

Christian traditions and continuity in Transdanubia during the first millennia

The history and artefacts of Transdanubian Christianity before the Hungarian conquest might be divided to three sections based on politico-historical and ethnical reasons. The first section is the province under Roman authority until the 430s. The second period lasts from 430 to 568: the province got under the rule of the Huns for a short interval, then Germanic groups entered the region, the Lombards being the last of them until 568. The third period is that of the Avars from 568 until the Hungarian conquest of Transdanubia at the beginning of the 10th century.

I. Roman period (1–4th centuries)

The province of Pannonia got under Roman authority from the reigns of Augustus to Claudius (41–54 AD). The northern and eastern borders of the province were formed by the Danube, the western border by the eastern slopes of the Alps, while the southern border was to the south of the Sava river. Located on the northern border of Italy, the province always had a military significance because of its geographic location: its role was to defend the empire against Germanic and Sarmatian people. More than twenty urban communities were established in the province. From the middle of the 3rd century, when attacks on the empire had become more frequent, the majority of the emperors were from southwestern Pannonia and its environs. *Sirmium* slowly became a significant location, where emperors frequently dwelled.

In the 430s the protection of *Pannonia Valeria*'s borders ended because of pressure from Hun powers and the *limes* was opened. The residents of the province were relocated to the northern border of Italia (today Slovenia). Pannonia came under the authority of the Huns. Archeological observations as well as place names suggest that western Transdanubia for centuries continued to be occupied by Roman – and by that time largely Christian – people. The population did not remain, however, in eastern Transdanubia: archeological findings ceased to be Roman and Christian, and names of settlements and waters did not survive. The southernmost province, *Pannonia Savia* was under the authority of the Ostrogoths in the 5th century, while the area of *Sirmium* was within the sphere of influence of the East Roman Empire and would remain so even after the Hungarian conquest in the late 9th century.

Christianity:

The earliest source of Christianity concerns *Apostle Paul*'s activity, which extended to the borders of Illyricum, so he might as well made it to the southern parts of Pannonia. The next reference is *Bishop Eusebius* (late 3th century), who took care of pastoral needs of Pannonians (in *Cibalae*), and it was in this milieu that he was presumably executed. At this time *Victorinus*, bishop of Poetovio, lived and wrote scriptural commentaries and martyred around 304. *Hilary*, the bishop of Aquilea, living also in this late 3rd century period, was of Pannonian origins, too. Christian communities are also attested by those who suffered martyrdom during the Diocletian persecution in the first decade of the 4th century. As Sirmium was a diocesan and imperial residence, persecution of Christians must have been particularly severe. The martyrs name and their heavenly birthday were recorded in the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum*. Their names and occupation suggest that by the end of the 3rd century the episcopal hierarchy had already been established, thus verifying the appearance of Christianity in the region decades earlier than the persecution.

After the Council of Nicea (325), Pannonian bishops and priests played a crucial role in the debates over orthodoxy and Arianism. Most of the clergymen in the region must have supported bishop *Arius*.

Since Christians in most southern Pannonian cities were governed by a bishop, it was likely that the more populous cities in *Pannonia Prima* and *Valeria* were also under the guidance of bishops, although rare written evidences support this idea. Two bishoprics are mentioned only north from the river Sava: *Iovia* perhaps near the later Tolna county's Danube bank and *Scarbantia*, today Sopron (both in Hungary). We know little about the place of the Pannonian provinces in church hierarchy, as the organization of metropolises was just taking shape and conformed to the main Roman administrative centers. It is likely that Sirmium fulfilled the role of a metropolis during the late 4th century. The city can be considered the ecclesiastical head of the Pannonian bishoprics because of its role as an administrative center. The task of the metropolis later was carried out by the archbishop of Aquileia until 811. After this, the area north of the Drava came under the jurisdiction of Salzburg for the time being.

The persecution of Christians provided us information on the establishment of the Church hierarchy of the early 4th century, later, the period of the Arian controversy provided data primarily about the bishops. To understand something about the personal religious practices of the residents of the province, we can turn to archeological evidence. The finds can be separated into two categories: those associated with the persons (articles of attire, jewellery) and those that refer to a Christian community (buildings, cemeteries). More

spectacular are the cult structures or buildings. So far one community-cult building, a *basilica* has been unearthed in Aquincum, and another in the imperial city of Sirmium. We know only the existence of a third: the aforementioned basilica of Scarab/vantia, Sopron. Churches in the cities, especially within block of flats could have simple square rooms. If they were not decorated with mosaics and stone carvings, it is impossible to determine their religious functions.

Numerous burial buildings are known especially in Southern Transdanubia. The 4th-century sepulchral structure were generally small with varied groundplans, simple square spaces with exterior pillars are the most common. Burial chambers – sometimes with painted walls – have been occasionally found underneath the surface structures. The walls of the above- and underground excavated buildings had surprisingly independent walls from each other. In other words, the walls of the barrel-vaulted chamber did not merge with those of the mausoleums above. Burials were performed in the lower chamber, while the ceremony and memorial were held in the building above.

