

VÉSZTŐ – MÁGORHALOM – A HISTORICAL MEMORIAL PLACE

GY. ISTVÁNYI

Institute of History and Theory of Architecture
Technical University of Budapest, H-1521

Received: November 27, 1989
Presented by Prof. M. Zádor

Abstract

Typically, many of Hungarian monuments and memorial places have been disclosed by archaeological excavations. Excavation of a settlement mound (tell) in East Hungary disclosed prehistoric culture layers and several periods of the monastery of the Csolt clan from the 10th to the 12th centuries. First, ruins of the monastery have been reconstructed, and an exhibition of regional history organized in the former manorial cellar built in 1812. Later on, a so-called archaeological crypt — in-situ archaeological exhibition under a penthouse — arose to present Neolithic, Copper and Bronze Age cultural layers, tombs. To present the living way of the region some centuries ago, objects of two forms of ancestral husbandry — marshland fishing and hunting, and wild animal keeping — fishing and hunting homestead, sheep pen and stable have been reconstructed. All the area is an environmental reservation. Finally, in a separate area of the site, a memorial park with statues of writers, poets, scientists of this region has been established. This is how fifteen years of archaeological, monument reconstructional and building work (1974 to 1989) resulted in a historical memorial place remembering of our predecessors since five millenaries.

In commemoration of Jenő Major, historian, — pervaded by past-conscious emotion at our tour in Mágor.

Hungary is likely to be a leader among European countries having suffered from erosion by history, in respect to politics, society, ethnics, and material culture as well. During its millennial history, devastations by Tartares (Mongols) and Turks, German or Slavic hegemony — even if with updating or messianistic ambitions — were detrimental to Hungarian values, peculiarities. Similar were outcomes at home either of self-defense with head erect, or of obedience with bowed head — both being venial Hungarian features. This peculiarity is illustrated by the condition of Hungarian monuments. While in most countries of Europe, subsistence of a mediaeval church, convent, castle or cathedral is self-intended, in Hungary it is self-intended to have ruined castles, to let spades of archaeologists excavate mediaeval churches and palaces, and even castles and manors from the 19th century are mere ruined mementos of the disappearance of the “ancien régime”. And this is not only to-day but also in the past centuries. Every village had and has wastelands in its surrounding fields, where mediaeval villages, fortresses, convents are recalled by ruins, potsherds, or mere popular memory.

Such a site in — among others — Mágorhalom in Békés county, of East Hungary, bordering on village Vésztő. As stated in “Geographic Vocabulary of Hungary” published in 1851: “The lord has a fine vineyard on the Mágor hill, where about 1200 there was the minster and monastery of the Csolt abbey and the red friars. The double spire of this minster collapsed in 1786; its stones were carried away by the Vésztő villagers. This hill is topped by a fine manor of the lord, with a large cellar beneath.”

By the 1960's, the vineyard grew old, abandoned, the “lord's manor” has left no traces, but the baroque-vaulted cellar, 30 m long, 7 m wide, still reminded of the once vineyards. This has still been supported by a Latin inscription on the disfigured façade: “Count Ferenc Wenckheim had had the neglected ruins here raised from the foundations, and let a cellar built in the praise of wine in years 1810 to 1812”. The concerned hill rises by about 9 m from the once flooded plain of Sárret. It is embraced by the oldest bend of Sebes-Körös — actually a backwater — and without knowledge of the quoted description, nobody would think the site to be of any interest or to become such.

In the 1970s, archaeological excavations initiated on the hill resulted in two sensational findings. One was that cellar building was raised on wall ruins inside its ground area from their “foundations”, while that hidden in the ground was sufficient to identify the monastery of the mediaeval Csolt clan.

The other sensation was to find the double hill not to be a natural formation but a prehistoric settlement mound heaped up high from wastes and remnants of farming villages systematically renewing for millennia, commonly known by the Arab name of *tell*. The northern hilltop seemed convenient for excavation where the hill was the highest and excavation was not disturbed by building remnants. Archaeologist Katalin Hegedűs (Museum of Szentes) proved wide areas of the hill, down to the virgin soil at a depth of 7.2 m below the surface. With this layer thickness, Mágorhalom ranks first as the greatest known settlement mound of Central Europe, and excavations offered a closer acquaintance with the history of about five and a half thousand years — including Middle Ages — of this unique site.

The first agrarian settlers appeared here by about 3500 B. C. in the period of Neolithic Age. Their settlement had continuously subsisted for about a millenary, meanwhile the hill surface was raised by about 4 m by the upfill from wastes. The early period may be classified among cultures of linear pottery of the Great Hungarian Plain. The most important find was found between ruins of a sanctuary, a sitting woman figure of pottery about 40 cm high, a Magna Mater representation of the Neolithic fertility cult. Deads were buried true to the period, in contracted position, ochre painted, but enclosed in portable box-type coffins, exceptional among finds. The settlement get twice uninhabited, then resettled each time. The upper, last layer dates from about 1000 B. C., comprising settlement and object finds from the developed Bronze

Age. There were no finds from the period up to the Hungarian conquest, may be deep soil cultivation has obliterated cultural layers.

