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## Blowing in the Wind, Sinking in the Swamp: Mosaburg – Zalavár

### ABSTRACT

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Zalavár and its surroundings are considered one of the most important 9<sup>th</sup>-century localities in the Carpathian Basin. The centre at Zalavár-Castle Island retained its role even after the Hungarian conquest and kept it until the 13<sup>th</sup> c. By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. the remnants over the surface were completely destroyed, and in some places even the foundations were removed. Although archaeological research revealed many remains, only a few were reconstructed. Considering the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century political/national ideas about the site, its interpretation Archaeological excavations resulted in new information about the region, which led to an increased interest in the site and to both tourism and pilgrimage evolving significantly. The site became a place of political commemoration. Due to social changes among the villagers from Zalavár, the community gradually lost interest in the site, even though it lies only 1.5 km from the village. Experience suggests that without involving the local community, conservation work will be unviable.

**Keywords:** Mosaburg, Zalavár, Blatnohrad, politics in archaeology, memorials

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### Introduction

The site is located to the south-west of Lake Balaton, in the marshy lower valley of the Zala River, in the confines of the village of Zalavár, on Castle Island, an area of 15 hectares. It lies not far (but at a safe distance) from the north-south motorway which has been used as a route since the Neolithic onwards. The archaeological research on Castle Island began in 1948, and it has been going on until today with longer or shorter interruptions.

### Possible fundamentals for reconstructions and conservation

The settlement, situated on an L-shaped island (that turned into an elevation surrounded by low lying meadows which often become

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flooded after a dam was constructed in the 19<sup>th</sup> c.), was established at the beginning of the 840s. It was called *civitas Privinae*, *castrum Chezilonis* and also *Mosaburg* in a 9<sup>th</sup>-century document; it consisted of three main parts in the Carolingian Period: the founder Pribina's (Szőke 2017) fortified manor house in the south, the territory of the Archbishop of Salzburg in the north, and – probably – a suburb in the eastern area. It is the most important archaeological site from the 9<sup>th</sup> c. in the Carpathian Basin. The excavated remains of the buildings, the ongoing changes in settlement patterns, together with the quantity and quality of the finds reflect the intensity of the settlement and its central function. This importance is also reflected in documentary evidence: the *Conversio bagoariorum et carantanorum* compiled in 870/871. At that time there was some confusion in Mosaburg's life caused by Methodius' activity. But in the 880s the sun rose again above the settlement – it became a temporary royal residence of Arnolf of Carinthia (Szőke 2014, 51–110). Finally, at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> c., the whole island was surrounded by earthen and timber ramparts (Gergely 2015; Grynaeus 2015) due to the appearance of a new, strange population – the Hungarians – in the region. First, they were allies of the Emperor, but later (after Arnolf's death) they became conquerors of the land and thus enemies of the Empire. At the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> c., as a consequence of the Hungarian conquest, the notable inhabitants of Mosaburg and their escorts fled. The main marker of this process is the vanishing of polished pottery. There is no evidence of any kind of violent occupation, but the prosperity of the settlement was interrupted. Some signs of continuous life (houses, wells) have been excavated on the peripheries of the former centre; at the same time pottery and animal bones appear again in the graves situated on the edges of the churchyards. However, the excavations did not provide any evidence of the newcomers' spontaneously settling in. The once respectable settlement seemed to fade into oblivion and began to sink into the surrounding swamp.

On the Easter of 973 twelve envoys of the Hungarian prince arrived at the court of Otto I in Quedlinburg to make peace with the Empire. As one of the consequences of the peace treaty, the official Christianisation of the Hungarians began. At the very start of this activity there was a competition between the bishoprics of Salzburg and Passau for the influence on the nascent Hungarian Church. Fake charters were produced,