Old Christian burial chambers of Pécs

Part of the UNESCO world's cultural heritage, the late Roman cemeteries of Pécs provide spectacular remainings of Christian presence of the 3–5th centuries in Transdanubia.

The earlier settlement of secondary importance called *Sopianae* became significant at the late 3rd century due to the barbarian attacks on *Pannonia Inferior* and the limes. The *Itinerarium Antonini*, a Roman travel book of the time, described the city as a major transportation hub: several Pannonian roads branched out from Sopianae like the imperial road linking Byzantium and Augusta Treverorum (Trier) towards Carnuntum, Brigetio and Aquincum. Followers of Christ's teaching were present from the early 4th century, and the city became an important Christian centre. By the end of this century the community was certainly under the influence of Arianism. Possibly the community also had a bishop, although no proof of this has been excavated so far

The Christian remains of the city almost exclusively come from the cemetery. Inhumation was the general mode of burial in the late Roman period. The body was placed in an out-stretched position, rolled in a blanket generally oriented to the west in a coffin-like box. Wooden coffins must have been general, and sarcophagi were rare. Not only clothing remnants: belts, fibulae, but jewellery such as bracelets, rings and earrings were typical grave goods. Differentiating between Christian and pagan graves, however, is not easy. A general feature of Christian burials was a puritanical element, a restraint in the use of grave goods.

Some scholars have suggested the clasping of the hands and arms might indicate a Christian affiliation, others have observed the position of a pitcher and a cup in the grave as a symbol of the Eucharist.

Most of the sepulchral buildings at Pécs (*Sopianae*) were made for one person and consisted of two units. A narrow descent dug into the ground led to the crypt, which was several square meters in size, and in some cases a *narthex* was built in front of the crypt's entrance. This descending passageway was refilled after the burial with loose rocks that prevented the earth from falling into the chamber. Above the door to the crypt was the entrance to the *cella memoriae*. The burial chapels usually terminated in a semi-circular apse, but some had a straight terminating wall.

The interior of the crypt in many cases was plastered and whitewashed or painted with biblical scenes. The most intact burial chamber is the Peter–Paul chamber, which is covered in its entirety in scenes related to the Resurrection, the Salvation and depictions symbolising Heaven. The rich floral decorations on the entrance wall, the series of allegories of the paradise on the ceiling and the Christogram in the centre, surrounded by the busts of four young men all refer to this. On the wall opposite to the entrance, the figures of Peter and Paul flank the niche in the wall and the Christogram above it. On both sides of the vaulting are Biblical scenes, barely discernible because of serious damages. On the eastern side are the temptation, Daniel in the lions' den, and Jonah resting under vines of ivy. On the western side the Virgin Mary is shown with her child. Next to this scene is probably the three Magi, and then Noah travelling on his ark.

A relative late phase of use around the first millennium can also be observed. The bishopric of Pécs was founded in 1009 by Holy King Stephen. The *cella trichora* at this time was consecrated as church proven by the painting of the foundation of the structure. The founding of the episcopacy in Pécs (*Sopianae*; in medieval Hungarian Latin: *Quinqueecclesiae*) and especially its location in the northwestern part of the cemetery, in the vicinity of the partially standing, early Christian burial chapels was not coincidental. After all, the Church sought and encouraged the repeated use of what had once been sacred places. It is also likely, although it cannot be proved at present, that the cathedral was located on the site of a large sepulchral building and it was partially integrated into the building.

What was the proportion of religious affiliation in Pannonia in the 4th century? Archeological findings do not allow us to conclude that the entire population had become Christian by the end of the Empire. The preference shown by Constantine the Great and his successors for

Christians became manifest in the first half of the 5th century, when state administration had collapsed, city governments had become inoperable and state support (military defence and food in times of need) ceased. When these systems faced hardships, the Christian church's network of cities and their territories, under the direction of the bishops, was ready to take its place. Need demanded that the bishops and Church elites deal not only with the questions of faith and religion, but also be willing to negotiate with the barbarians that had arrived in the region. In most parts of the Empire this method was successful – but not in border provinces like Pannonia, which suffered the most attacks. The migrating people continually occupied the territory of the provinces, the local population slipped from the view of the universal church. However, the conversion of the Lombards to Christianity is difficult to explain without the presence of a Christian population in Transdanubia

II. Huns and Germanic tribes (5–6th centuries)

Following the battle of Adrianople in 378, the Danube frontier of the Roman Empire was inundated with people fleeing the Huns. Among those who left Pannonia were civil and military administrators, social elites and many Christians who took their relics of martyrs to the more secure southern regions.

Initially, the remaining provincial population comprised of Christian communities. At the beginning of the Avar period, Christian groups of Balkan–Byzantine origin were settled in the area. Furthermore, the majority of Germanic people in Pannonia converted to the Arian form of Christianity, while the nomads arriving from the eastern steppes (Huns, Avars, Bulgars), though fundamentally rejected Christianity, but still managed to tolerate it, not interfering with the religious life of the people over whom they ruled.