Mediaeval wall remnants have been disclosed by archaeologist Irén Juhász (Museum of Szarvas), making discoveries sensational from the aspect of Hungarian history in the Middle Ages.

First, basement walls of the basilical church (minster) built after the mid-12th century, remnants 30 to 80 cm high of upright walls and pillars were disclosed, then on the south to the minster, basement walls of the monastery with midyard and cloister, while at the chapter hall, pillared basilica with plain ceiling, its principal nave ended in a semicircular apsis. The principal nave and the aisles were separated by six pairs of pillars of Greek cross plan. On the west there was a pair of western spires corresponding to the system of aisles with an entrance hall in between. In the third intercolumniation the minster space of the larger ground area for monastery use, and the lesser one used by the parish were separated by a rood-screen. In this latter, the simple mensa of the people's altar has subsisted, somewhat shifted to the north from the middle of the rood-screen. The irregular fitting of the monastery to the minster, as well as different masonry and dimensions of the chapter hall hinted to earlier periods of the monastery. Soon it has become clear that the pillared basilica was the fourth in the sequence of churches, namely within its ground area, ground plan of an earlier, i.e. third church appeared. It was a columnar, probably arcuate basilica, its nave ended in a long apsis. Datable grave goods found in tombs intersected by the walls confirmed that this minster was built early in the 12th century, and has subsisted for some decades. Accordingly, the monastery was built already with the third church, or according to a relevant design.

Strata stripped in constructing the wine cellar in the past century contained the middle part of the second church soon emerging. Walls of its sanctuary ending in an apse and its western straight closing wall, found on the east and west to the cellar, showed it to have been a single-space, nave-and-aisles church. As dated by finds, it was built in the second half of the 11th century, after the repression of Vata's rebellion. In the foundation of the apse wall, re-used stones bearing Byzantine-style mural fragments were found. Existence of a still earlier, Eastern Christian church from the era before Western Christianization has become manifest. This — at first only supposed — church finally appeared in the middle of the monastery courtyard. Brick basement walls of a circular building and of a longitudinal parvis joined. In its surroundings, flat masonry stones were found of a limestone corresponding to that of the frescoed stones; convex façade surfaces floated with plaster bore half-engaged column forms. Thereby, church façades were articulated by slender half-engaged columns. This church was doubtless contemporary to St. Stephen's rule, and fell victim of destructions of civil wars and religious movements of the mid-11th century.

