

The ruins and reconstruction of the medieval Abbey of Zirc

The foundation and history of the Abbey

The Cistercian Abbey of Zirc – founded in 1182 by Béla III. – had its golden age up to the middle of the 14th century, and it played an outstandingly important part among the Cistercian abbeys of Hungary. It is worth mentioning that it is placed among those abbeys, not of western Europe, which were founded from Clairvaux, the monastery of Saint Bernard. The abbot of Zirc received several assignments from the Pope, and the General Chapter also commissioned him to deal with various official matters. The founding of Gotó in 1232 is proof of the flourishing of Zirc. It is important to note also that in the statute books Zirc, or the abbey of Bakony, is not mentioned a single time with regard to disciplinary matters.

At the same time at the beginning of the 15th century, similarly to most of the Cistercian monasteries of Hungary, Zirc must have been in a poor state both in regard to vocations and to its material wealth.

Following the golden age of the abbey, it was at this stage, during the Turkish occupation of the country in the 16th century, latest in 1541 when Buda was invaded, or 1552 when Veszprém was taken, that the last monk escaped from Zirc and the village became uninhabited.

During the 16th to the 18th centuries the Cistercian General Chapter several times requested the Austrian Cistercian abbeys to try and repossess the estates of the Hungarian abbeys and to revive the monastic life here. So first it was the abbey of Lilienfeld that attempted to regain possession of the property of the abbey of Zirc, but found insurmountable difficulties and so handed on its rights to the Silesian Heinrichau Abbey, which, following diligent hard work, in 1700 finally succeeded in the revitalisation of Cistercian life at Zirc.

By this time the medieval abbey was in ruins. The back wing of the nave had almost totally collapsed, as had presumably the western wing, too. The eastern wing and the refectory were still standing, the vault of the dormitory on the first level was partly intact, while the vaults everywhere else had completely collapsed. So the restorers felt it would be better to build an entirely new monastery. [1. dia] The work on the new baroque monastery lasted from 1726 to 1733 and in the process the stones from the medieval building had been reused. Those parts of the ruins that had remained standing were demolished so that the stones from them could be used again. The construction of the new baroque church continued from 1732 to 1751. Thus the ground-plan and structure of the 19th century medieval abbey have fallen into oblivion.

As the medieval documents and codices had been lost completely, we have knowledge of the 17th-18th century ruins of the medieval abbey building only from those who re-established the abbey in the 18th century.

Due to the lack of available space and time I will list here only the sources relating to the medieval abbey building: 1696, the work of Pál Esterházy entitled “Mennyei korona”; 1699, letter of Abraham Wabrzig re-establisher, monk of Heinrichau, to his abbot regarding his observations at Zirc; in 1729 again the re-establisher monks report on the medieval abbey in the handwritten book entitled: “Zirci ... apátság birtokainak ... felsorolása; a report dating before 1735 of Mátyás Bél about the ruins of the medieval abbey and the new building; in 1738 the *Historia domus* of the abbey gives details about the demolition of the then still standing parts of the building, stating also that the stones thus recovered were systematically used in the construction of the new abbey; in 1750 the work of Bonbardius and Trsztyánszki

Jesuit priests entitled: *Topographia magni regni Hungariae*, in its second edition, mentions Zirc.

Of these sources the letter of Abraham Wabrzig, 1699, gives most information as it describes in detail the ruins of the church and the eastern wing of the medieval monastery, making comparisons with his own abbey of Heinrichau, as well as that of the Cistercian abbey of Rauden. To this provide further details the writings of 1738 and 1729. From these we can conclude that almost every writer is held spellbound by the ruins of the old monastery and church, referring to them as royal or wonderful creations. We will take a look at their structure in outline below [later].

[2. and 3. dia] Beyond these, although it has no source value but it is in accord with the sources, in the Catholic parish church of Olaszfalu, on the high altar picture dating from the 18th century, there's a detail which almost certainly depicts the ruins of the medieval abbey of Zirc, and it also includes two Cistercian monks. (The artist and the date seem probable, but not definite, because the work is not signed.)