Christian Continuity

The appearance of barbarians in Pannonia and their passage through the region did not mean the total destruction of provincial Roman culture and life. At the end of the 4th and in the first third of the 5th century, the remaining provincial population – peasants and artisans – frequently settled alongside the barbarians in the forts and walled cities, where a new society of mixed culture developed as a result of their mutual influence. The romanized inhabitants were able to integrate certain settlers, passing on their antique lifestyle, their artisanal and agricultural traditions, their Christian faith and other beliefs, and they tried to continue their lives in Roman style in the first third of the 5th century. Because the Christians at first

belonged primarily to the community of the remaining provincial Roman population, the study of Christianity is intertwined with the question of Roman continuity.

Antique remnants and findings are extant from *Aquincum*, *Keszthely-Fenékpuszta*, *Savaria*. Scattered written sources prove the existence of a Christian community of *Scarbantia* with their bishop. *Eugippus of Noricum* (460–535) wrote about the life of St Severinus following the death of Attila. According to Bishop *Ennodius of Pavia* (474–521), the later beatified *Anthony of Lérins* was born in Valeria Civitas in Pannonia. He was taught by St Severinus, and after the saint's death was sent to Lauriacum Noricum (Lorsch). Based on his tomb inscription, the beatified *Leonianus* was also born in Savaria. *St Martin of Braga* was also born in Pannonia at the beginning of the 6th century. Paul the deacon (*Paulus Diaconus*) who wrote the history of the Lombards, mentioned a group of Pannonians that moved to Italy, whose origins and culture clearly derived from the local Roman province and who were in part Christian. It was at this time that the Scarbantians and their bishop and other clerics may have been fleeing the Avars. In a letter by Pope St Gregory the Great in 599 he described a priest named Johannes who escaped from Pannonia to Istria. He may also have been a representative of the Christian Church in Pannonia and leader of a Christian community.

Goths and Suevians

According to written sources, Arian Christianity appeared in the 4th century among Goths. Their best known bishop is *Wulfila* (around late 4th century), who translated the New Testament and the Lord's Prayer into the language of the Goths. His translation of the Bible played an important role in the preaching of gospels among the Germanic population and many of them were converted to Arian Christianity (eastern and western Goths, Vandals, Burgundians, Rugians, Suevians, Herules, Gepids and Scirians). The Goths began to arrive in the territory of the Roman empire in 376, seeking refuge from the Huns, had already been Christianized. They settled on the perimeters of the Carpathian basins.

After the withdrawal of the Huns, the northern part of Pannonia came under the control of the Suevians, the southern under the eastern Goths. An exceptional Christian inscription was found in Somogy county. The text, appearing in a 5x5 cm lead sheet, now in fragments, was recognized as an excerpt from Wulfila's Gothic Bible translation, written in Gothic uncials. (Bishop Wulfila devised the uncial Gothic alphabet, consisting of 27 symbols from Latin and Greek letters and German runes, in order to translate the Bible in 369.). Today only nine examples of Gothic language exist, one is from Hács-Bédekepuszta.

The Lombards and the Gepids

According to the *Historia Langobardorum* (written in the 9th century), Lombards were first acquainted with Arianism at the end of the 5th century. When the Lombards entered Pannonia in the first half of the 6th century, they described themselves as Catholics, according to the Byzantine historiographer *Prokopius*, unlike the Gepids. Later, Arianism became more influential among them – notwithstanding, their Christianity seems unquestionable. Archeological findings are relatively scarce: very few artefacts of Lombard Christianity have been unearthed so far.

Gepids appeared in the Tisza region and in Transylvania after the Hun period. They managed to capture Sirmium first in 473, later in 536 as well. Their monarch, Kunimund set up here a lavish royal court, and even minted gold coins with the symbol of the cross based on Byzantine example. The gepid Arian bishopric also had its seat here.

III. Christianity in the Avar khaganate

In 568, the Carpathian basin came under the rule of the Avars from Eurasia. This eastern, nomadic group forged an empire from the people of the region: Germanic, Slavic, Romanized communities, people from the steppes and Byzantines forced to resettle from the Balkans. The Avars occupied primarily the plains, and subordinate German groups and local Romanized people lived in the former region of Pannonia with small Christian communities linked primarily to them. At the beginning of the Avar period, new groups of culturally Roman and presumably Christian people arrived in the Carpathian basin. The Avars captured – as *Paulus Diaconus* wrote – women and children from Friaul (Cividale) and dragged them to the khaganate. Byzantine sources on several occasions also mentioned the Avars' resettling large number of people from the Balkan-Byzantine lands to their northern country.

