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LEGO MONUMENTS: THE BAKÓCZ CHAPEL IN ESZTERGOM AND THE PROTECTION OF HISTORICAL MONUMENTS

Abstract

Before the new cathedral was built in Esztergom in the second quarter of the 19th century, the ruins of the old, mainly medieval, cathedral were cleared away. But a Renaissance burial chapel of the archbishop Tamás Bakócz (1442–1521), built between 1506 and 1519, stood intact among the ruins. The significance of the chapel is that it is the earliest central Renaissance building north of the Alps, and the highest-quality surviving building of the Hungarian Renaissance. An interesting solution was undertaken to save it. Two hundred years ago, the Bakócz Chapel was dismantled, with the aim being to rebuild it on a new site. The rebuilt (reassembled) chapel is still the most valuable part of the Esztergom Cathedral from an art-historical point of view.

This paper analyses the antecedents and later examples of monument conservation interventions similar to the one in Esztergom. The antecedents are not yet part of the history of monument conservation. Later examples, however, lead up to the present day. These examples are not only European, but include, for example, the Zeus Altar in Pergamon and the rock temple of Abu Simbel. We look for answers to the question of variations in the reconstruction process. How can they be typologised? How does dismantling and rebuilding affect authenticity? Is the authenticity of monuments based solely on their preservation in their building material?

In addition to architectural examples, the issue of building sculpture is discussed. We focus on cases where buildings' sculptural components have been removed from their original location to be placed in a new (museum) context. Of particular importance among these examples is the case of the Parthenon in Athens, with its historical context. The question of problems pertaining to authenticity that this procedure gives rise to for the original buildings is also examined.

Keywords: relocation, Bakócz Chapel, Renaissance, Esztergom, monument conservation

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ЛЕГО СПОМЕНИЦИ: БАКОЦЕВА КАПЕЛА У ЕСТЕРГОМУ И ЗАШТИТА ИСТОРИЈСКИХ СПОМЕНИКА

Сажетак

Пре изградње нове катедрале у Естергому и другој четвртини 19. века, уклоњене су рушевине старе, углавном средњовековне катедрале. Међу рушевинама, међутим, стајала је и нетакнута ренесансна погребна капела надбискупа Тамаша Бакоца (1442–1521) саграђена између 1506. и 1519. Да би се сачувала, предузето је занимљиво решење. Њен значај огледа се у томе што је то најстарија средњеренесансна грађевина сачувана северно од Алпа и најбоље очувана грађевина мађарске ренесансе. У циљу њеног очувања предузето је занимљиво решење. Пре две стотине година Бакоцева капела је растављена на делове с циљем да се поново састави на новој локацији. Из позиције историје уметности, обновљена (поново састављена) капела данас је највреднији део катедрале у Естергому.

У овом раду разматрају се претходни и каснији примери интервенција на заштити споменика културе сличних оној у Естергому. Претходни примери још нису део историје заштите споменика културе. Каснији примери пак трају до данашњих дана. У раду нису представљени само европски примери. Ту и Зевсов олтар у Пергаму и храмови уклесани у стену у Абу Симбелу. Тражимо одговор на питање које све врсте поступака реконструкције постоје и како се то може типологизовати. Како демонтажа и реконструкција утичу на аутентичност? Да ли се аутентичност споменика културе заснива само на очувању њиховог грађевинског материјала?

Поред архитектонских примера, разматрамо и питање грађевинске скулптуре. Фокусирамо се на оне случајеве где су скулптурални делови здања демонтрани са првобитне локације како би се пренели у ново (музејско) окружење. Међу примерима посебно је важан случај Партенона из Атине и његов историјски контекст. Испитујемо проблеме везане за аутентичност које овај поступак ствара у односу на оригиналне грађевине.

