

BIZERE ABBEY AND THE INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE “MONASTIC LIFE, ART, AND
TECHNOLOGY IN THE 11TH – 16TH
CENTURIES” – AN INTRODUCTION

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The Benedictine monastery of Bizere dedicated to the Virgin Mary (*monasterium de Bisra*, 1183; *ecclesia Beate Virginis de Byscere*, 1321; *monasterium Sancte Marie de Bizere ordinis Sancti Benedicti*, 1423), located on a former island of the river Mureş/Maros in Arad County, existed already in the 12th century. It certainly seems to have been a significant institution of the medieval Hungarian Kingdom, as in 1235 it was populated by 32 monks. The monastery's most important privilege was represented by its cargo ships for the transport of salt along the river Maros/Mureş. The monks were allowed to purchase salt in any mine, which could be found upstream in Transylvania, and transport the salt free of duty three times a year. In later charters similar privileges were referenced, for example for the bishop of Nyitra/Nitra (1183) and for the Benedictine monastery of Pannonhalma (1211). The abbot of Bizere was mentioned at the latest in 1522. The monastery was totally destroyed during the Ottoman period, but its ruins were shown on historic maps, and the site around them was named *Monostoru*.¹ Now it can be found in the outskirts of the village Frumuşeni (Hungarian: Szépfalu) in Romania.

The limited archaeological research and field walks in the 19th and 20th centuries could not lead to the identification of the functions of the

ruined buildings, at the least the site of the totally unknown church could have been localized in 1981. Some architectural fragments, pieces carved of marble and other stones from multicolored pavements, have come from the site to the Arad Museum. In the great survey of Benedictine monasticism in medieval Hungary, the catalogue of an exhibition organized in Pannonhalma in 2001, only a short summary of the former results were published.²

The extensive archaeological research of the building complex started in the same year as the Pannonhalma exhibition. The excavations were led by archaeologist Adrian Andrei Rusu and revealed remains of great significance. The mortar imprint of a medieval ship, used later secondarily as a lime- or mortar-pit, is a unique find in the Carpathian Basin. It clearly demonstrates the shipping practices of the monastery, as mentioned above. In 2003 colored mosaic pavements of geometric, floral, and figural ornaments were discovered in the monastery church. Among their stones, which were of many different colors (reddish, bluish grey, black, white, light blue, yellow, and dark green), both red and green porphyry could be found.³ Prior to the excavation the use of porphyry in the Carpathian Basin during the Middle Ages had not been detected at all. These stones were likely reused in Bizere; the imperial porphyry and marble pieces probably originated in the interior of Transylvania, from the ruins of settlements in what had once been the Roman province of Dacia. Shipping the special material – stones, marbles, and Roman *tegulae* also used for the floors – would not have given the monks much trouble. With their motifs and

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¹ György Györffy, *Az Árpád-kori Magyarország történeti földrajza*, 3rd ed. [The Historical Geography of Hungary in the Árpád Age] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1987), 173–174; Levente Hervay F., “Bizere,” in *Paradisum plantavit. Bencés monostorok a középkori Magyarországon. Benedictine Monasteries in Medieval Hungary*. Exhibition at the Benedictine Archabbey of Pannonhalma 21 March – 11 November 2001, ed. Imre Takács (Pannonhalma: Pannonhalmi Bencés Főapátság, 2001), 484–485.

² Zsuzsa Heitelné Moré, “Monostorok a Maros mentén. Adatok” [Monasteries along the Maros River. Data], in *Paradisum plantavit*, 268.

³ Ileana Burnichioiu and Adrian Andrei Rusu, *Mozaicurile medievale de la Bizere. The Medieval Mosaics from Bizere. Die mittelalterliche Mosaiken von Bizere* (Cluj-Napoca: Mega Publishing House, 2006); Adrian Andrei Rusu and Ileana Burnichioiu, eds., *Mănăstirea Bizere* [Bizere Monastery], vol. I (Cluj-Napoca: Mega Publishing House, 2011); Ileana Burnichioiu and Adrian Andrei Rusu, “Medieval Floor Mosaics at Bizere Monastery. A Brief Survey,” *Trans RXX*, no. 2 (2011): 3–13; Ileana Burnichioiu, “The decorative heritage of Bizere monastery. Fragments of *opus sectile*,” in this volume: 249–264.

material richness these pavements in Bizere are unique among the Romanesque relics of medieval Hungary, but remains of marble floors are known from other buildings too. In the provostal church of Székesfehérvár, the medieval cathedral of Eger, and a not yet identified building in Kutaspuszta (Székkutas) in the Great Hungarian Plain rhombuses, triangles, semicircular slabs, and medallion-type low reliefs of different colored material refer to the destroyed originals.⁴

The research work at the Bizere site was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research, which made it possible to organize an international conference at Alba Iulia's University "1 Decembrie 1918," together with a special exhibition presenting the finds of the excavations.