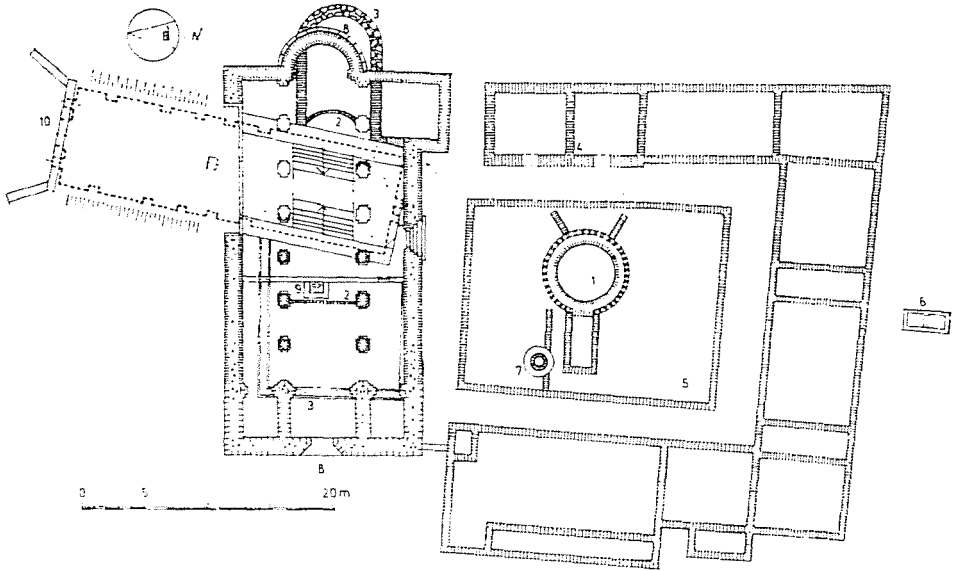


Fig. 3. Site plan of the Csolt monastery, indicating the periods

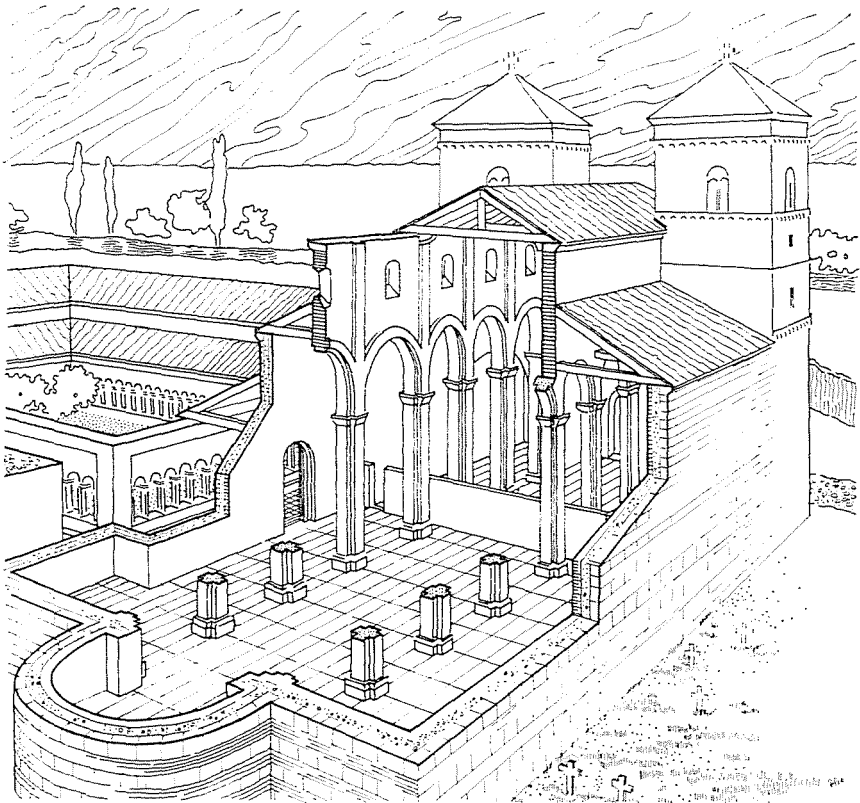


Fig. 4. Theoretical reconstruction of the Csolt monastery

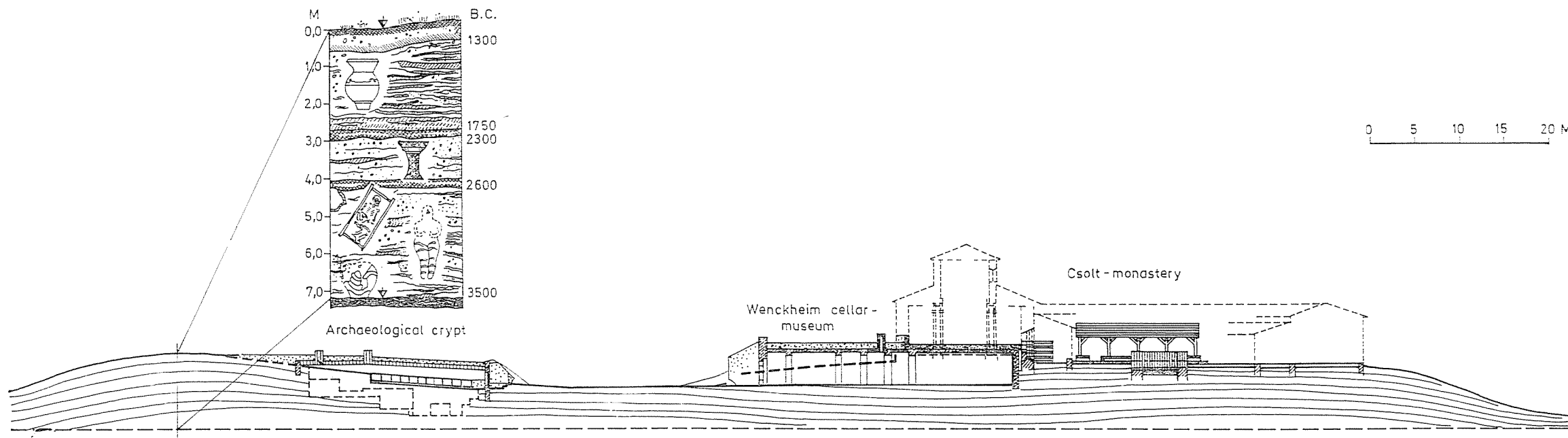


Fig. 2. Section of the double settlement mound

For each of the churches, the greatest part of the masonry were of burnt brick — self-intended in the Great Plain where stone was in shortage — but some features — socles, capitals, small columns, as well as ashlar for alternate brick-stone courses of masonry in the fourth church — were hewn of stone. Stone as building material was probably quarried in the Bihar mountains, ready hewn and shipped to the site on the Körös river. This appears from the fact that no building stone was larger than to be moved by one man and to be shipped in small loads. Marble and red marble fragments hinting to small architecture originated from a farther import.

Monumental reconstruction has followed the principle of conserving and presenting the fourth church and the monastery aisle, the best recognizable items. Architectural details between the finds such as bevelled curved stones of the south windows in the nave; impost and capital, as well as column fragments of the double window of the spire; profile bricks from the column-lined doors; impost and filigrae fragments from double columns of the minor arcade of the monastery cloister; pillar pedestals found in the original position; as well as a capital fragment representing a turbaned head and decorated with a braid, found in the basement of a house in Vésztő, offered a basis sufficient to realize the once monumental minster, underlying our theoretical reconstruction. Presentation of the third, second, and first churches is made by means of ground plan marks.