Кључне речи: релокација, Бакоцева капела, ренесанса, Естергом, конзервација споменика културе

Introduction

Those concerned with the history of monument protection in Hungary associate its beginning with the year 1841, with the establishment of the Society of Hungarian Physicians and Naturalists, and the institutionalisation of heritage protection, which was initiated from the 1860s onward.¹ But before all of this, we know about an effort to save a building dating back to the middle of the 18th century, with such an example of architectural intervention being finally realised exactly two hundred years ago. Specifically, this was the saving of the Bakócz Chapel in Esztergom, the most important work of Renaissance architecture in the Hungarian Kingdom to survive the Ottoman wars. In order to avoid anachronisms, the 1823 intervention is considered part of the 'prehistory' of monument conservation. In Esztergom, two indispensable conditions for monument protection were in place: there was an existing monument (that deserved attention not only from an artistic point of view, but also from a historical, cultic and cultural point of view) that had not been destroyed by the storms of history, and the intervention performed on it for the purpose of preserving the building. To save the Bakócz Chapel today, based on the experience of two centuries of historic preservation, conservationists would certainly suggest other solutions; they would fight for uncompromising conditions facilitating the possibility of all-round conservation, hoping for restoration expertise to save the original materials and, in terms of circumstances or environment, railing against new (contemporary) artistic endeavours. However, this should not prevent the recognition of the historical (or, as it were, pre-historical) value of the architectural intervention of 1823 and its fundamental result: the survival of the chapel. Yet the case of the Bakócz Chapel is not treated as a major topic in the literature. Even the monographs dealing with the chapel (i.e. those of Jolán Balogh in 1955 and Miklós Horler in 1987)² provide little data and analysis, and individual studies only mention it as an episode in the (post-)history of the chapel.³ The background to this is that the contemporary observer, the building commissioner János Máthes (1785–1848), in his book on Esztergom's Castle Hill, made little effort to elaborate upon the intervention.⁴

So what happened to the Bakócz Chapel in Esztergom two hundred years ago? The building was demolished with the intention of rebuilding it using the original pieces, just like posterity's child playing with Lego. With the permission of Sándor Rudnay (1760–1831), Archbishop of Esztergom, the work was designed and supervised by János Packh (1796–1839), an architect from Eisenstadt (present-day Austria). It was rebuilt close to the original site,⁵ integrated into the new (neoclassical) cathedral being built at the time, albeit with some alterations to its original appearance.⁶ The chapel has not been moved since then: it remains in the same place in Esztergom, on the south side of the cathedral, at the corner of the narthex and the transept, with the altar facing west.

Although we cannot fill the gap in the detailed treatment of demolition and reconstruction in the present study, by addressing the issue we can help to ensure that the case of two hundred years ago is not completely forgotten, and, if even by formulating just a few aspects of it, take a further step in the direction of more thorough scientific research and analysis for the future. Beyond this, the historical case, like all similar cases,

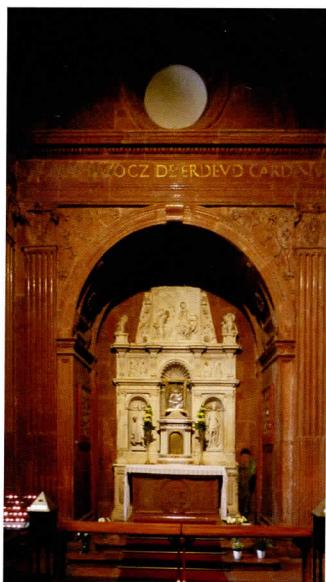


Fig. 1. Altar of the Bakócz Chapel carved by Andrea Ferrucci. Photo: Anna Tüskés, 2023

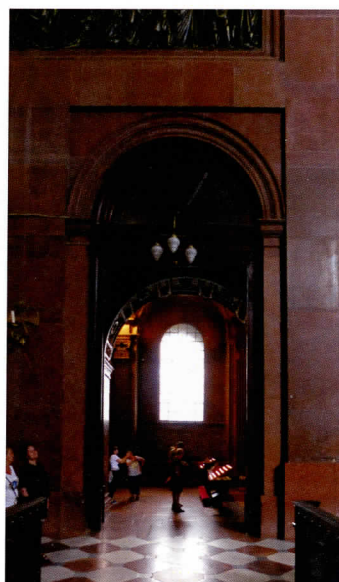


Fig. 2. Entrance of the Bakócz Chapel. View from the cathedral towards the chapel. Photo: Anna Tüskés, 2023

should serve as an experience for contemporary heritage conservation. There is no doubt that the case of the chapel is a professional palimpsest for those involved in the protection of historic monuments, and it would be absurd to adapt to its approaches and results, and also, to the contrary, to move away from them without a thorough knowledge of their existence.

