

THE TWELFTH-CENTURY MOSAN RELIQUARY
OF PÉTERMONOSTORA





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THE TWELFTH-CENTURY
MOSAN RELIQUARY OF
PÉTERMONOSTORA

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Front cover: The two plaques of the Reliquary of Pétermonostora. Image: Pazirik Ltd.

Back cover: Detail of the Ascension plaque. Image: Pazirik Ltd.

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Foreword

The archaeology of destruction is one of the most complex issues in the research of material evidence connected to historical periods. Destroying and preserving objects and pieces of art seem to be contradictory concepts, but destruction layers at archaeological sites often produce exceptional finds that are conserved by a „desertion process” caused by sieges, fires, or the devastation of an invasion. The monastic site and the deserted medieval settlement at Pétermonostora near Bugac (Hungary) belong to this category, and the recent archaeological excavations led by Szabolcs Rosta produced outstanding finds from the medieval period.

One of the most important turning points in Hungarian history was the Mongolian Invasion in 1241–1242, when a considerable part of the country was wholly devastated. Written sources, medieval chronicles, and eyewitness accounts describe the plundering and pillaging, the torching of villages, and the massacre of their inhabitants, leading to the depopulation of several regions of the country. One of the most affected areas was the Great Hungarian Plain in the central part of the Kingdom of Hungary.

During the past one and a half centuries, archaeological research in Hungary has repeatedly tried to identify the traces of the destruction — the remains of battlefields, the unburied dead, and the torched settlements. However, with the exception of a few isolated finds, very few traces of the invasion have been identified in the archaeological record. For example, traces of the devastation caused by the Ottoman invasion in the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries were clearly identified during the early archaeological investigations of medieval villages in the Kecskemét area conducted during the 1930s, while the destruction in the wake of the thirteenth-century Mongolian invasion was not unambiguously documented. However, there has been an unexpected increase in the number of archaeological sites where direct evidence of the Mongolian destruction has been identified during the past two decades, especially in more recent years.

The investigation of Árpáadian Age settlements has brought to light the remains of unburied dead and of people who perished when their houses were torched. The destroyed houses still contained the typical tools and artefacts of daily life, as in one of the houses excavated near the battlefield of Muhi. Most of the settlement sites with archaeological evidence of the Mongolian invasion first came to light during salvage excavations preceding motorway construction. The large-scale, development-led archaeological research provided a greater chance of discovering villages that had been destroyed to the extent that even the inhabitants of nearby settlements were unable to bury the dead. However, the excavation of these

sites did not produce exceptional pieces of artwork, as such objects were not part of the material culture of village people of the period.

The archaeological excavation of Pétermonostora was carried out after a complex historical and archaeological investigation of the written evidence and the archaeological sites in the research territory of the Kecskemét Museum. Many years of research, excavation, and the dedicated work of a team produced the most significant collection of liturgical objects and pieces of artwork connected to a monastic site near Bugac. This now represents the most complex archaeological assemblage connected to a monastery destroyed during the Mongol invasion of Hungary.

It is not often in art history that an archaeological find sets a new direction for research. The likelihood of such a discovery occurring in East Central Europe is relatively low. The chances of it occurring in the middle of Hungary, in the Great Plain, where few medieval remains can be found since the Ottoman Wars, are even lower. But no one could have expected that the largest known enamel plaques of the Meuse region would be found in an excavation here.

However, finding objects is only one side of the coin. The fact that we now have a book about a world sensation in our hands is not just down to luck. It took a determined archaeologist who purposefully pursued his vision to uncover a monastic site he had identified. It also required a sober understanding on the part of the excavator that a thorough, professional analysis of the vast archaeological complex requires specialists in each field of research. Above all, it required an art historian with the training, talent, and diligence to interpret such an extraordinary find correctly.

In this case, the meeting between an unexpected and highly significant archaeological find and its dedicated researcher is in itself uncommon. It is exceptional that a young art historian should be given this opportunity. Bernát Rác has interpreted the unique enamel works in the context of an MA thesis defended in the Medieval Studies program at the Central European University (Budapest-Vienna), with an erudition worthy of the artefact’s status. In the present monograph, we have a multifaceted approach to the subject, which testifies to both the young author’s talent for art history and his ability to place an unexpected find in its historical context.

József Laszlovszky and Béla Zsolt Szakács

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INTRODUCTION

In 2013, during the excavation of the archaeological site of Pétermonostora (“Peter’s monastery” near Bugac, Hungary), two exceptionally large enamel plaques were discovered.¹ The iconography of the two plaques and their combination is peculiar. The scene on the left side is taking the entire plaque to represent the Ascension of Christ (*fig. 1*). The right side depicts the story of Christ washing Peter’s feet in two separate registers (*fig. 2–3*). In addition, a florally decorated gilded copper strip consisting of three fragments, which seems to have been connected to the enamels, was also found among the ruins (*fig. 4*). Another copper plaque with a gilded angel most probably also belonged to the artwork (*fig. 5*).

Pétermonostora was a private monastery founded around 1130.² Its first mention in the second decade of the thirteenth century describes it as a property of the Becse-Gergely kindred whose members were among the most influential lords of the period.³ Archaeological evidence suggests that the monastery was destroyed during the Mongol invasion of Hungary in 1241–1242. The settlement discovered around the monastery seemed unexpectedly large.⁴ In addition to the archaeological value of the monastery and the settlement, its art historical worth is certainly extraordinary.

The reliquary, as will be presented, was made in the Meuse Valley, a major intellectual and artistic centre of the period. Its discovery is among the greatest archaeological discoveries in medieval Hungarian archaeology. From the perspective of Mosan art, the reliquary also stands out because it is one of the few Mosan enamels discovered in an archaeological context. Therefore, in the first chapter the relevant archaeological information is presented. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the style and shape of the reliquary, respectively. Its extensive stylistic ties to the Meuse Valley are examined not only within the context of enamels, but connections with manuscripts are also explored. This is then supplemented by the interpretation of the characteristic technique used. As for the shape of the plaques, different models have been suggested since their discovery. I suggest that the artwork was a large phylactery reliquary. In Chapter 4, the broader context of the site and the artwork is presented. Even though the site was completely destroyed by the Mongols, its remains and especially finds like the reliquary create a unique image of a large settlement and a Latin Christian masterpiece. Given the destruction of sources and artworks in East-Central Europe, Pétermonostora offers a relatively rare opportunity to examine artistic, cultural, and historical aspects from this period of history.

¹ A significant part of this book is based on my MA thesis: Bernat Racz, “The Reliquary of Pétermonostora: A Twelfth-Century Mosan Phylactery Discovered in Hungary” (MA, Vienna, Central European University, 2023).

² Edit Sárosi and Szabolcs Rosta, “Privately Founded Benedictine Monasteries in Medieval Hungary – a Case Study,” in *Religion, Cults & Rituals in the Medieval Environment*, ed. Christiane Bis-Worch and Claudia Theune (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2017), 103–13.

³ For an explanation of private monasteries and kindreds including the Becse-Gergely, see Chapter 4.

⁴ Sárosi and Rosta, “Privately Founded Benedictine Monasteries in Medieval Hungary,” 111.