The main problem with presenting and reconstructing the mediaeval ruins was that the large wine cellar intersected the apsis. Appreciating the cellar as a monument, and the baroque cellar inserted in mediaeval ruins to be kept as a fact of peculiar stratification of ages, it has been decided that in the section inside the church space, after removal of the earth fill, a new stratified structure would be developed on the brick vault. The first layer would be a r. c. shell 8 cm thick covered by thermal insulation, superposed by three layers of bitumen felt dampproofing. The next layer would be filter bed concrete 5 cm thick overlaid by a frost-resistant concrete crust 8 cm thick. Access to the boss in the church space was provided by steps in the crust concrete, while positions of the now missing pillars were indicated by outcrops. Wall and basement wall remnants were surmounted by brick or brick-ashlar protective walls fitting the original masonry skill to variable heights from 30 to 180 cm needed to perceive the original building dimensions and for the unified appearance.

A special architectural means was needed to present the round church. Namely there was a significant walk level difference between the basement wall remnant and the monastery courtyard, within that, neither the place of change and thickness of upright wall, nor an eventual inner division was known. Therefore the protective wall could not rise to the courtyard level, and some framing aboutment wall had to be built. To avoid monotony, a precast concrete castellated enclosing wall has been built.

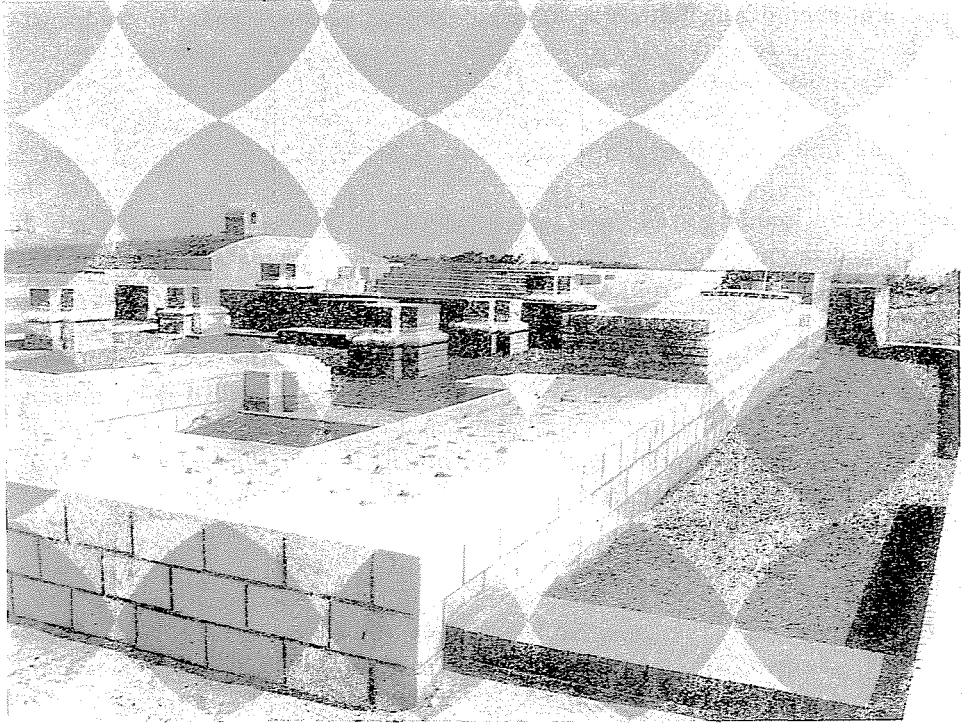


Fig. 5. Church remnants with the cellar



Fig. 6. The monastery

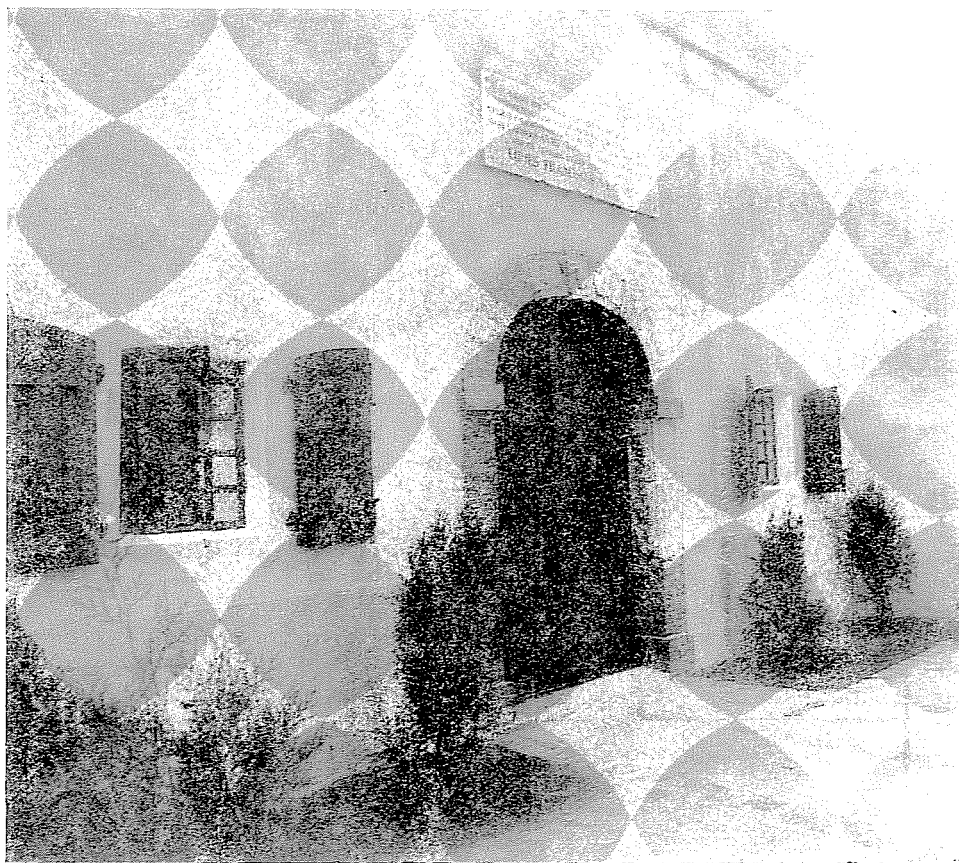


Fig. 7. The Wenckheim cellar-museum, entrance