Versions of the Esztergom solution can be found elsewhere in the history of monument conservation: from Pergamon to Abu Simbel and the Temple of Isis on Philae Island. A building of purely massive stone construction can be completely disassembled along the original joints into countable and inventoried pieces and subsequently reassembled.

The question is, from where did those responsible derive the idea for the 'Esztergom Lego'? What is the history of this type of monument-saving? The Temple of Ares in Athens could be an early example: the Classical-era building was relocated to the Agora by the Romans during the reign of the Emperor Augustus, probably in 2 AD, by dismantling of the original building and relocating its marked fragments.⁷ But this example could not have been known at the time of Esztergom, as the case only became known after excavations in 1937 by the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, when Roman pottery was found below the level of the foundations. But the Archbishop of Esztergom and the architect involved may have been influenced by the knowledge of the case of another ancient monument. A close (perhaps too close?) chronological antecedent of the works in Esztergom is the demolition and rebuilding (from the original stones) of the Arch of Titus in Rome, in its original place, according to the plans of Giuseppe Valadier, in 1821–22.⁸



Fig. 3. Entrance of the Bakócz Chapel. View from the chapel towards the cathedral. Photo: Anna Tüskés, 2023

However, the idea of dismantling and rebuilding the Bakócz Chapel was not conceived at this time, but during the reign of Archbishop Miklós Csáky (1751–1757), by Bartolomaeus Ricciawho was entrusted with the planning of the new Esztergom Cathedral.⁹

Rebuilding the Bakócz Chapel in 1823

The seat of the Archdiocese of Esztergom was moved to Trnava (today in Slovakia) during the Ottoman occupation, and remained there for a considerable length of time after the liberation in 1686. Finally, Archbishop Csáky decided to relocate to Esztergom and started to assess the conditions for this. Those conditions would have included the construction of a new cathedral, as only the ruins of the original medieval one remained. Archbishop Ferenc Barkóczy (1761–1765) set about facilitating this. The Archbishop did not make the same decision as that made by Imre Csáky (1710–1732) and Gábor Patachich (1733–1745), Archbishops of Kalocsa, three decades earlier, who approved the integration of the ruins of the medieval cathedral into the walls of the new building, considered a “restoration”¹⁰ in spite of the fact that the original remains became invisible. In Barkóczy’s case, the works started with landscaping and partial clearance of the ruins, but soon stopped after the Archbishop’s death. The cathedral plans of the time by Franz Anton Hillebrandt and Isidore Canevale were based on the preservation of the Bakócz Chapel,

Finally, Archbishop Sándor Rudnay (1819–1831)¹¹ managed to relocate the church back from Trnava to Esztergom. The new plans for the cathedral to be built (based on the ideas of Paul Kühnel, from whom János Packh took over the work) suggested an ambition for monumentality that surpassed all previous ideas. The cathedral and its adjoining buildings



Fig. 4. Dome of the Bakócz Chapel with the coat of arms of Archbishop Tamás Bakócz (twice), King Vladislaus II of Hungary and Bishop György Szathmáry. Photo: Anna Tüskés, 2023

would not have been able to fit on the summit of the old Castle Hill, and therefore the only way to create an area of sufficient size was to lower the level further, not only by removing the remaining ruins of the cathedral, but also by removing its foundations and even by reshaping the hilltop itself. Although the archbishop's headquarters were moved back to Esztergom, the continuity of the cathedral would not have been confirmed by the old topography, let alone by architectural remains. And such 'authentication' through historical antiquity has been employed for centuries. Where in-situ architectural remains were not available, continuity and authenticity were ensured by spolia transported from elsewhere, often from hundreds or even thousands of kilometres away. The spolia used in the Middle Ages primarily included columnar stems, which may have been accompanied by capital carvings. A well-known example is the case of the Palatine Chapel in Aachen, where columns were transported from Ravenna to create continuity between the Carolingian and Roman empires, thus authenticating the new. The spolia columns of the façade of the church of San Remi in Reims, integrated in the 12th century, are also known. At the very end of the same century, the example of the granite pillar associated with the western gate of Pécs Cathedral may show the perception of the Roman spolia as a relic. The spolia column in Pécs is thought to have been placed in the new cathedral (completed at the end of the 12th century) as a reference to the earlier cathedral(s) and even to the Early Christian past of the site. The secondary marble material used for the gate is proof of the authenticating presence of the Early Christian past through the Roman origin of the marble: the marbles come from the tomb monuments of the old Sopianae cemetery (also used by Christians). The case of Venice, which succeeded Byzantium, is another well-known example: after the occupation of Constantinople in 1204, the Venetians looted column stems and capitals by