Nevertheless, Christian artefacts became scarce in the 8th century, suggesting a significant decline in Christian population. In that century, European ecclesiastical intelligentsia regarded the Avars as pagans and was interested in the possibility of converting them. Although St Columban (610), Ruprecht (696) and Emmeram (710) all had plans of carrying out missionary work among them, they were all overcome by their fears and turned back at the borders of the Empire. It was later Charlemagne who conquered and converted the Avars at the end of the 8th century. Important church prelates participated in the military campaign and were much surprised to discover surviving Christians in Pannonia.

No matter how the Avar elite in the 7th century used tremendous force to unite people of the Carpathian basin and for two and a half centuries ensured their place as a major power of

Europe, Avars themselves only superficially became European. Even in the 8th century the structure, the intellectual culture and religious life of the their state and society were determined by traditions of the eastern nomads of the Steppes and no attempt was made to establish European-type administration or a church hierarchy. The vanishing of the Avars provides an opportunity to draw comparisons with the fate of the conquering Hungarians, who also arrived from the east to settle in the Carpathian basin. By the third generation their leaders had recognized that the only path to remain and become a part of Europe was conversion to Christianity and the founding of a Christian kingdom.

The Keszthely–Fenékpuszta culture

A new settlement type emerged alongside the basically town-centred culture of the Transdanubian region during the 5th century. Local Roman population withdrew to this hill-top settlement type: well defensible places with stone fortifications, generally characteristics of Noricum rather than Pannonia. One more or less good example for the latter is the Keszthely–Fenékpuszta lowland settlement, which is exceptionally well defended since the waters of the lake Balaton protected it on three sides. On the basis of this site, continuity is attested until the middle of the 7th century. A basilica bears witness to the presence of Christianity. In the middle of the 7th century, however, occupation ceased in Keszthely–Fenékpuszta, and archeological evidence reappears in the 9th century. However, from the area around this site, multiple cemeteries are known from this roughly 150-year long period. The finds show that late antique forms survived, although isolation led these forms became transformed. This group can be defined as the Keszthely culture, which provides a method of surviving, a *modus vivendi* for local people – and even Christianity – in the harsh times of the late 7–8th centuries.

IV. The founding of the Hungarian kingdom and Church

The Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian basin took place at the beginning of the 10th century. The raiding Hungarian tribes were obviously pagan, though they must have had earlier contacts with monotheist religions such as Christianity or Judaism when they were under the rule of the Khazar Empire (in today Ukraine).

Conversion to Christianity began during the mid-10th century, when certain chieftains, Bulcsú and Gyula were baptised following Byzantine rites. Organised missions started off from Byzantium: the patriarch sent *Hyerotheos* to the Carpathian basin as the first bishop of „*Turkia*”. The process was strengthened, when Sarolt, the daughter of Gyula got married to

prince Géza. Géza turned, however, towards the west: his representatives took part at the imperial convention in Quedlinburg held by Emperor Otto I, in 972. The emperor appointed *Bruno of Querfurt* as the leader of the new mission from the west to the once Avar territories, who was accompanied by monks from the monastery of St Gallen and that of Passau, Bavaria. Vajk, son of prince Géza, the later Holy King Stephan was also baptised by Bruno together with his father and the royal court. Géza designated Esztergom as the centre of his rule, where he initiated the building of not only a castle, but a chapel as well for his household. Bruno and his companions promulgated the adoration of *St Gallus* and *Martin of Tours*, who had been born in Savaria, Pannonia province.

When prince Géza died in 997, his cognate – perhaps nephew –, Koppány vindicated the power for himself, as the eldest living member of the family. He also intended to marry Géza's widow, Sarolt, obeying the pagan principle of levirate, which collided the Christian principle of primogeniture. István entered into a battle with Koppány somewhere around Veszprém and defeated him: his body was torn into four pieces, which were sent to the confines of the land to promulgate not only Stephan's victory, but that of Christianity as well. Stephan was created prince in 997, and went on conquering the tribes and converting the pagans. He was supported by his household forces, western monks and knights as well, mainly from Bavaria and other German kingdoms and duchies.

Pope Sylvester II in 1000 sent him a crown and apostolic blessing: the first meant that Hungary entered the community of Christian kingdoms, the latter allowed the king to establish the Hungarian ecclesiastical organisation independently. The first prelates were exclusively of western origins: Astrik-Anasztáz, Bonipert, Sebastianus and Dominicus. Queen Gisella also fulfilled an important role in the conversions. It was in the former province of Pannonia that the first episcopacies were found: by 1009 Veszprém, Győr and Esztergom had already existed, and it was in that very year that the bishopric of Pécs (*Quinqueecclesiae*) was founded. Esztergom became the head of the church territory: the archbishop of Esztergom has been the head of the Hungarian Roman Catholic Church since then. Other episcopacies were also founded during the realm of Stephan I: the bishoprics of Eger, Bihar, Gyulafehérvár (*Transylvania*) and Kalocsa were created by not later 1015. Benedictine monasteries also supported the new religion, scattered mainly in Transdanubia as well: Pannonhalma (*Mons Sacer Pannoniae*, 996), Pécsvárad (1015), Zalavár, Zobor and Bakonybél (by 1020).

