

STUDENT CAMPS IN PRESERVATION WORKS OF THE 'VILLA RUSTICA' IN SZENTENDRE¹

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This short report on the ruins of the Roman villa in the Open-Air Ethnographic Museum of Szentendre, and on international architect camps organized for substance protection of these ruins fits the tradition created by Professor Gyula Hajnóczi several years ago by organizing 'Interstudex' archaeological camps in Aquincum.

After Aquincum, international archaeological camps shared by students in architecture, continued with Gorsium. I — as a second-year student in architecture — took part in one of the last Gorsium camps, whence essentially the idea of the international 'Villa Rustica' architects camp in Szentendre originates.

The continuation of the tradition of 'Interstudex' camps in Szentendre was elicited by the stalemate about the ruins of the villa rustica.

When in 1978, immediately after graduation, I was engaged at the open-air ethnographic museum in Szentendre, three years after the end (abandonment) of excavations, ruins of the Roman villa could hardly be noticed among breast-high weeds and earth heaps.

Rescue excavations started in 1973. Later — observing that the building rests are more important than expected — segmental excavation was introduced. Excavations lasting to August 1975 brought to light the most extended rural villa (rustica) of Pannonia provincia. (Main building 67 by 78 m; floor area 5226 sq. m; central courtyard about 20 by 25 m; courtyard surrounded by 52 rooms.) Its construction started by about A. D. 230. Construction was completed in three periods and the villa is likely to have been in use to late in the 4th century.

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Primarily, since the ruins are sited in the area of a to-be museum for (vernacular) architectural treasures, Dr. Judith Topál, archaeologist directing the excavations suggested already in 1975 to preserve the entirely excavated building aisles. 'Because of the cautious or even inimical attitude of competent authorities, and of the expected stiff costs, the purpose got frustrated.' Because of the abrupt destruction of excavated building rests, the archaeologist leading the excavations made several applications — this time now to bury again the ruins, 'but its costs would be 8 to 10 times those of the excavation, so the authorities turned again a deaf ear, while none of them took responsibility for the destruction of the greatest villa of Pannonia, at the same time the single disclosed remnant of Szentendre (the Roman *Ulcisia Castra*)!' (Quoted from a notice by Dr. Judith Topál.)

Professional authority of Prof. Gyula Hajnóczy was preponderant in the establishment of the architects' camp 'Villa Rustica'. In the first years, substance preservation works were made under his, and Prof. Gyula Istvánfi's conceptual guidance.

Beyond of evading the stalemate, these camps proved to be efficient and economical. Abandonment of the conservation — that would affect only half the area, halving the ground plan by the mid-courtyard, about 'sweeping the south half of the building under the carpet' — would cost eight million forints in 1978. While a skilful re-burying — likely to result in complete destruction of the building remnants, namely already excavated walls got at places fully destroyed in a few years — would cost about three million forints in 1981. On the other hand, the overall expenditures for the camps from 1981 to 1989 were less than one and a half million forints.

In the first year, money originated from different organizations, institutions. In 1982, the camp was entirely funded by the Ministry of Education that also promised to allocate the museum year by year the necessary yearly sum — 100 to 120 thousand forints. But already in 1984 the museum did shell out the camp costs from its proper budget, although the ruin belongs to it only in the meaning that it is sited in its area. The competent authorities interested in substance protection should be the National Museum, the Management of Museums in Pest County, and the National Monuments Inspectorate. But neither of them supported the work. 1985 to 1989, camps could be organized from different funds. To acquire funds, hence, organization of the camps has been problematic every year. This fact was largely responsible for that the last camp in 1989 was organized simply as a summer production exercise.

In addition to the International Architects' Camp, since 1985, the Open-Air Ethnographic Museum has organized Secondary School Camps for further excavations on the site.

During these nine years, the three-week International Architects' Camps organized with the participation of students in architecture of the Technical University of Budapest, had participants from fourteen countries in Europe and overseas. Many of them came back year by year.

The camps' achievement was the substance protection of the completely excavated half (the 'eight-million-forint half part') of the ruins, and also conservation of the partly excavated parts has much advanced. In course of the (re)excavation before substance protection and of further excavations, continuously emerged finds, among others, columns belonging to a porticus, one of the most valuable frescoe fragments, fibulae, among others, a unique cricket fibula from the Hun period.

This is in short the story of the villa rustica in Szentendre and of the International 'Villa Rustica' Architects' Camps. Although, in every year, the risk of missing supports hung over the camps as Damocles' sword, and there were even counter-fans to the initiative, in final account, the story had not a sorry end. In spite of the discontinuation of the camp because of organizatory difficulties, the ruins are not overgrown by weeds any more, an interpretable and in fact, presentable ruin field has been developed in the centre of the Open-Air Ethnographic Museum area.

Due to its situation, the ruin field dominates the fields between regional units of the museum. It would be justified to utilize it more intensively, to fit it into the system of museum exhibitions. During the nine years of camps, several relevant ideas, plans emerged, among others, in the frames of complex design delivered at the Department of History & Theory of Architecture. At the same time, surroundings of the ruin field would suit to accommodate the final seat of the museum. While parts of the Roman villa — for instance, those from the first building period — could be reconstructed like in house reconstructions in 'skanzens'. By the time, this is, however, only a 'dream'. These fantasies may some time become reality, as a worthy consummation of the work of camps organized for substance preservation.