presumably using information from the *Conversio*. Consequently, Mosaburg and its three churches came out of the shadow of century-long oblivion, showcasing Salzburg's role in the Christianisation of the region. The representatives of the Archbishopric were present at the princely court of Géza and his son, Stephen, so it is probable that due to their proposal the decision to revive the former Carolingian centre might have been born there. But this revival did not mean the rebirth of the settlement with its 9<sup>th</sup>-century structure and institutions at all. However, the tripartite division of the area of the island was preserved, though the Church and the secular part changed places: in the middle part of the central area of the island a secular (county) seat settled partly above the former Church of St. Hadrian, while a Benedictine monastery occupied the site of Pribina's manor house-complex to the south of it. The manor's 9<sup>th</sup>-century Holy Virgin Church was rededicated to St. Hadrian in 1019; the suburb probably – according to finds from field walking surveys – remained uninhabited. Although it was a revival, it cannot be regarded as a case of preservation of the past at all, for the 9<sup>th</sup>-century “honourable Church of St. Hadrian” and Arnolf's palace were demolished and were utilised as quarries (Ritoók 2010).

By the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> c. the county seat had been given up. The process of abandonment of many ancient centres of the early Árpádián monarchy in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. is explained either by the reorganisation of the administration and/or by the consequences of the Mongol invasion (1241–1242) (Szende 2011, 394–405). The latter could have had less impact in the case of Zalavár. Here, further factors, such as the geographic environment and climatic changes, should be taken into account: these two factors, supplemented also by the decline of the Benedictine Order in the late medieval period, led to the site's gradual loss of the central role.

From the geographical point of view, southern Transdanubia had a dense road network in the High and Late Middle Ages. It is characterised by a multitude of parallel, periodically usable paths and a lack of royal or public highways. This led to the curious “townless” status of the county in the Middle Ages and also partly explains the regression of the Zalavár-Castle Island settlement (Kubinyi 1989; Ritoók 2015, 84–85).

In addition to environmental analyses of evidence of climatic changes (Sümegei *et al.* 2007), archaeological contexts, surprisingly enough,

reveal rising groundwater level in the region in the 11–13<sup>th</sup> c., for it was a warm and dry period. The rising water level made it difficult to approach the county seat. According to a charter dated to 1359, the monastery could only be approached by boat from the west coast of the river. In 1413 the communication between the monastery and the east coast (the village of Zalavár) was provided by a timber-twig bridge. The situation turned even worse in the wet period which started in the 15<sup>th</sup> c. In the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> c., when the fortified monastery functioned as a border fortress, it was the surrounding swamp that provided powerful protection against the Ottomans.

After Hungary was liberated from the Ottoman rule (1699), the ruined building became useless, and was partly blown up in 1702. No wonder that the Göttweig Abbey, the new owner of Zalavár from 1715 onwards, chose a new location for the new monastery in Zalaapáti. The remains were used as a quarry (Ritoók 2014, 286).

### The first site conservation plan

The text of the *Conversio bagoariorum et carantanorum* was first published in 1780 by a church historian, Stephanus Salagius (Salagius 1780). In the following decades many scholars tackled the localisation of Mosaburg and its possible identification with Zalavár. The critical edition of the *Conversio* as an appendix to the *Glagolita Clozianus* prepared by Jernej (Bartholomeus) Kopitar appeared in 1836 (Kopitar 1836). Thanks to these publications and discussions the interest in Mosaburg/Zalavár increased, but at the same time this interest was often associated with emerging Slavic nationalism. However, it was in that very year, 1836, that a large-scale demolition of the remains started and the building material was reused for road construction and for the regulation of the Zala River. In 1841, two travellers seeking Slavic relics visited Castle Island: Jan Kollar, a Lutheran priest from Pest, and Anton Doležalek, the director of the Institute of the Blind in the same town. They saw there a lot of people “swarming like ants” and busily taking away the stones and bricks from the ruins. The visitors told the owner’s representative that the walls they were destroying belonged to the remains of the first Christian church in Hungary. At last they managed to stop the demolition. Doležalek appealed to some prominent people, first of all to the patron of Doležalek’s Institute, the Palatine of Hungary, to save

the remains, and to erect a memorial chapel in the Byzantine style on the site where the stones and bricks that had been mined from the old walls were piled on. The dedication of the chapel was planned for 1850, the millennial anniversary of the dedication of the first St. Mary's Church of Mosapurc/Zalavár. As a result of Doležalek's intervention, further destruction was forbidden and fundraising for the planned chapel began. The chapel was designed by a young architect, Josef Pan, who was born in Prague, studied in Vienna, arrived in Pest in 1834, and lived and worked there until his death in 1890. Doležalek also informed the Hungarian Academy of Sciences about his experiences and plans. The Archaeological Committee of the Academy, was established in 1844, called on the owner, the convent in Zalaapáti, to assess the ruins and to find proper documents in its archives (Doležalek 1847; Prokop 1964, 232; Ritoók 2014, 286).