V. The Church in Veszprém by the end of the 11th century

Among the earliest ecclesiastical buildings of Veszprém is the nunnery of the Veszprém Valley, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, built in the early 11th century. According to its founding charter, its dwellers might have been of Byzantine rite. Archeological excavations unearthed here a Tau-shaped crosier made of walrus-tusk from the beginning of the second millennium. More famous is the vestment tailored in the nunnery and used for the coronation of Hungarian kings until 1916. Its inscriptions clearly show that it was made no later than 1031. Their central figures are Holy King Stephan, his wife, Gisella, and their son, Holy prince Imre, who died as a youngster. He vowed virginity in Veszprém in the „antique and old” chapel of Saint George, according to his legend assembled at the end of the 12th century. This data coincide with the excavated ruins of a round chapel (*rotunda*) north from the cathedral. Only basement walls of the chapel survived, which makes it clear that it was built during the reign of prince Géza, at the end of the 10th century.

This chapel had already existed at the time the episcopacy was founded (1009). The present cathedral provides us little opportunity for archeological research: therefore we do not know what structure had existed before the building of the medieval church commenced in the 1040–1050s. The cathedral, dedicated to St. Michael, has gone under some renovations. It was around 1720 that a complete baroque rebuilding took place after the Ottomans were pushed out from the kingdom. Between 1907 and 1910 another complete alteration was carried out in neoromanesque style. A photoalbum was assembled about the process of the contructional works at this time, which showed standing medieval walls inside the plasters and mantles of the present walls. Later observations and evaluation of the photoes implied that the extent and shape of the medieval cathedral was almost identical to that of today’s basilica.

Veszprém is usually referred to as the city of queens. Beatified Gisella, the first queen was the patron of the newly founded cathedral, and according to written sources of the 12th century, she began to build and furnish it. Nevertheless, no traces of her burial inside the buliding has been found. Her tomb is in Passau, the nunnery of Niedernburg, and her arm-bone relic was given to Veszprém only in 1996. Nonetheless, the actual bishop of Veszprém always had the right to crown Hungarian queens, and he also bore the office of the queen’s chancellor. Some remnants of a perhaps royal palace in the castle is depicted to have been in ruins in a late 16th century military survey, to which the walls of the so called Chapel of Gisella belonged, of which mural paintings are also famous medieval reminiscences of Veszprém.

Christian traditions and continuity in Transdanubia during the first millenia

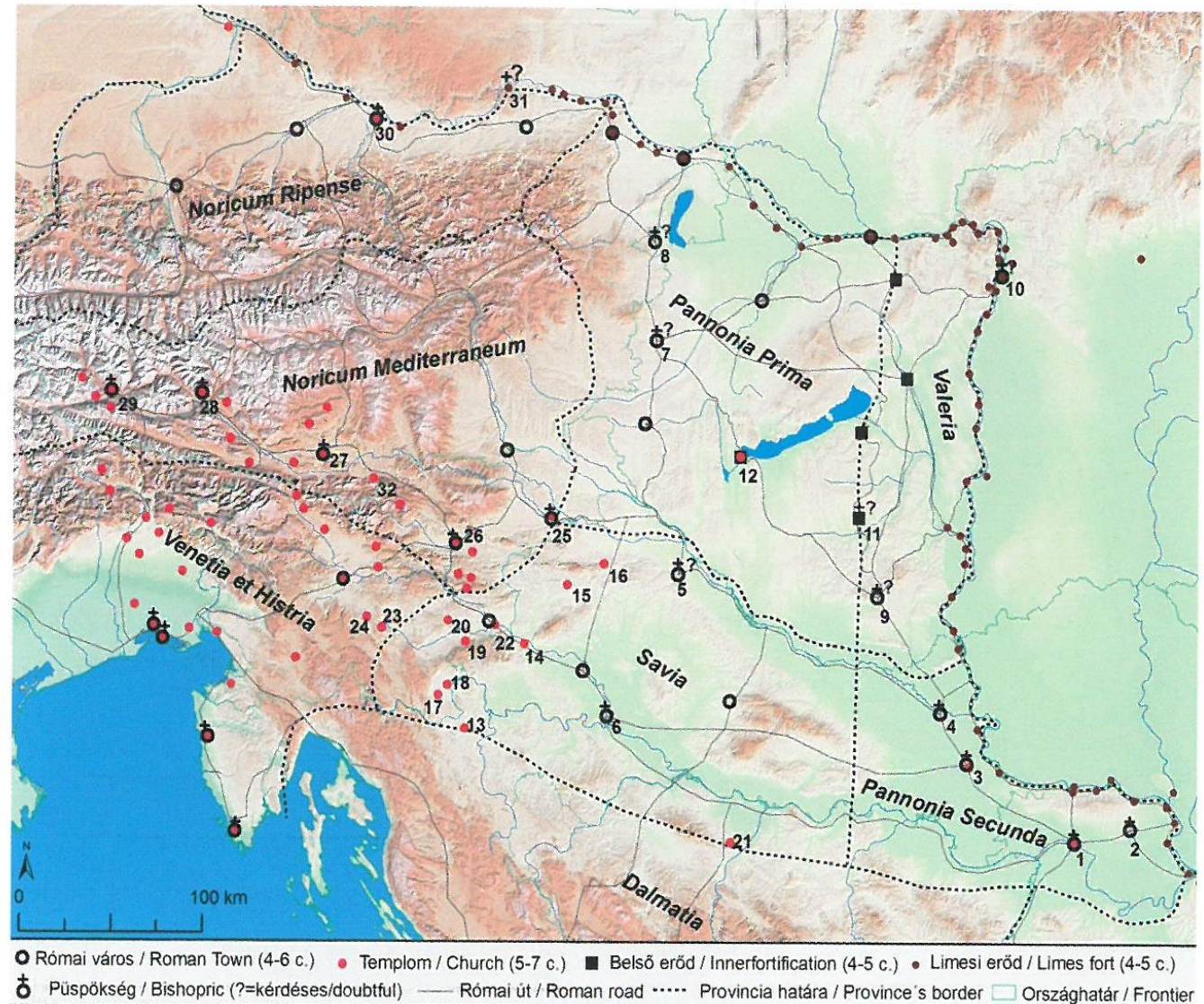
Balázs Karlinszky PhD
Veszprém Archdiocesan Archives

