

THE CHURCHES OF KISKUNLACHÁZA

From 19th-century explorations to 21st-century research

TIBOR ÁKOS RÁCZ¹

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In the autumn of 2024, the Institute of Archaeology at Pázmány Péter Catholic University received a Mece-natúra Grant from the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (NKFI) to produce a doc-umentary film examining the organisation, operation, and practical outcomes of community archaeology programmes in Hungary. As the local government of Kiskunlacháza – provider of the filming locations – acts both as host and financial contributor, the documentary also addresses the municipality's and its residents' engagement with the past, alongside their involvement in and attitudes toward archaeological heritage management. The project comprises archaeological investigations at multiple sites, instrumental prospection, the conservation of metal artefacts, comprehensive specialist analysis, and the curation of a public archaeological exhibition.

FLÓRIS RÓMER AND IMRE HENSZLMAN IN PEREG

On 11 May 1864, Fővárosi Lapok (“Municipal Papers”) published a brief notice in its “Capital City News” column reporting that “Henszlmán and Flóris Romer, our antiquity hunters, travelled to the Puszta of Pereg (Pest County), where they discovered an old burial site” (FŐVÁROSI LAPOK, 11 May 1864, vol. 1, no. 107). A more detailed account appeared a few days later, in the 15 May issue of Sürgöny (“Telegram”), where Sándor Résző Ensel discussed the discovery in an article entitled “Pest County in the Field of Archaeology” (RÉSZŐ 1864). Résző noted that “every cause needs support in order to advance; in our country, archaeology is one that demands particular assistance. Archaeology seeks out the past, the vicissitudes, and the sweet and bitter memories of our homeland. It is an extensive field, beyond the capacity of any single individual, and one that requires the cooperation of us all.”

Following this rhetorical prelude, the report details the discovery of subsurface ruins on the outskirts of the village of Pereg and the subsequent dispatch of an investigative committee. According to the account, “the energetic member of the committee, Lajos Kármán, invited Imre Henszlmán, Arnold Ipolyi and Flóris Rómer, representatives of the Academy's archaeologists, as well as the author of this article, who is engaged in this field on a daily basis, to participate.” The delegation travelled to Ráckeve on 5 May aboard the Árpád steamboat, where “the enthusiastic chief judge of the town, István Gózon, welcomed them with a volley of gunshots.” The group examined the Gothic-style Serbian church before continuing their journey; on 6 May they proceeded in several carriages – accompanied by local admirers of the arts – across the Danube bridge to Pereg. There they were again received with great enthusiasm at the town hall. Their first stop was the inspection of a Roman carved stone unearthed from among the ruins, after which they visited the excavation site itself. The report states: “The ruins were discovered at the lower end of the village of Pereg, on the so-called Sz.-Miklós urhegy-düllő, on a large hill, half of which belongs to Ádám Kátai and the other half to Mihály Gubovics, both farmers. During the first ploughing (on Friday, 22 April 1864), he (Gubovics) noticed the ruins when his plough struck a stone and reported it; he allowed residents of Lacháza living nearby to excavate his portion...” The inhabitants of Lacháza continued digging for roughly four days, ultimately uncovering the aforementioned Roman stone and “a bone-house containing countless human skulls, breastbones and leg bones.”

Under the direction of Imre Henszlmann, a one-day verification excavation was initiated. As the report notes, “men, women, the elderly and the young alike commenced work with pickaxes, spades and baskets. Chief Judge L. Kármán offered words of encouragement, Imre Henszlmann marked out the excavation

¹ Ferenczy Museum Centre, Szentendre; Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest. E-mail: racz.tibor.akos@gmail.com



Fig. 1. The excavated Árpád-era church, with the participating volunteers and students in the background.
Photo: Sándor Czigóth

points, and the undersigned joined in. By noon, the foundation walls had been exposed... In the afternoon, following the completion of the day's work, Chief Judge Lajos Kármán organised a folkdance gathering, accompanied by a Hungarian band composed of local men who played *csárdás* without interruption. The day passed pleasantly and will remain unforgettable in our archaeological diary."