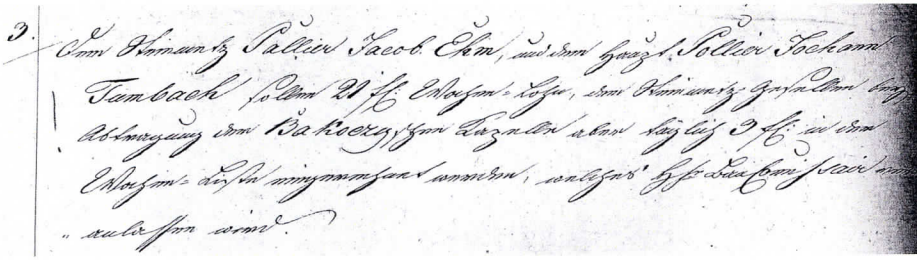


Fig. 5. Document denominating the two master stonemasons, Jacob Ehm and Johann Tumbach, who disassembled the Bakócz Chapel. Disposition Protocol, 12–19 June 1823. Esztergom Primate's Archives, Economic Archives, Basilica Building Office, Box 1 Volume 3.

the dozen. As the Church of San Marco, the most important site of state representation, was already complete, it was extended with a new façade edifice to accommodate the spolia, thus clearly proclaiming Venice as the new Byzantium.

Esztergom had no need for spolia and relics procured from distant lands. A complete early 16th century chapel was there on the site, and only had to be moved a few metres. But while moving spolia is not too complicated, moving an entire building is not easy. Where would Archbishop Csáky have found the courage from to authorise such an adventure, and where would Rudnay have derived it from?

Csáky and Rudnay didn't even have to be priests, just simple Catholic believers, to know about the potential of architectural details as relics, and even their transportability, from the legend of Santa Casa in Loreto:¹² From the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth, the house of the Virgin Mary and the holy family was transferred to Trsat (today Croatia) in 1291, and from there to the vicinity of Recanti (Italy) in 1294. According to legend, this undertaking was performed by angels. If it is indeed an authentic relic, it was not transported by air but had to be transported by water for much of the journey. The Venetians, as we have already said, were, contrary to others, very skilled at introducing architectural elements. If, in the 13th century, a building (or part of a building) could be removed from the ruins of the Church of the Nazarene, which then became a relic of the original building, then why would it not be possible in the 19th century to rescue the only part of the medieval Esztergom Cathedral that survived intact¹³ from the ruins and to use it to authenticate the new cathedral?

The 18th-century plans for the new cathedral anticipated the preservation of the Bakócz Chapel in its original location, as the new building was designed to be aligned with it. But Rudnay, despite the protests of the chapter, decided not to 'sew a coat to a button', in spite of the fact that this was a common solution employed when integrating relics. The old chapel had to be adapted to the new terrain and the design of the new cathedral. The chapel was thus demolished and rebuilt using 1600 numbered pieces, as an adaptation of the original, but with modifications at certain points. All without the need for air or water transport, the chapel, which had been isolated due to the rearrangement of the terrain, 'merely' had to be moved from the original plateau of the castle hilltop down to the new site. The new

chapel was rebuilt at an elevation 11.4 metres lower and a distance 17 metres away from the original site.¹⁴ Amongst the written sources available, Balogh was the most detailed on the process of demolition and reconstruction.¹⁵ On 19 May 1823, the altarpiece of a Mary icon (a copy of the weeping Our Lady of Mariapócs icon created in 1696, and transported by order of the emperor into Vienna in 1697) was removed from the chapel as part of its de-sacralisation.¹⁶ After that, the dismantling process could begin. From 7 June to 21 July, a systematic inventory of the 1600 stones in the chapel was made as they were dismantled. By 7 August, construction of the walls of the new sanctuary was already underway. However, this does not mean that the dismantling of the chapel was complete, as the old chapel's crypt was only opened on 3 October. The reburial of the exhumed dead did not have to wait long: it took place in the new chapel crypt on 16 November. The rebuilding was quickly completed, and the chapel was apparently consecrated.¹⁷ But for the time being, only a temporary dome could be built, and the niche facing the cathedral had a back wall. The chapel and the cathedral were only opened together after the construction and consecration of the cathedral. Access to the chapel was provided – temporarily – from the sacristy.¹⁸ The end of the relocation work is clearly indicated by a source detailing the commissioning of commemorative plaques in May–June 1824. The neo-Renaissance dome was completed in 1874–75, and invoices for other subsequent works have also been preserved.