The structure and ground-plan of the medieval abbey have sunk into oblivion following the demolition of the ruined remnants. Only a single bundle of columns remains visible today as reminder of the once flourishing monastic life in the church and monastery. On top of this bundle of columns the statue of St Imre was placed in 1749. {4. dia} So the great researcher of the history of the Cistercian Order, Remig Békefi, after his election as abbot in 1911, delegated the monk Tibor Hümpfner to open up the ruins of the medieval abbey, with any necessary assistance. Hümpfner had expertise in history of art as well as the Cistercian building methods and medieval buildings, and he began his work in 1912. The starting point of the work was the establishment that the remaining pillar was standing at its original position, and so the southern wall and cloister of the church had to be lying to the south of it. Following the discovery of these, all as presumed, they proceeded to the east to find the eastern wing. [5. and 6. dia] A large portion of the diggings took place in a pleasure garden, so only research trenches could be opened up in order to look for wall lines and their junctions, the corners. Total opening up could be done only around the eastern wing. The results of these excavations were surveyed and documented according to the possibilities of that time, although we feel that the details are incomplete considering present-day circumstances. As a result of those excavations a ground-plan was produced which is approximately accurate, even according to our present-day knowledge. Furthermore, some chiselled stone fragments had been unearthed. [7. dia] To mention only the most spectacular finds: gravestones, column capital and base fragments, corbels, bevelled window frame, fragments of rib vault have been unearthed, among other items. (The most spectacular pieces can be seen today at the stone storage facility at Tihany, the others at the storehouse of the Museum of Veszprém.)

Supplementing the incomplete knowledge and taking into account the peculiarities of Cistercian architecture in 1913 a ground-plan was drawn [8. dia] which shows the following: the length of the church is almost 60 metres (this is about the same as those larger abbey churches founded by the royal house at Pilis, Kerc and Toplica); the length of the transept is 27 metres, its width 9 metres. The sanctuary is not surrounded by a passage – just as it is described in the source dated 1699 – but there are two-two chapels beside it. East of the church there is a spacious vestry. The east wing is almost 45 m, the whole block of the abbey buildings – not counting the occasional separate but presently yet unknown buildings – occupied some 5100 m² of ground. We know nothing certain about the southern wing, but traces of the well house have been found. Similarly, the foundations of the western wing have been discovered. The fortunes of further excavations had been marred by the First, then the Second World Wars, and in 1950 the dispersal of the monks. All the searching trenches of the

diggings had been buried again, with the exception of the eastern wing which had been opened up completely. The writing of Hümpfner about the excavations was published posthumously in 1964.

The excavated ruins basically had lain neglected since 1950. There was an attempt made early in the 1960s to clear away the weeds growing over the opened up eastern wing of the excavation area, but by the 1980s the trees and weeds had completely covered it up. Then, at the initiative of a spirited local teacher of the history of art, the excavation area was cleared of all encroachment for the 800th anniversary of the foundation of the abbey, but after that a further 20 years of neglect followed.

In 2003 in preparation for the current excavations we cut down the shrubs and a dozen trees that had weakened the remaining walls and foundations. On top of the medieval ruins in the 18th century there had been earth piled to a height of 1,5 to 2 metres. Therefore, the ruins of the eastern wing unearthed in 1912 could be found deep at the bottom of the diggings. In this deep trench the rain and snow had accumulated [9. dia] and so the remaining small portion of wall and foundation had loosened as a result of 100 years of neglect. This necessitated immediate attention to authenticate the excavations, restore and protect the condition.

After the excavations of 1912 useful finds and information surfaced, which help us to discover more about the construction of the medieval abbey. First in the 1950s, after the dispersal of the monks, during the laying of essential services the sewer pipes were led across the the former church, and so medieval wall lines, stone fragments and graves were found. During the demolition of old dwelling houses in Zirc smaller stone fragments were found and they also can be seen at the stone storehouse of the Museum of Veszprém.

[10. dia] After 1990 when the monastic life at Zirc could resume, during the internal building work of the abbey some medieval chiselled stones were found. These, as far as we can tell at present, were part of the structure of the medieval church. In 2004 during the laying of rainwater pipes at the monastery, 35 metres from the medieval ruins, the corner portion of the former outer entablature was found. [11. dia]

[12. dia] In 2005 during the building of a store some 300 metres from the monastery, a large number of medieval chiselled stones were found that had been part of a mill that the abbey had built in the baroque era and which was later used as servant's quarters. In this building, too, the stones from the medieval abbey had been used once again. On the strength of the present evaluations we can say that the majority of the discovered finds had been a part of the church: arches [that connect pillars], façade arches [a part of the structure of the groin vault which touches the wall], rib vaults. [13. and 14. dia] Of all these the most interesting finds are the fragments of the church's large rose window, on the basis of which the archaeologists established that these are parts of the inner hub and outer frame of a rose window that measures 6 metres across. According to the sources this rose window had to be on the sanctuary wall. Beyond the building mentioned, out of a baroque boundary wall numerous fragments came to hand, so today there are about 200 pieces of fragments at the stone storeroom of the abbey at Zirc. [15. dia] These finds and the virtual reconstruction that Csaba Benko will be presenting in his talk – which is the result of two years of work – have also given great momentum to the start of the excavations of the medieval abbey.

More can be found on the subject in my article on the net at: <http://www.ocist.hu/zircz>

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