresses, and the southern side aisle had a polygonal end; the foundation of an altar was discovered inside. All the above suggest that this part of the church building served as a chapel or a side sanctuary. The church of the second building phase was the one the exterior walls of which remained unchanged until the complete demolition of the building. As far as field observations go, the foundations belonging to the two building phases overlapped everywhere but in the area of the south-eastern corner (as mentioned above). In the second building phase, the floor was also raised by about 30 cm, as visible at the foundation of the pillars supporting the vaults of the second phase and in the depth difference between the plinths of the first and second phases. The analysis of the discovered archaeological finds, particularly of the carved stone fragments, has not yet been finished; however, the expected results promise a much more accurate picture of the architectural evolution of the church building.

In the second building phase, a turret housing a spiral staircase was also erected outside the building, attached to the south-eastern corner's exterior wall. We discovered its entrance that opened to the

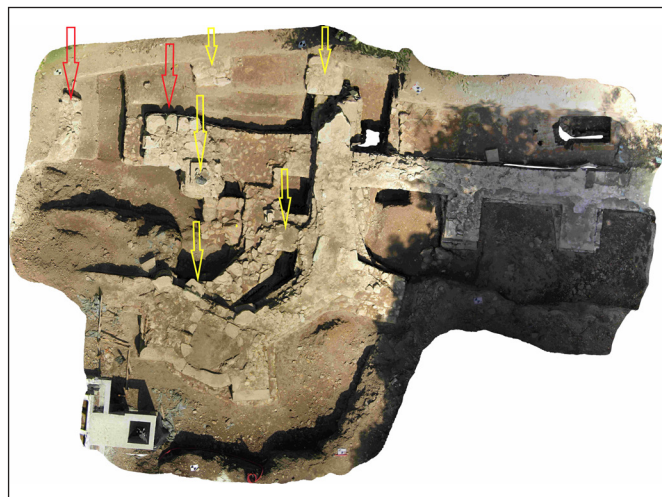


Fig. 7. South-eastern corner at the end of the southern side aisle. Red arrows: foundations of the southern row of side pillars, yellow arrows: foundations of a Lettner



Fig. 8. Remains of a turret and spiral staircases by the south-eastern corner

interior of the southern side aisle and also that the stairs were renewed: we found the remains of two sets of steps, one starting left of the northern entrance, the other by the southern wall (Fig. 8). After the turret had been abandoned, its interior was filled up and used as a burial place.

In the southern part of the nave, we identified the foundations of the southern side-pillar row; this row was established in the first building phase and repaired and reinforced in the second (Fig. 7, marked by red arrows). The row of pillars was aligned with the southern wall of the main choir, the north-eastern corner of Stephen's Tower, and the buttresses on both sides. This arrangement is a relic of the building's original three-nave structure, preserved in both building phases until the creation of a central row of pillars as part of its transformation to a two-nave structure in early modern times. Our observations also revealed that the nave had the same width as the main choir (cca. 10 m), while the side aisles were relatively narrow (cca. 6 m).

We have also identified the remains of a double row of pillars in the south-eastern part of the building's interior, in front of the choir (Figs. 2 and 7, marked by yellow arrows). Their position at the border of the nave and the choir, next to the turret with a staircase, suggests that these pillars were part of a Lettner (rood