The Organizing Committee of the conference was formed by Ileana Burnichioiu (University "1 Decembrie 1918" of Alba Iulia), Peter Hügel (Arad Museum Complex), and Oana

Toda (University "1 Decembrie 1918" of Alba Iulia), and their work was assisted by a Scientific Committee consisting of Romanian and Hungarian archaeologists and art historians.

The conference with the title of "Monastic Life, Art, and Technology in 11th – 16th Centuries" took place on October 16th–18th, 2014. The elegant, freshly restored historic buildings of the University of Alba Iulia gave the event an excellent atmosphere. These buildings of the fortified town center can be found in the vicinity of both cathedrals, the Roman excavations' site, and the famous Batthyaneum Library. Guided tours in the medieval Roman Catholic Cathedral and in the Batthyaneum were important and popular parts of the conference program.

After the opening with the keynote lectures by Eric Fernie and Xavier Barral i Altet more than twenty papers were read in three sections: "Monastic landscape; spatial organization



⁴ For the latest summary about decorative stones in medieval Hungary see: Pál Lóvei, "Uralkodói kőanyagok. A király és az elit díszítő-kő-használata a középkori Magyarországon" [Stone for Rulers. The Use of Decorative Stone by Kings and Magnates in Medieval Hungary], in *In medio regni Hungariae. Régészeti, művészettörténeti és történeti kutatások „az ország*

közepén" / *Archaeological, art historical, and historical researches 'in the middle of the kingdom,'* eds. Elek Benkő and Krisztina Orosz (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Régészeti Intézet, 2015), 79–109.

of monastic complexes,” “Monastic wealth sources,” and “Monastery as production centre; usage of art in the monastic milieu; artistic connections.” The participants represented several countries of Europe: they came from Great Britain, Catalonia, France, Italy, Croatia, Slovakia, Poland, the Czech Republic, and of course from Romania and Hungary. Not only the leaders and the participants of the Bizere excavations presented their results, but with several lectures the interpretation of their finds has been started on an international level too. This was one of the main goals of the organizers. Other papers were devoted to different topics concerning Benedictine, Cistercian, and Praemonstratensian monasticism in Central, South, and Western Europe. There were lectures dealing with the problems of art, architecture, material culture, the economic life of the Mendicant Orders, and in addition to the Dominicans and Franciscans the Pauline Order, founded in Hungary, was also addressed.

An international conference about monasticism with such a broad perspective had never been organized in the region before. Still, before the political changes around 1990 there was an important conference, dedicated to medieval mendicant architecture organized in Szeged (Hungary) by the scientific department of the former National Office for the Protection of Historic Monuments in Budapest, with some topics and participants from Transylvania, Slovakia, and Croatia.⁵ The series of conferences “Medieval Ecclesiastical Architecture in Transylvania” now number at eight, with several contributions on monastic problems. Based in the County Museum Satu Mare (Romania) their participants were fundamentally from Romania and Hungary; one could meet several of them among the organizers, lecturers, and audience at the Alba Iulia conference too.⁶



⁵ The volume of the 1988 conference was published only six years later: Andrea Haris, ed., *Koldulórendi építészet a középkori Magyarországon – tanulmányok* [Architecture of the Mendicant Orders in Medieval Hungary], (Budapest: Országos Műemlékvédelmi Hivatal, 1994).

⁶ The papers of the first seven conferences have been published in five volumes: Péter Levente Szócs et al., eds., *Arhitectura religioasă medievală din Transilvania. Középkori egyházi építészet Erdélyben. Medieval Ecclesiastical Architecture in Transylvania I-V* (Satu Mare: Editura Muzeului Sătmărean, 1999-2012).

The exhibition of the Bizere finds took place in the cellars of the “Apor Palace” built in the 15th–18th centuries, and used for the solemn central office of the University. It was a brilliant idea to use the exhibition as a focal point of the conference, giving a lot of chances for the participants to observe and discuss the exhibits. There was a rather spectacular attempt at reconstructing a section of a building unit consisting of dwarf columns with ornamented pedestals and capitals of different types. From the

mosaic stones, marble slabs, and *tegulae* moduls found not *in situ* at the site, a great selection of different patterns were reconstructed.

There was a huge glass case full with a rich collection of finds of iron and metal. Huge pieces of greyish Transylvanian rock-salt referred to the economic organization of Bizere abbey.

The organizers had planned for the publication of the conference papers from the very beginning of their work. The result of their efforts is this volume.