Collective memory of the excavation has long since faded, and the ruins themselves have been entirely reburied. Local inhabitants associated the presumed church site with a range of legends concerning Mongol destruction and a mass grave concealed within the ruins. The name Pereg appears in the thirteenth-century *Carmen miserabile* (Sorrowful Lament) by Master Roger, which recounts the events of the Mongol invasion, as one of the places of resistance (ROGERIUS 2010). Rogerius's narrative, however, refers to a Pereg situated near Arad and Egres, a settlement not identical with the village located in Pest County. The medieval church was rediscovered and its limits identified in 2012 by András Pálóczi Horváth with the assistance of archaeology students from Szeged. Drawing on the data compiled at that time, the site's official registration was initiated in 2023, which was completed without delay. Also in 2023, István Pánya and István Kudó conducted ground-penetrating radar surveys on the hill, revealing the well-preserved foundation walls of the structure. Precisely 161 years after the events described in the enthusiastic nineteenth-century report, in late April 2025, at the initiative of the Kiskunlacháza Municipal Council, we commenced the re-excavation of the Árpád-period church on Úrhegy hill. The work was carried out in cooperation with archaeology students from Pázmány Péter Catholic University, volunteers of the Community Archaeological Association, and staff members of the Ferenczy Museum Centre. Fieldwork continued in July. After four weeks of intensive excavation, supported throughout by the committed participation of Pereg and Lacháza residents, the foundation walls of the church were once again brought to light (Fig. 1), which the local government plans to conserve and present to the public.

THE BIRTH OF A COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT

Kiskunlacháza was selected as the primary filming location owing to the distinctive research history of its small medieval church, as well as the cultural events and community archaeology initiatives organised by the local municipality. Ecclesiastical topographical investigations commenced with an on-site survey in 2012. In the years that followed, an ever-growing number of professional archaeologists, dedicated amateur researchers, and heritage-protection institutions became involved in the fieldwork. The project provides an illustrative case study of the dynamics inherent in community archaeological programmes, demonstrating how numerous independent initiatives may be directed toward a common objective, mutually reinforcing one another and ultimately becoming integrated into a coherent research framework.

A central figure in this narrative is József Répás, mayor of Kiskunlacháza, who not only provides financial support but also actively promotes archaeological research in the area. As early as 2012, the possibility was raised that the local council itself might undertake the excavation of the newly identified church; although the circumstances at the time did not yet allow for such an initiative, the intention persisted. Soon thereafter, a group of museum-oriented volunteers began surveying the outskirts of the settlement, identifying several medieval village sites through metal detecting. For a number of years, they served as the principal driving force behind local historical research. The scientific framework for the field investigations was developed by István Pánya, geographer and geoinformatics specialist at the Katona József Museum in Kecskemét, whose expertise in the historical geography of the Solt region informed the research (PÁNYA 2017). In the Middle Ages, Fejér County extended eastward beyond the Danube, encompassing areas along the river's present course. A small section – approximately 361 square kilometres – falls within the boundaries of modern Pest County, including the territories of Kiskunlacháza and Dömsöd, while the larger part, some 2,465 square kilometres, lies in today's Bács-Kiskun County. Pánya georeferenced early modern manuscript maps, examined medieval documentary sources, established the locations of medieval settlements, and shared these data with volunteers to guide their field activities. My own involvement in the project arose through the official authorisation of fieldwork and the processing of artefacts arriving at the Ferenczy Museum Centre, the institution responsible for the region. In 2014 and 2015, together with colleagues from the museum, we authenticated several newly identified sites.