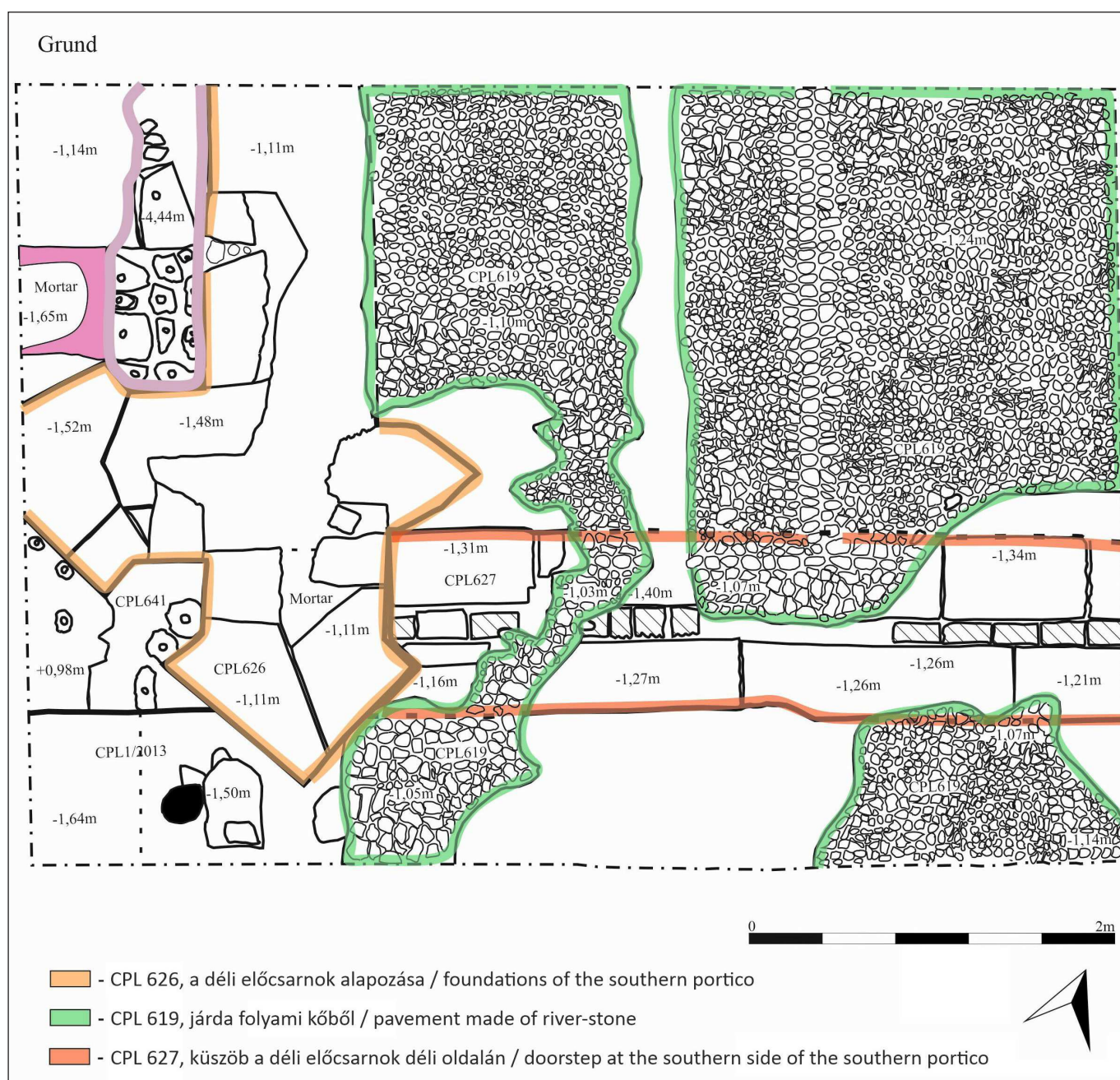


Fig. 9. Discovered parts of the southern portico

screen), built in the second phase and dismantled at some point, probably when the staircase was put out of use.

A further side construction was once attached to the southern exterior walls, right opposite the northern portico. We observed that the foundations of this construction and the main building's southern exterior walls in the second building phase complete each other, suggesting having been built at once (Fig. 9). This southern side-building was supplied with buttresses with diamond-shaped cross-section a unique type appearing on parish church buildings in Cluj (Kolozsvár) and Sebeş (Szászsebes). By its floors and the walking surfaces identified outside, the structure was identified as another portico that – unlike the northern one – was planned and built



Fig. 10. Brick floors from two building periods in the choir

together with the main building in the second building phase. Next to this portico, we identified the remains of another side-chapel between the western wall of the southern portico and Stephen's Tower. After the fire in 1769, another small chapel was attached to the southern side of the southern portico.