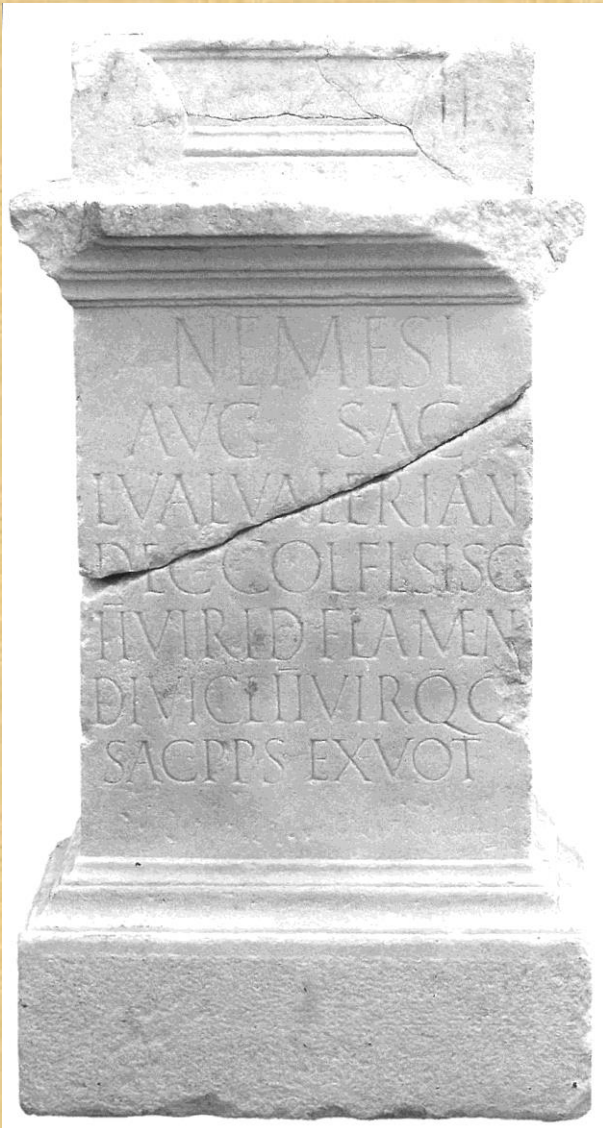
The Roman Empire around 200 AD



Roman period (1–4th centuries)

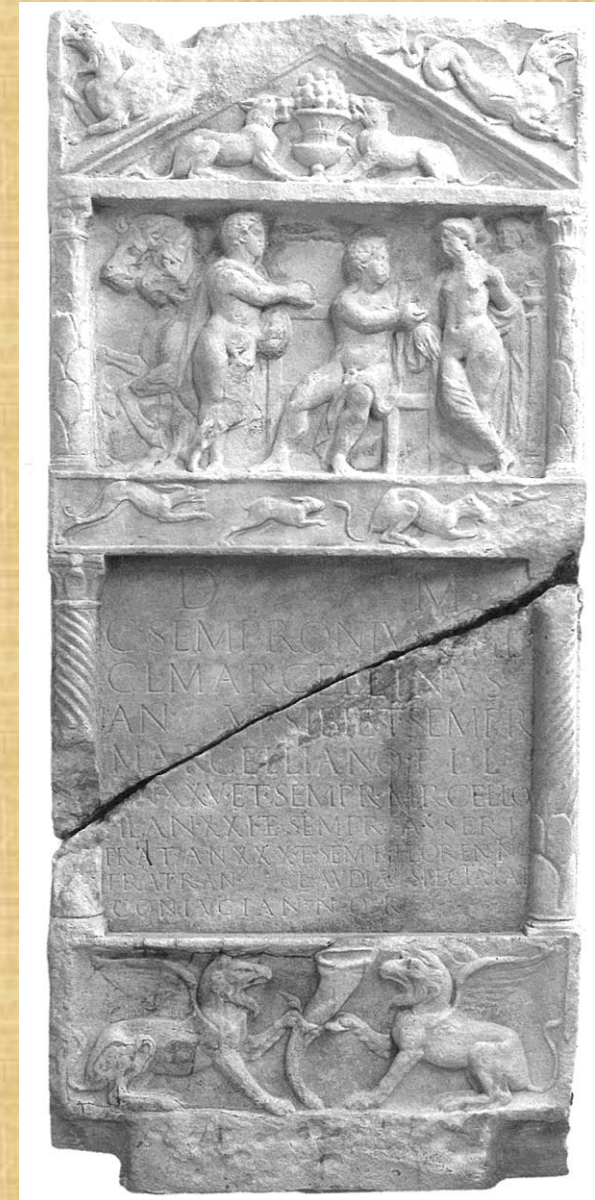
- Roman conquest:
after 41 AD
- military significance
- continuity: only
western Transdanubia
- Savia under East
Roman influence