In 2019, the Kiskunlacháza Municipal Council initiated a systematic research programme in which volunteers from the Community Archaeological Association participated alongside the territorially competent staff of the Ferenczy Museum Centre. The fieldwork comprised site surveys supported by drone photography and ground-penetrating radar prospection, as well as metal-detector surveys. The long-term objective of the project is the preparation of a local historical monograph commissioned by the municipality. However, this undertaking necessitates foundational research, as no archaeological excavations or systematic field surveys had previously been conducted in the area. A comprehensive study of the settlement's history is likewise lacking, due in part to the exceptionally large administrative boundaries of present-day Kiskunlacháza. Within this territory lie eight to ten medieval village sites, several of which include the remains of churches. The medieval history of the Lack family of Szántó was discussed by Lajos Babós (BABÓS 2010). Dezső Alföldy-Boruss made use of historical data pertaining to the medieval settlements of Kiskunlacháza, although without attempting a comprehensive synthesis (ALFÖLDY-BORUSS 2002), while Edit Tari's source collection includes documentary references to three churches in the area (TARI 2000, 82–83). The destroyed medieval settlements themselves are well attested: as their locations have not been overbuilt, they can be readily identified archaeologically even on cultivated land.

Our field surveys have yielded a stratified body of information on the medieval settlements examined. The identification of Bánkháza, for example, was made possible through a comparative study of modern cartographic sources (*Fig. 2*). On the map of the First Military Survey, the ruins of the medieval church of Bánkháza are still depicted, accompanied by several standing structures; later maps, however, show only the inn that once operated at the crossroads. The junction itself has remained stable over time, with roads continuing to branch towards Bugyi and Apaj. The site of the former church of Szentiván was recognised



Fig. 2. Bánkáza in historical images and the topographic map of the authentication survey.

Made by István Pánya and Tibor Ákos Rácz

by the presence of substantial stone blocks and dispersed human skeletal remains. Here, in addition to repeated surface surveys, we carried out a series of highly successful ground-penetrating radar measurements (Fig. 3). The assemblage of metal finds includes several rings and iron artefacts such as knives, bits and padlocks. The recovery of nearly eighty coins – each attributable to the late medieval period – further refines the settlement’s chronology. Their dating suggests that Szentiván experienced a period of particular prosperity toward the close of the fourteenth century.

Among medieval settlements, Szentkirály is particularly notable for its early historical documentation and its distinctive archaeological finds. Its predecessor was the estate known as Bial (Biwol), the earliest written record of which dates to 1193 (GYÖRFFY 1994, 92; BÁRTFAI SZABÓ 1938, 3). At that time, King Béla III confirmed Queen Eufrozina’s prior land grant to the crusaders of Fehérvár, including five ploughlands and an island in the Danube. The estate referred to as Bölénysziget (*Insula Bubalorum*) evidently held significance for the crusaders of Fehérvár, as a charter issued by Andrew II in 1232 was dated at Bölénysziget following a period of fasting in Fehérvár (FEJÉR C. D. III/2, 301). It is generally accepted that no buffaloes inhabited the region during the Árpád era; accordingly, the name Bial may have denoted bison (GULYÁS 2017, 99–125). A 1344 charter identifies Bial as Szentkirály (*Byol alio nomine Szentkhyral*) (DL 3694; BÁRTFAI SZABÓ 1938, 54), and the appearance of *praedium Sz. Király* on early modern maps facilitated its identification. In 2019, a highly successful field survey was undertaken, resulting in the recovery of a partial crucifix, a depiction of the Corpus Christi, along with over one hundred medieval metal artefacts and coins. In 2022, István Kudó collected several hundred additional medieval metal finds from the site with precise