Two rooms of the monastery facing east — likely to constitute the chapter hall — obtained a penthouse, originally as a protection for the burial chambers found here. Technical difficulties, however, prevented them to be presented, so that the penthouse gives an idea only of the overroofing and space effect of the cloister.

An essential item in monument presentation was to reconstruct the cellar and to utilize it for exhibitions. The basket-handle vaulted, arch-bended cellar needed no reconstruction else than for the entrance and the roof vent. The former was done by reconstructing and completing on the basis of some subsisting door jamb parts, and the latter after contemporary drawings. In the cellar have been exhibited complemented find reconstructions and building parts determinant for the once beauty of the building but of a value prohibiting open-air exhibition, where fundamental considerations opposed them to be restored on the original place. Such are details of the outer articulation of the

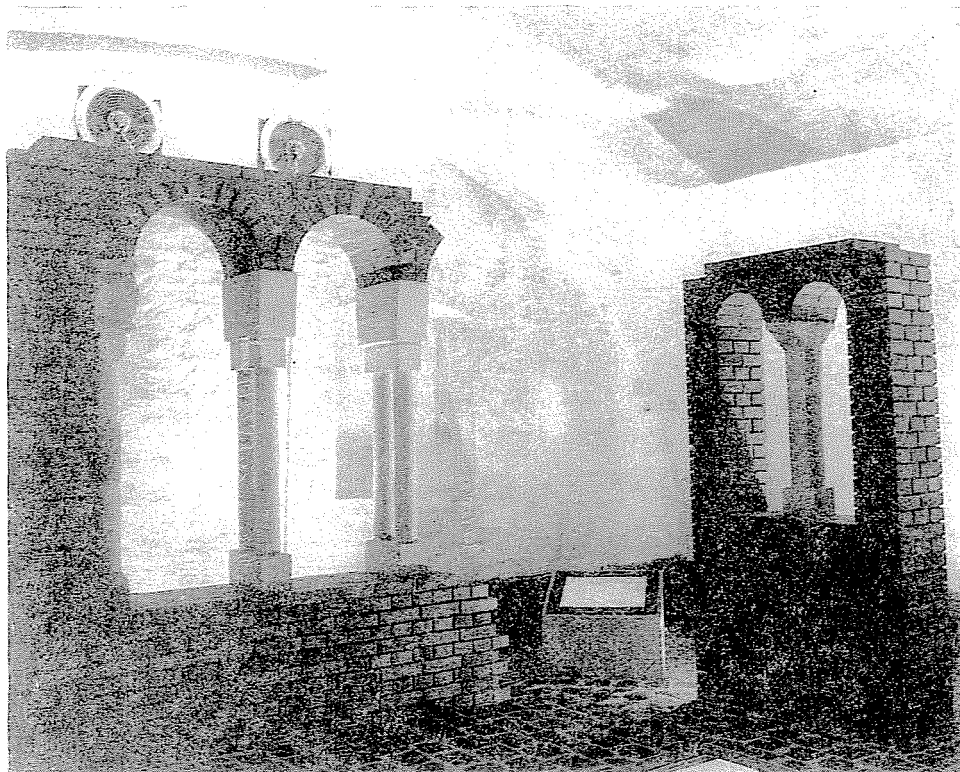


Fig. 8. The Wenckheim cellar-museum, architectural details exhibited

first round church; a carved door lining of the monastery belonging to the third church, as well as the dwarf gallery of the cloister, all these reconstructed with the original remnants for the exhibition; furthermore the coupled window of the fourth church; bevelled window of its nave and one pillar with pedestal and capital, of course, lower than the original. Wall complements are of brick, carvings have been complemented with reduced profiles cast of reconstructed stone. Understanding of periods is helped by transilluminated reconstruction drawings. The larger, front part of the cellar exhibits prehistoric and mediaeval finds, minor carvings and frescoe fragments. This exhibition — of a uniform easthetic effect and didactic power — has been planned by the Central Directorate of Museums, adapted to local circumstances.