However, there was no happy ending. The revolution of 1848/49 and its cruel defeat overshadowed the ambitious plans. The former protectors of monuments were imprisoned, forced into emigration or passive resistance (Szentesi 2012, 8–9). The convent continued their stone quarrying on Castle Island in accord with the county administration. According to a report written in 1864

with his vigorous action, Kollár had for a short time removed the danger from these extremely interesting ruins; but later on, the noble Zala County, preferring utilitarianism to archaeological interest, continued the wrecking so that finally Rómer [the archaeologist who made a survey of the remains in 1861] found even the place of the “castrum” had disappeared and the stone foundation no longer existed (Henszlmann 1964, 121).

However, in 1881 still interpretable remains were documented. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. a substantial volume was published on the history of the Zalavár monastery, its antecedents, charters and remains (Füßy 1902). Then the image darkened. Some of the high-quality stone carvings formerly transferred to Zalaapáti and recorded in the 19<sup>th</sup> c. disappeared. Castle Island was covered by pastures and after 1929 a herb processing plant was built on the site, near the quarry.

In 1938 north of the former monastery a memorial stone was erected to commemorate the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of the first Hungarian king, Stephen I (1000–1038), the founder of the monastery and the Zala County. This memorial can be considered an early forerunner of six other memorials (see below).

### Systematic archaeological research – with political backwind

The excavations started in 1948 primarily focused on issues of the continuity and survival of Roman culture in the Zalavár region in the medieval period. The political changes of 1949 also changed the aims of archaeological research. In 1949, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences declared the material culture and settlement of the Pannonian Slavs one of the most important fields of Hungarian archaeology. Zalavár as a research site was designated as the only known “Slavic site” in Hungary. Although the new aspects of research were not devoid of political entanglements, both Hungarian archaeology and the site itself benefited from the decisions. The legal demolition of the site was stopped, and excavations have been going on since that time (Fig. 1).

In the 1960s, as a sign of the ongoing political thaw, the focus of the research changed: in addition to the 9<sup>th</sup>-century finds, the legacy of the Árpáadian period (i.e. 11–13<sup>th</sup> c.) also became important.

Despite the high priority of the place, in the 1950s the possibility of presenting the excavated remains was not raised, for no stone walls



**Fig. 1.** Zalavár-Castle island. Excavations in 1953 (Photo by G. Fehér)

were found (except for an 11<sup>th</sup>-century church); the dates of timber buildings, their structures and contexts were not entirely clear and undisputed.

Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, under less supportive circumstances, only the devotion of Ágnes Cs. Sós led to the pursuit of the excavations.

... and without it

Due to the findings of the large-scale excavations conducted over the last two decades, new contexts were considered and the cultural and political connections of the site were successfully clarified (as it is thought today). The above mentioned 9<sup>th</sup>-century remains and the settlement structure evoke the characteristic image of Carolingian centres. In accordance with the written sources, the 9<sup>th</sup>-century settlement of Zalavár-Castle Island today is defined as the seat of the easternmost earldom of the Carolingian empire and the Pannonian centre of Christianisation. This image is enriched by the activity of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Zalavár/Mosaburg.

This new definition means a rejection of the former theory of the exclusively Slavic connection strongly advocated by politics, and the return of the non-political evaluation of the remains proposed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c., based strictly on finds and sources (Récey 1892). However, public opinion is reluctant to accept the new results.