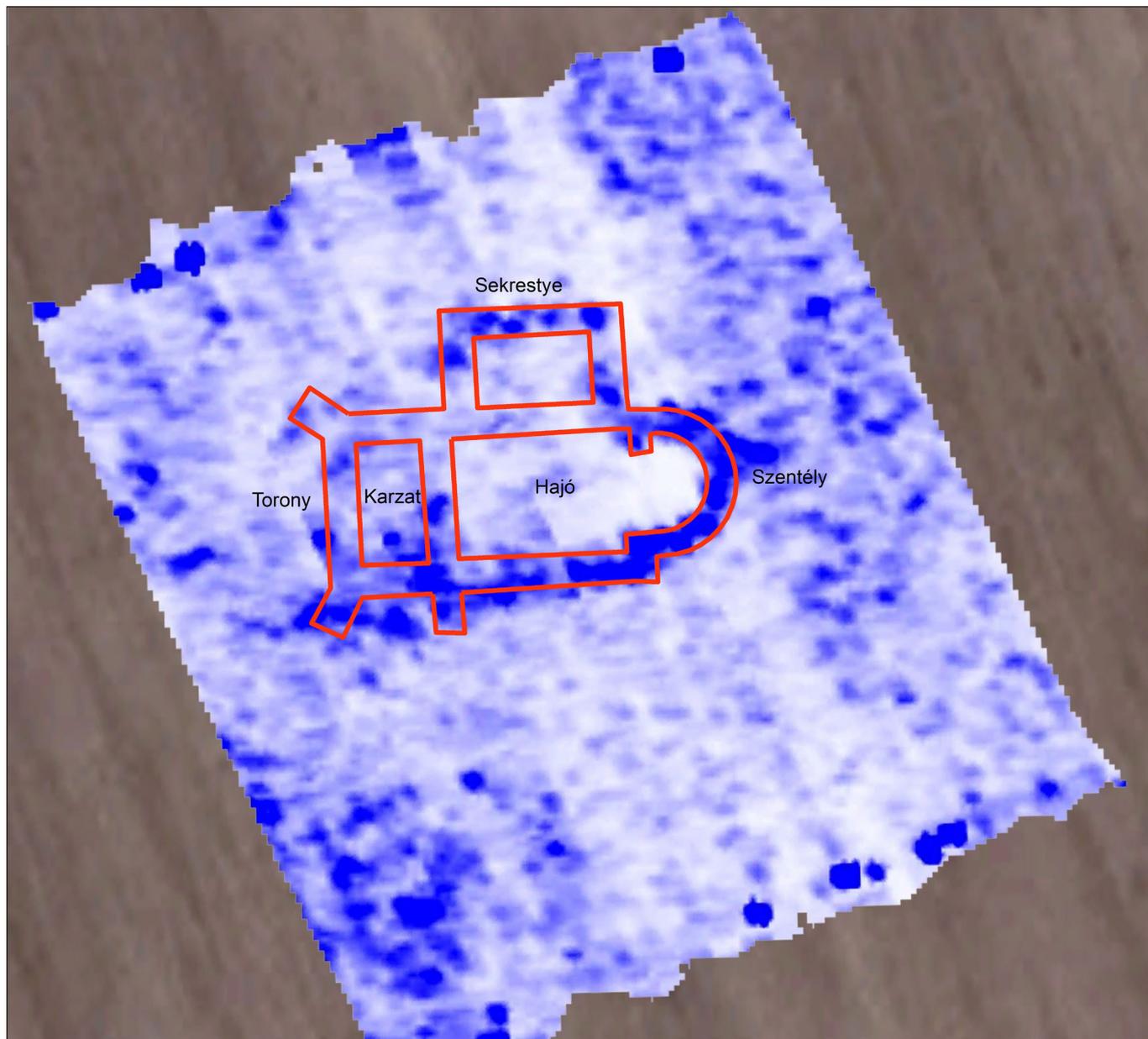


Fig. 3. Ground penetrating radar survey of the church of Szentiván and its interpretation. (Sekrestye = sacristy, szentély = sanctuary, hajó = nave, karzat = gallery, torony = tower.) Made by István Kudó and István Pányá

georeferenced coordinates. Among these, the most remarkable is an intact block of raw iron bearing a stamped mark, weighing approximately five kilograms (Fig. 4). This specimen represents iron in a state immediately prior to use, a rarity in the archaeological record. Several pieces of industrial waste were also recovered, and together with the unusually high number of graphite-rich ceramics, these finds may suggest the presence of a metalworking workshop. Through repeated site visits, we were able to delineate the site with precision, thereby documenting its principal topographical features. The location of the medieval church was indicated



Fig. 4. Block of raw iron from Szentkirály, found by István Kudó. Photo: Balázs Deim

by stone blocks dispersed within a twenty-metre radius, their surfaces rounded through repeated ploughing. Scattered human skeletal remains, including fragments of skulls – some exhibiting green discoloration – were observed in their proximity. Adjacent to the church remains, the foundations of an additional stone-built structure were also identified.