In connection with the reconstruction work, the outstanding care of the Vésztő village council, primary condition of the restoration, has to be emphasized. Rather than sluggishly, as usual for official procedures, they proceeded with tenant's carefulness, devoted — as fitting the national importance of the goal — in all scopes from supporting the excavations to the purchase of materials needed for restoration.

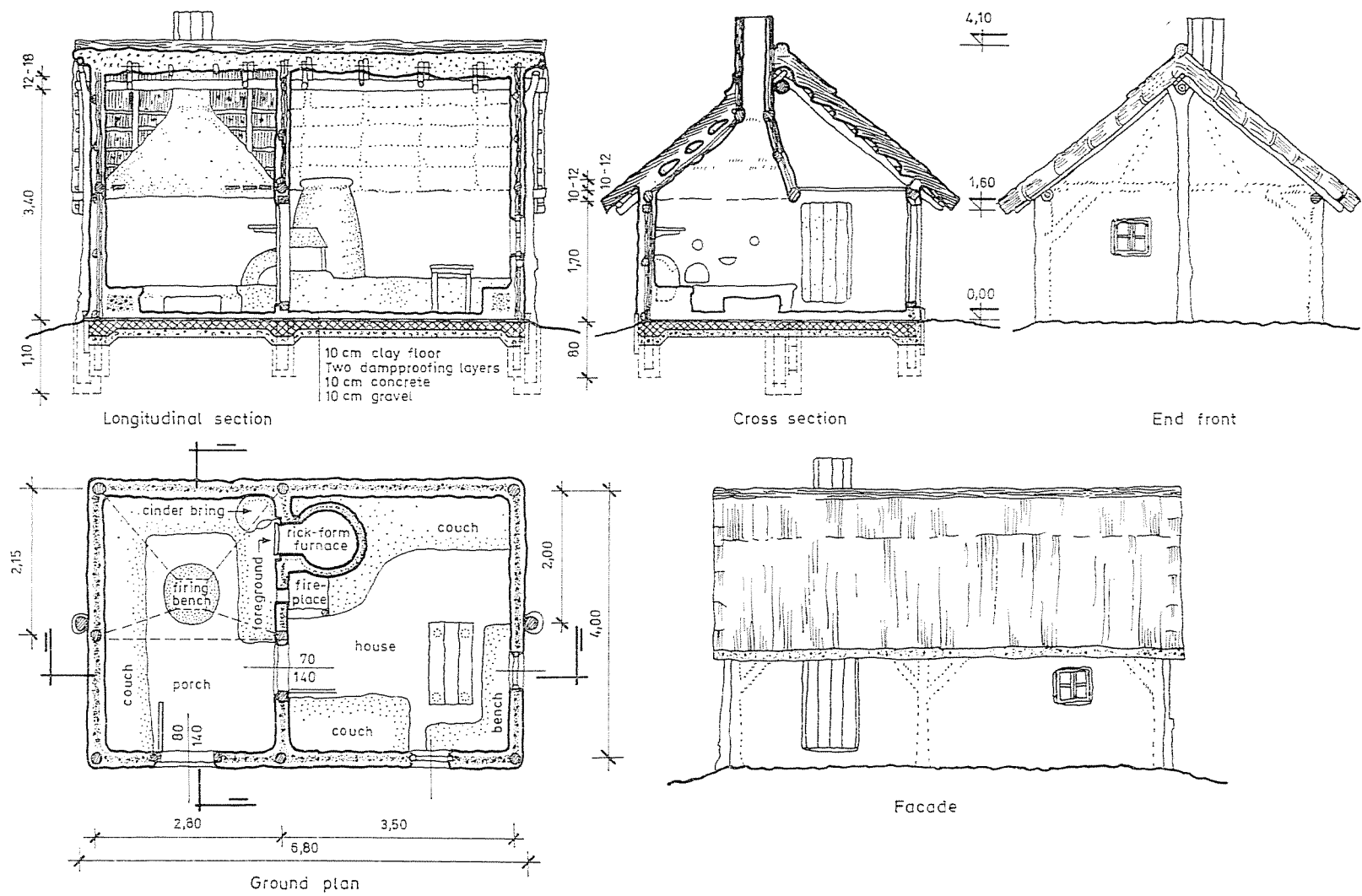


Fig. 9. Reconstruction design of the hunter- and fisher's home

Thereby it has become possible to include the monastery and Mágorhalom — in addition to monumental and archaeological protection — in the ordered and extended protective zone or a natural reservation, effectively supported by the National Environmental Office. Important earthworks, drainages were made by voluntary work of county enterprises and by inhabitants of Vésztő. The area was provided with power, roads, water supply, etc. Construction works of high skill, care and assiduity were done by masons of the Council's enterprise.