In the choir, we discovered the foundation of the main altar, a crypt built of stone slabs, and the foundations of the sacristy attached to the northern wall of the choir. It was heavily disturbed by works related to the building's demolition and later projects, rendering it impossible for us to determine the sacristy's precise extents and internal arrangement. The southern wall of the choir and the attaching buttresses were preserved in a much better condition: there, even the remains of the rising walls were two ashlar-row high.

We have identified several floor levels in the interior of the church building, the latest one of the nave and side aisles, paved with carved stone slabs. The floor of the same period in the sanctuary was made of bricks laid oblique to the building's main axis. We also have identified a previous floor in the choir and the southern side aisle, about 30 cm below the first one (Fig. 10). The older floor was also paved with bricks but in a different pattern: they were arranged with their long sides parallel with the main axis of the building. Several features discovered in the layers between the two floors indicate that the older floor was renewed several times. Furthermore, the in-between layers contained a significant number of artefacts with everyday tools (e.g., a thimble) and coins. The oldest coins were minted during King Louis I (TÓTH 2020, no. 2.32.1.1 and 2.46.1.1), while the youngest one was issued at the time of King Mathias Corvinus (HUSZÁR 1979, no. 718–719).⁵

Several observations offered invaluable information for us to date some features. The first building phase of the church and the earliest burials were dated by coins in the graves, minted during King Charles Robert in the 1330s (TÓTH 2020, 1.53.1.1). Until the processing of the find material is completed, our grounds to date the features of the next building phase and later interventions are less firm. The extended south-eastern corner and the pillars of the Lettner were built over burials, one of which contained a *denar* of King Charles Robert (TÓTH 2020, 1.53.1.1). The oldest brick floor can also be linked to the second building phase. Based on the dating of the coins recovered from the layers between the two floors, the older floor was established at the time of the end of King Louis I's reign and remained in use until the time of Matthias Corvinus. The form of the buttresses supporting the southern portico, built in the second phase, refers to the last third of the 14th century. Two denars of King Louis I were found in the stone slab crypt in the choir's main axis (TÓTH 2020, 2.23.1.1). Later, interventions and reparations were quite frequent while the church was in use; the related traces can be detected, with archaeological methods, in floor renewals and the construction of altars and lesser structures. As mentioned above, the subsequent significant structural rearrangement occurred most probably after 1552, when a central row of pillars was erected, and the building was transformed into

⁵ I am grateful to Orsolya Gálvölgyi (BTM, Budapest), who helped me determine the coins.

a two-nave church.

BURIALS IN THE CHURCHYARD

During the excavation, more than 700 burials were unearthed, but the great number of human bones in a secondary position suggests thousands of disturbed or destroyed burials in the area. While the earliest documented burials date back to the first half of the 14th century, most were established in the early modern period, the most recent in the 18th century. Most early modern graves were undisturbed and usually much deeper than the medieval ones. These burials were usually richer in grave goods than the earlier ones, comprising jewellery items and clothing accessories, remnants of cloths, metal fittings of coffins, and other coffin parts. An excellent example of these burials is a child's grave from the churchyard, that contained a coffin with the date of the death in silver nailhead-trimmed letters: 16 August 1763 (Szócs 2020).

BUILDINGS AROUND THE CHURCH

Some chapels and altars mentioned in written sources were most probably inside the church, while others can be identified as attached side-constructions. Besides, we have found the remains of several constructions around St. Stephen's Church that cannot be identified this way as the related written sources only contain some relatively late and uncertain references. Two such chapels were discovered east and south-east of the church's choir, respectively (*Fig. 1*). Based on the presence of buttresses, the ground plan of both is Gothic. Currently, we cannot date either of them more precisely, but the building to the south-east can be identified with certainty as St. Martin's Church, mentioned only by early modern sources, that was replaced by a Baroque-style church building. The identification of the other church building is more problematic: based on the burials unearthed in its interior, it was used during the 18th century, but its presumed dedication (to St. Catherine) was only preserved by oral history. Foundations of a rectangular early modern building were discovered south of St. Stephen's Church (cpl785/2014, fig. 1). Based on the significant number of molten metal pieces and slag finds recovered from its infill, the building played a role related to metalworking and trade, probably in connection with the market around the medieval parish church.

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