Rather than providing a detailed catalogue of the finds, the present report aims to outline the complex methodology and anticipated outcomes of the ongoing project. The most significant artefacts were presented to the public in the exhibition *Folyó szeli ketté* (“A River Runs Through It”), with the curators’ account appearing in the current issue of *Hungarian Archaeology*. István Pánya (Katona József Museum) and Nikoletta Lukács (Hungarian National Museum) are actively involved in the research; however, the processing of several thousand metal and ceramic artefacts requires additional support, ideally from archaeology students and recent graduates. Our long-term goal is to conduct a detailed analysis and publish the results in a forthcoming monograph on local history. Data collection remains ongoing, with further identification and authentication of medieval sites planned for the coming years, and, where appropriate, targeted excavations to be initiated. Following extensive preliminary non-invasive investigations and a prolonged preparatory phase, in 2025 we successfully completed the excavation of the project’s first feature of particular significance: the church at Úrhegy has now been fully uncovered. The following section summarizes our principal results.

THE CHURCH OF ÚRHEGY

The medieval church of Kiskunlacháza-Úrhegy is situated on the southern periphery of the settlement, within the Pereg district, west of Road 51, occupying a small hill at the intersection of dirt roads, the highest point in the surrounding landscape. The immediate environs of the church are no longer under cultivation and have become overgrown with trees and shrubs. Our survey grid was designed on the basis of ground-penetrating radar measurements, with the objective of obtaining detailed knowledge of the church structure and documenting the features uncovered. The local government intends to preserve the ruins and restore the historic building as part of a long-term conservation plan.

A total of four excavation trenches were planned and aligned along a north–south axis. Despite their size variation, the trenches surveyed the foundation walls, and the section walls between them allowed for the longitudinal and transverse sectional documentation of the building. All excavation was conducted manually, without the use of machinery. The first phase, undertaken in spring, focused on familiarisation with the church building, while the summer phase involved the removal of partition walls between the trenches and concentrated on the interior of the church and the adjacent cemetery. During the spring phase, 122 square meters were excavated without reaching undisturbed subsoil; by the summer, the excavation area had been expanded to 154 square meters, and subsoil was reached with the removal of section walls and excavation of the north-eastern corner of the sacristy.

The church hill, historically subjected to farming, has only recently ceased to be cultivated. Evidence of past mechanical landscaping includes earth deposits on the southern side of the hill. The removal of bushes resulted in the stripping of the upper soil layer, leaving virtually no humus in the excavation area. After removing the root zone, the uppermost stones of the church foundation walls became visible. Henszlmann’s trenches, marked according to 19th-century excavation methods, were also identified with centimetre precision (*Fig. 5*).

This single-nave church, terminating in a semi-circular apse, was constructed using ashlar masonry. A Roman-era figurative carving was uncovered in the southern wall of the nave (*Fig. 6*), preserving the head, right arm, and body of the figure. Specialists identify the relief as Eros leaning on a torch turned upside down, dating to the 3rd–4th century, originally serving as a gravestone before incorporation into the Romanesque church.

The construction history of the church (*Fig. 7*) may at present be summarized as follows. A row cemetery predates the church, although its precise chronology remains uncertain; it can, however, likely be



*Fig. 5. Ortophoto of Trench 2, showing traces of the 19th-century excavation trench along the church walls.
Ortophoto: Róbert Lóki*

attributed to the first half of the Árpád period. The church itself, built in the mid- to late Árpád period (*Fig. 10*), was remodelled during the Anjou era without enlargement; four corner buttresses were added, windows with tracery installed, and burials commenced inside the nave. A pointed, carved tracery fragment was discovered as a stray find; the layer of construction debris found inside the church may relate to this late medieval renovation. No additional construction or destruction layers were observed. While the date of the sacristy's addition remains uncertain, it predates the construction of the corner buttresses, as the north-western buttress abuts the western sacristy wall. In its final phase, the sacristy functioned as an ossuary (*Fig. 8*). The structures uncovered represent foundations rather than actual walls; only a small section of the northern foundation structure in Trench 2 retained the lowermost segment of the vertical wall. The current surface has subsided below the original Árpád-era floor level due to subsequent earthworks, ploughing, landscaping, and erosion.