The recent Historical Memorial Place of Csolt monastery, with cellar museum and protected environment — forgotten for centuries and recently disclosed — has been inaugurated August 20, 1982, by Minister Imre Pozsgay.

Building remnants, ruin parks disclosed in archaeological excavations are rather difficult cases of monuments preservation. While there is a clear archaeological purpose — to find authentic documents of the past, to publish them for the profession, and to present them to the public in museums — the purpose of monuments preservation is far from being as simple to realize. Conservation and permanent exhibition of ruined building walls are among the most difficult technical problems, namely these are generally not protected from the weather by a roof, and beyond that, they are exposed to other climatic and soil-borne physical effects. A free-standing ruin wall is in the final, agonizing stage of a building — its parts will soon return to whence taken — to earth. Neither human, social factors are unimportant. Final destruction of many ruins is forwarded by greedy people, naughty children, or vandalistic youth. Thus, building remnants require careful and continuous keeping and maintenance, as well as circumstances making anybody conscious of the local, national and universal value of the sacrificially saved historical monument. Local population and authorities have to grow up emotionally to the duty of upkeep and safeguarding. Maybe in a manner to demonstrate in the given site other values of its history to foreigners. And if the community expects visit by foreigners, it is expected to service the visitors, to provide for comfort, to widen the range of sights. This is already an undertaking, with its business aspects.

The mediaeval Csolt monastery has prehistorical precursors in Mágorhalom. Small exhibits are seen in showcases of the cellar museum. Now the idea occurred that the site could in-situ demonstrate an archaeological excavation, namely every patch of the hill conceals remnants of prehistoric life. To this aim, plans for an "archaeological crypt" have been made, in cooperation with colleague Ferenc Vámosy.

Archaeologist János Makkay, native of Vésztő, has excavated a section 4.5 m wide by 25 m long, preparing there culture surfaces from Neolithic, Copper, Bronze Ages: house remnants, waste pits, tombs. All this has been overbuilt by a plain concrete and reinforced concrete penthouse, and an earth

fill has been made so that only the entrance is on view. This is an internationally unique prehistoric exhibition.

Beyond that, Vésztő has historical values nearer to historical continuity, estimable traditions, namely the old ways of living in Sárrét. The Geographical Vocabulary referred to above states: "Vésztő . . . is an old Hungarian community . . . Devastated first by the Tartars, then, after 1680, by the Serbs, only the stone wall of the church subsisted for some years when early in the 18th century it was begun to be disposed of by some people from Bihar county. There is a nice Reformed church with a spire, schools, 460 ornamented peasant homes, . . . one water mill, seven horse-driven mills, and two oil mills. Fields are of plain black soil, mostly meadows because of frequent floods, . . . to prevent floods, much work has been done by the villagers. The Körös river has been lined with a high, wide embankment to save the plain part of the village — the so-called Babylon — from floods, while in 1808 a canal 2000 fathoms long has been dug across the meadow . . . Many crabs and fish are caught in the Körös. Earlier, many turtles had been caught in the reeds . . . There are many wild-geese, wild-ducks, loons, spoonbills and herons." This is a clear description of a typical village of the Tisza region.

Devastating history, rugged life formed an uppish, busy peasantry, region-dependent farming. In addition to agriculture, wild keeping of animals — Hungarian gray cattle, "racka" sheep, etc. — as well as ancestral hunting and fishing were of importance. In possession of a historical memorial place, inhabitants of Vésztő meant to display these historical facts.

The architect was only expected to design a reconstructed hunter-and-fisher homestead — a typical archaic house type from the Tisza region — and a stable combined with a pen. Description and drawing of the hunter-and-fisher house was found in: Sándor Szűcs: "Reed-House in Sárrét and Life in it" (In Hungarian) "Néprajzi Múzeum Füzetei, Nr. 8. 1943", underlying the reconstruction. While for the reconstruction of sheep pen and stable, adequate, authentic data have been found in "Pastoral Construction in the Great Hungarian Plain" (in Hungarian) by István Györffy, *Ethnographia-Népélet*, Nr. 24. 1923. Another architectural problem was to properly locate it, in the vicinity of, but outside the monumental environment, so as not to disturb each other's effect. Otherwise, neither the pen, nor the stable are meant as open-air exhibits. A herd of "racka" sheep is kept as a gene bank and expected to browse and thereby to maintain the turf. In the stable some saddle horses and draught horses are kept, partly as a sight in the Great Hungarian Plain, and partly, for touring the pleasant region. About obligatory concomitants of a tour in the Great Plain are making and eating food cooked on open fire — toasted bacon, pork on brochette, goulash, stewed mutton.

To this aim, a thatched canteen has been built. Campestral food can be made by anybody for himself, or, if ordered, by the cook of a nearby restaurant.