Nevertheless, there is a great international interest in the excavations in Zalavár. Scholars from the neighbouring countries often visit the site. The new results are difficult to accept even for them. Their attachment to the previous Slavic interpretation is understandable, since Zalavár (often referred to as Blatnohrad in Slavic languages) became part of the Slavic national past, as one of its decisive chapters. This is why it is asked many times with disbelief: is this research really supported by the National Cultural Fund of Hungary? This astonishment is probably understandable considering the 20<sup>th</sup>-century history of Central and Eastern-Europe.

Few reconstructions and many memorials

The review of the above-mentioned data and processes was necessary to understand the failure of the site's current use.

The first remains suitable for presentation were found in 1953 – the foundations of a church – and in the 1960s – details of the foundation-trench of the enceinte wall of the monastery; both are dated to the last decades of the 11<sup>th</sup> c. The latter, despite plans for conservation, were covered back, but in 1996 the church was reconstructed (in fact a new church was built), celebrating the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hungarian conquest. With this reconstruction started the development of an archaeological park on Castle Island. The next element of this park was the presentation of the outlines of St. Hadrian's pilgrim church in 2000, together with a well and a (probable) brewery. The ploughing of the excavated area ceased, and a small museum was erected by the Transdanubian Water Management Directorate, where “small” archaeological, ethnographic, biological and water management exhibitions are shown; a “water playground” and a twig labyrinth were later added in the vicinity of the building (Fig. 2). Tourist traffic has increased, but a plan of proper arrangement is still badly needed for the whole Castle Island, as is the presentation of many more excavated



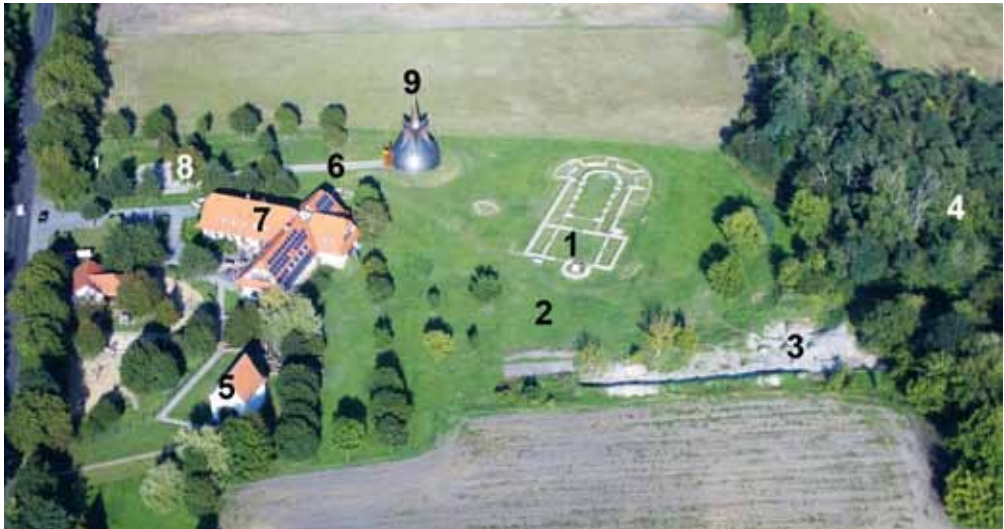
**Fig. 2.** Zalavár-Castle Island. The reconstructed church and the twig labyrinth (Photo by Á. Ritoók)



remains, of which perhaps the most significant element would be the wooden church of St. John the Baptist with its baptismal font and Arnolf's palace (Fig. 3).

Interestingly enough, the more the park developed, the more the interest of the local community decreased. Up until the 1990s, local patriotic history teachers taught the children of the village the importance of the place, visited the excavations and brought their pupils regularly to the site. Their successors are no longer local residents who live in the village, to teach their lessons there. They are not interested in the excavations, nor in listening to archaeologists' reports on new research results, nor do they guide their pupils to the site. In the past, village festivals were always held on Castle Island; nowadays they are organised in the village, in the community centre. A dumpling cooking competition opened here in 2017. "We want the dumpling cooking to become a gastronomic festival with international participation next year *because due to our historical past* we have Russian, Bulgarian, and Slovak relations" – said the Mayor (ZAOL 2017).