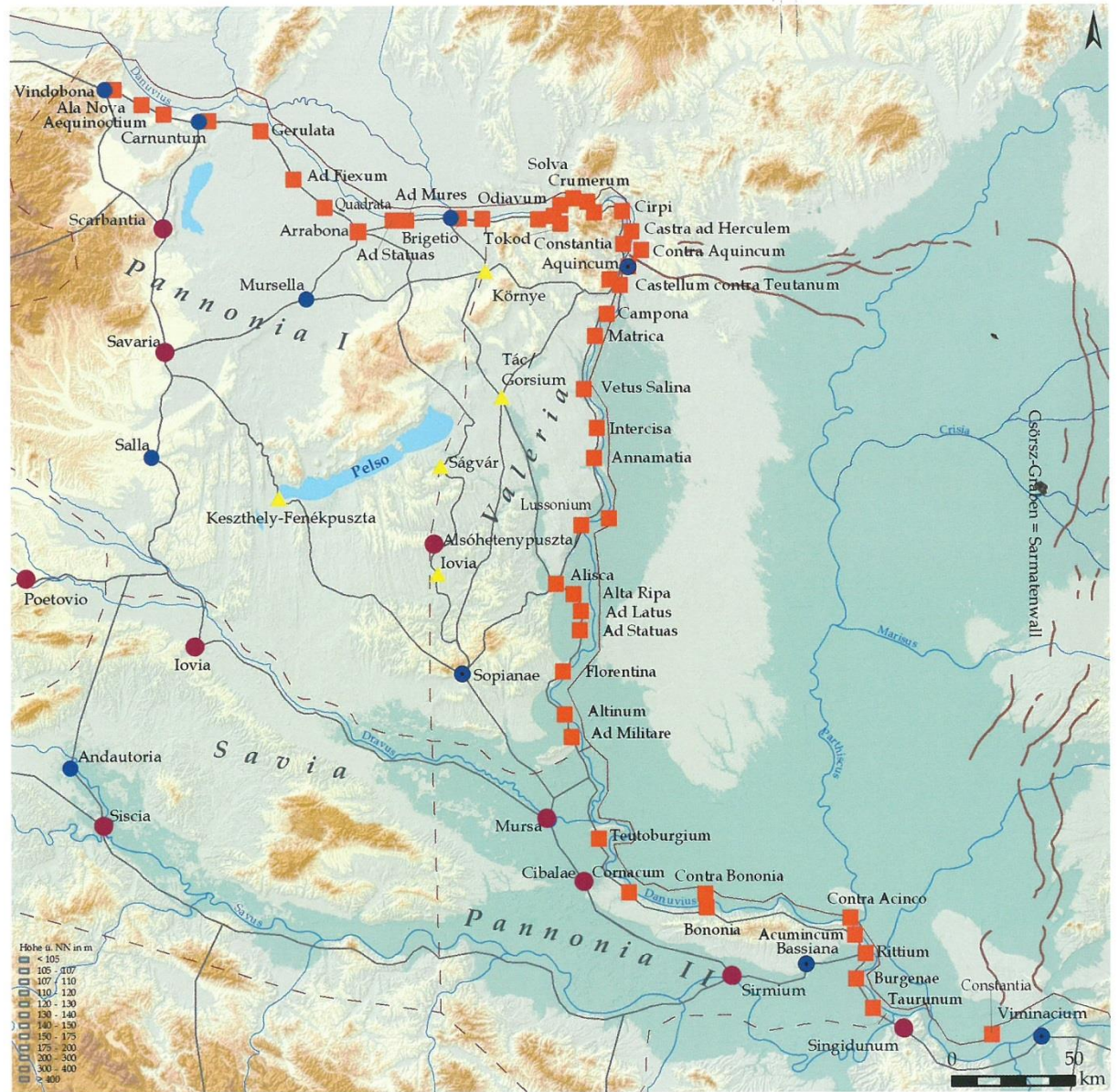


Chrsitian Pannonia

- Apostle Paul's (1st century)
- persecution, esp. Diocletian
- Arianism after 325
- episcopacies in Pannonia
- remnants of Christianity
- Pécs, burial chambers