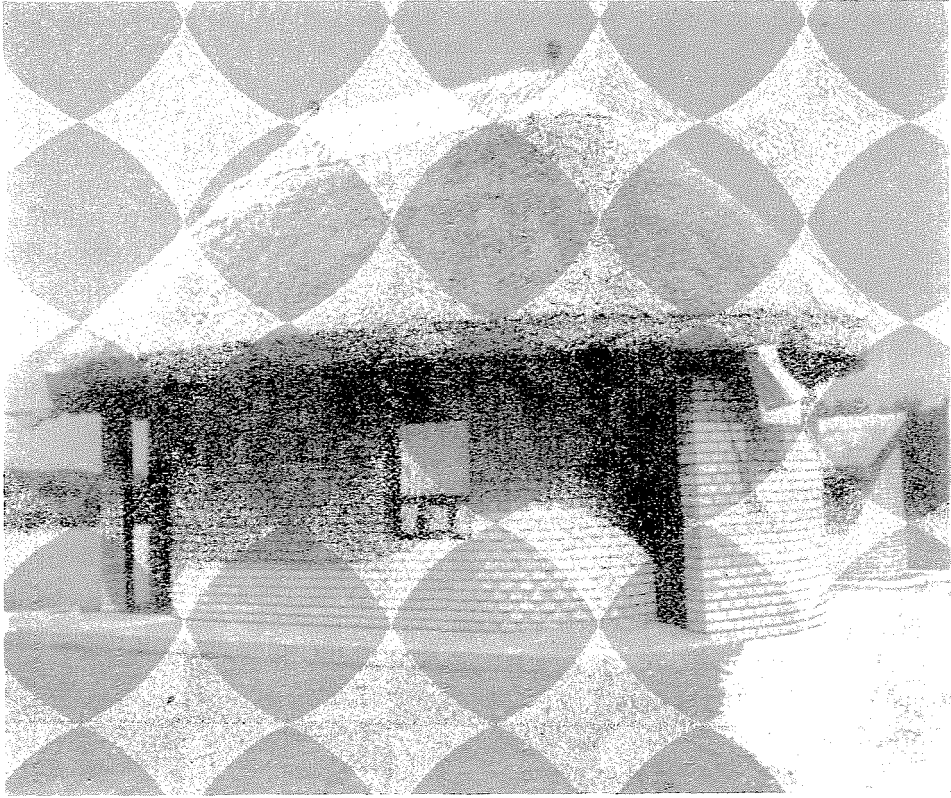


Fig. 10. Entrance building — temporary buffet

Revival of the folkways was later joined by a local patriotic proposal to erect a memorial for local mental achievements. In a so-called “Sárrét Pantheon” statues of writers, poets, politicians originating from, or active in Sárrét or the Tisza region will be erected, of them the activities they are proud of, and feel them to be theirs. The site was self-intended to be Mágorhalom and its surroundings, and so was the corner of a bank offering the best sight of the double mound. The bank slope lent itself to develop a stand suggestive of an ancient theatre, facing a circular area (orchestra). In place of the stage a memorial gate has been designed, reminiscent of old timber structures and folk architecture motifs, serving as a two-way platform. This has become the centre of the statue park, offering a place for lesser open-air performances or lessons. It is joined bilaterally by an alley of three-centre arch trace lined with busts. Three construction points of the curve have been set out by an object each. The hill toe received a fountain, namely this is about the end of the area accommodating 2—3000 people in the south foreground of the memorial gate — speaker’s

platform. In the right-side focal point there is the festive flagstaff, on the right side a so-called "time-tree" has been implanted. It bears the basic idea that population of this region for six millennia merit the honour of a memorial for their existence, struggles, nearby resting places and memories, just as do master minds from the turn of this century. But how to sustain their memories? It was meant that hundreds of unknown portraits from the past are well replaced by cultic objects and tomb marks. Thereby, according to a helical rising order, around the thick oak trunk, the fat female body refers to Neolithic believers of a fertility cult; the ruler's hatchet to a Bronze-age people, the horns to followers of a cult of force and bull, the Scythian stag to the population of Avar prairies, the trunk status over a grave to the conquering heathen Hungarians; Greek cross, sword and Latin cross to the establishment of a kingdom and to our ancestors accommodating themselves to Europe; then, wooden grave posts and headboards — current in the region — symbolize peasantry of the Middle Ages, distressed by Mongols and Turks, resettling, struggling and hoping . . . , people of the Great Cemetery. While in the statue park, the Pantheon of remembrance grows two busts every year — in four years, busts of Pál Szabó, Ferenc Erdei, Péter Veress, László Németh, Dénes Barsi, István Györffy, Géza Féja, József Erdélyi have been erected.

This is how — from the shroud of lick and vineyard grown wild, five millenia of primitive age, and one millennium of Hungarian history have risen again, thanks to fifteen years of archaeological, conserving and redreaming care, dignity restituted to the memory of our predecessors, a historical memorial place.

Dr. Gyula ISTVÁNYI H-1521, Budapest