*Fig. 6. Roman carving in the southern wall of the church.
Photo: Zoltán Nagy*



Fig. 7. Drone photo of the excavated church.
Photo: Sándor Czigóth



Fig. 8. Photo of the cross section of the sacristy, used as an ossuary. Photo: Tibor Ákos Rácz

Medieval burials extensively disrupted the original floor levels. Approximately 130 skeletons were excavated from the surrounding cemetery, with internal chronology awaiting refinement based on superposition and associated finds. Some skeletons, presumably interred according to Christian rites and oriented eastward, were disturbed or truncated during the construction of the church (Fig. 9), indicating the existence of a cemetery on the Úrhegy hill predating the single-nave church. Distinguishing between the early row cemetery and later graves presents a further challenge. Two north–south-oriented, severely disturbed burials stand out; the spindle whorls and beads they yielded suggest their early medieval dating. The summit of Úrhegy, demarcated by a shallow ditch, may have served as a burial site for peoples neighboring the Roman Empire as early as the Sarmatian period, approximately one millennium prior to the church's construction. Burials within the church were dated by coins from the reigns of Charles Robert, Louis the Great, and Sigismund of Luxembourg, while a denarius of Stephen II, recovered from the surrounding cemetery, represents the earliest find. The church was likely destroyed before the Ottoman Turkish period.

Prior to excavation, extensive metal-detecting surveys were conducted in the vicinity, and metal detection continued during excavation in adjacent fields, revealing an extensive multi-period site with the church hill in its centre. Potsherds of a Bronze Age settlement were scattered evenly in the area west of Úrhegy Hill. Pottery and metal artefacts from the 3rd–4th-century were sporadically found around the hill but concentrated along the ridge of a neighbouring hill, a few hundred metres to the northeast. Notable finds include several Roman single-buttoned fibulae with strong profile and coins. Remnants of an Árpád-era settlement were also recovered around the hill. Scattered ceramic frag-



Fig. 9. Burial predating the building of the church.
Photo: Tibor Ákos Rácz



Fig 10. Reconstruction drawing of the Árpád-era church. Drawing: Zsolt Fodor

ments, concentrated north, east, and south of Úrhegy, suggest a dispersed settlement and a low-intensity use area. Pottery dating to the 12th–13th centuries, a coin of Stephen II, and several coins associated with Béla III correspond to the earliest strata in our excavation. Interestingly, no late medieval artefacts were found on the surface, although the church fill yielded finds dated to this period.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our results build on the early ecclesiastical-topographical investigations conducted by István Greman, Nándor Rácz, Bernát Rácz and György Tóth. From 2019 onward, intensive participation by volunteers – among them István Kudó, Tibor Győri, Edit Bekker, László Szabó and József Meleg – significantly advanced the fieldwork. We owe particular thanks to István Kudó, who also contributed ground penetrating radar measurements. Beginning in the same year, numerous volunteers from the Community Archaeological Association regularly joined the site-exploration campaigns. In 2022, under the direction of Nikolett Lukács of the National Institute of Archaeology, Hungarian National Museum, a preliminary excavation was carried out at Bánkháza as part of the Belgrade–Budapest railway-line revision project; the results were presented at the *Folyó szeli ketté* (“A River Runs Through It”) conference in Szentendre. Lukács subsequently joined our broader field research, participating actively not only in survey work but also in the excavation of the church at Úrhegy. Throughout the project, István Pánya provided geoinformatics and geodetic support. University colleagues József Beszédes, Orsolya Láng and Lóránt Vass assisted in the identification of Roman carvings. The Municipality of Kiskunlacháza offered financial support for the excavation, which was conducted by university students and volunteers from the association. During the campaign, residents of Lacháza and Pereg extended a level of hospitality that left a lasting impression on our entire team.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all who contributed to the success of the project. To conclude, I echo the words of Sándor Ensel: “*Thus did archaeology continue its triumphant march in Pest County.*”

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