Nevertheless, Zalavár-Castle Island does have a real success story: the memorial park with six closely spaced-out memorials, where political



**Fig. 3.** Zalavár-Castle Island. 1 – Church of St. Hadrian, 2 – timber Church of St. John the Baptist (reburied), 3 – Arnolf's palace (reburied), 4 – Pribina's manor / Benedictine monastery (research in progress), 5 – reconstructed church in the county seat, 6 – tower from the Arpadian period (reburied), 7 – museum, 8 – memorial park, 9 – millennium monument of the county of Zala (Photo by T. Bóka)



**Fig. 4.** Zalavár-Castle Island. The 1938 monument in 1985 (Photo: <https://mapio.net/pic/p-25709737/>)

celebrations are held. The first one was a black marble plate with a simple inscription dedicated to the work of St. Stephen (1938; set up by the Zala County). Between 1985 and 2010 this marble plate built into an aedicule became the nucleus of the memorial park being erected, together with the bronze statues of Saints Cyril and Methodius (1985; set up by People's Republic of Bulgaria, Eötvös Loránd University and the Zala County) (Figs. 4–5). A column reminds visitors of the activity of the Salzburg Archbishopric on the site (2000; set up by the Salzburg Archbishopric). The statue of a book and a sword recalls the memory of Chezil, Pribina's son (2005, set up by Slovenia) (Fig. 6). On the opposite side of the path only the foundation stone of Pribina's memorial was laid by Slovakia, since at that time (2007) relations between Slovakia and Hungary became fraught (Fig. 7). In 2010 the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Zala County was celebrated. In honour of it, a strange building was



**Fig. 5.** Zalavár-Castle Island. The 1985 monument of Cyril and Methodius (Photo by Á. Ritoók)



**Fig. 6.** Zalavár-Castle Island. Monuments of Salzburg Archbishopric (1) and Slovenia (2) (Photo by Á. Ritoók)



**Fig. 7.** Zalavár-Castle Island. Foundation stone of Slovakia's monument (Photo by Á. Ritoók)



**Fig. 8.** Zalavár-Castle Island. Millennium monument of county Zala (Photo outside: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zalav%C3%A1r,\\_Millennium\\_Monument,\\_2014-08.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zalav%C3%A1r,_Millennium_Monument,_2014-08.jpg) and photo inside by Á. Ritoók)



**Fig. 9.** Zalavár-Castle Island. The 2014 monument of Saints Cyril and Methodius (Photo by A. Ritoók)

erected in the centre of Castle Island, based on an old design of Imre Makovecz, the famous organic architect and a native of the county. In the middle of the building there is a huge tree of life, its trunk surrounded by plastic leaves. On its plastic leaves the names of the settlements of the county are written (Fig. 8). Its purpose was questioned for a long time. Recently, wedding ceremonies have been held there. In 2010 the marble plate from 1938 and the aedicule from 1985 were broken and thrown into construction debris. Their pieces were placed, at the request and suggestion of archaeologists working in the field, on the southern facade of the church built in 1996. The most recent memorial is a scaled



**Fig. 10.** Zalavár-Castle Island. The memorial park (Photo by Á. Ritoók)

down copy of the Saints Cyril and Methodius statue from Nitra (2014, set up by the Slovak minority's self-government in Budapest) (Fig. 9). The last two of the series, which were erected regardless of their visual intrusion or poor quality, indicate the disintegration of the Hungarian Monument Protection System from 2010 onwards (Fig. 10).

Yet, there is at least one point which can develop into a positive: historical or spiritual pilgrimage. Some people want to visit the place where Saints Cyril and Method preached and taught, or to commemorate Pribina, the founder of the settlement. Others come here to remember St. King Stephen. And there are those who look for an interesting historical site, where, far from the famous Carolingian centres, the settlement structure and the architecture of the Carolingian era can be studied. The growing number of pilgrims is proof that the site – for different reasons – is equally important for Slavic countries, Hungarians and Europe.

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