Conclusions

All of this shows that: 1. 1600 marble elements were salvaged from the old chapel. 2. Most of the architectural elements that have survived are believed to have been incorporated into the reconstruction.¹⁹ 3. The non-marble parts were not preserved; thus, nothing was saved from the old dome, which consisted of copper plates fixed to the frame structure. Likewise, nothing was saved from the original foundations or the crypt. 4. The chapel was given new foundations, a new crypt and a new roof. In other words, in the case of the Bakócz Chapel, we cannot talk about saving the building in its entirety.

The question remains, however, as to what else was saved on the vertical ascending parts of the chapel in addition to the red marble visible in the interior? What lay (and what lies) behind the red marble? It is also difficult to answer this question due to the fact that the chapel was incorporated into the walls of the neoclassical cathedral without its own independent façade(s). The original façades may well therefore have been demolished: if the goal of the commissioner and the architect was merely to save the red marble elements of the interior (and to incorporate them into the new space), then whatever lay behind the red marble and whatever was on the façade was doomed to destruction. Even if there were a massive stone construction, nobody bothered to count, register and save the blocks. If, on the other hand, the walls were built using small stones or mixed techniques, the 'Lego' method could not have been employed; rescuing the structure (without the aid of the angels of Santa Casa) would not have been worth the effort. More pertinently, the question can be formulated thus: *Are the red marbles of the interior merely tiles, and is the Renaissance architecture no more than decorative tiling?*

Máthes, who witnessed the dismantling, speaks of the red marble as a covering (*vestitum*).²⁰ On his attached plan²¹ and on the Packh plan of the chapel, the pillars are uniform, with a unitary element and wall grid. Packh also made sectional drawings, in which the internal partitions also form an integral unit with the wall cores, which is a reminder that red marble is not just a covering. The pilasters are not aligned with the element(s) behind them. The pilasters of the entrance to the former (medieval) side aisle also stand alone, without any connecting elements. Behind the pilasters, the sides of the niches are formed by a single block of stone, which is also used to form the frontal articulation, up to the shoulder parapet, which, in turn, is made of separate stones. The extension of the niche on the sacristy side is also formed by a block on each side. The right side of the altar niche, on the other hand, is formed by several blocks. The southern niche, which is taller than the others (this niche was originally the entrance from the side aisle of the old cathedral), consists of 2x2m stone blocks, the separation between which can be observed at the height of the transom of the other niches. Whether the stone blocks on the side of the niche are the same ones that extend behind the pilasters to the angles cannot be determined. In any case, there is a separation in the angles. The back wall of the niche facing the sacristy (around the openings) is covered with small marble slabs or narrow marble broad stones. The barrel vault of the extension part of the niche is also composed of several stones, as are the arches with rosette decoration. Above, we can see a variety of stone boundaries, which do not appear to conform to the shapes of the structural elements or be in line with the composition of the decoration; it cannot be excluded that some of the boundaries are the result of dismantling by sawing. The method of fixing the marble elements can be seen on the two shorter sides of the marble stall: one metal pin head on the left and two on the right. On the sides of the original stalls, patched traces of metal pin holes can still be seen.

It can therefore be concluded that most of the red marble is not only a cladding but also a building material; when the chapel was rebuilt, not only cladding-like details were used. The smaller and larger red marble blocks, broad stones and stone slabs enclosing the walls and the façades on the other side, however, were demolished: they were not claimed in their reconstructive form by the neoclassical architecture of the time.

The example of Esztergom's Bakócz Chapel illustrates how the historical authentication role of monuments, their valorisation as relics, and the desire to preserve them have contributed to the development of conservation criteria and the rescue options applied. It also illustrates how selective protection that does not focus on the work as a whole, or the architectural aspirations and representational intentions of the time, can be a devastating threat to monuments.

Notes

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- 21 The floor plan can be traced back to Anton Hartmann's earlier drawing (1763–65). cf. Balogh, 1955, Fig. 20.