Episcopacies (with purple)

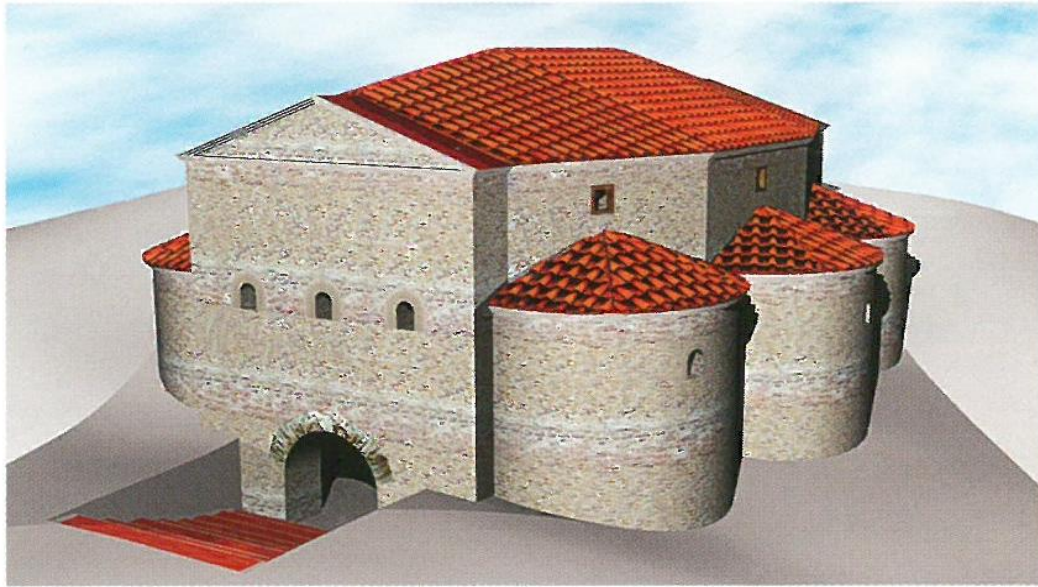


▲ Belső erőd
● Város
● Püspökség

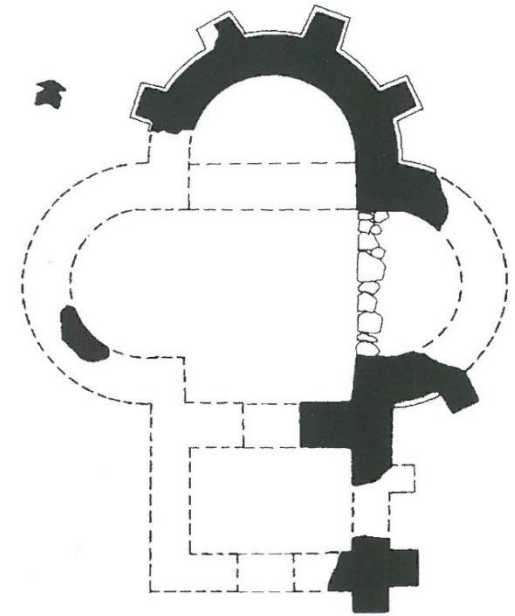
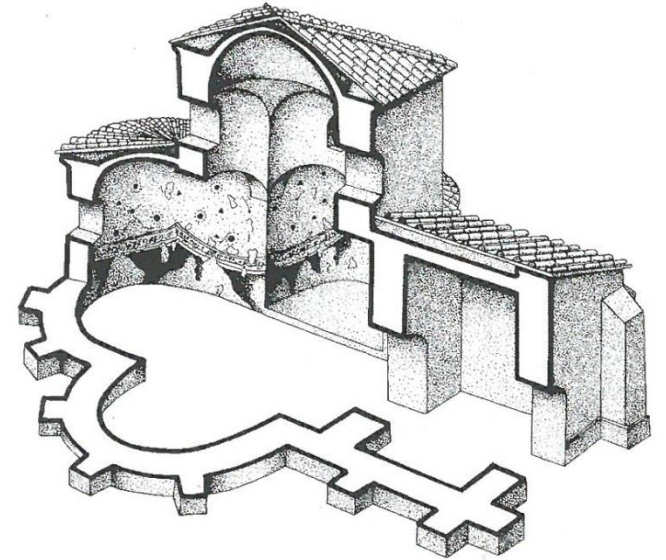
■ Limes erőd
● Erődített város
— Szarmata sánc

— Római útszakaszok

--- Római provincia határa
— Római birodalom határa



Pécs (Sopianae): burial chambers





Pitcher and Cup

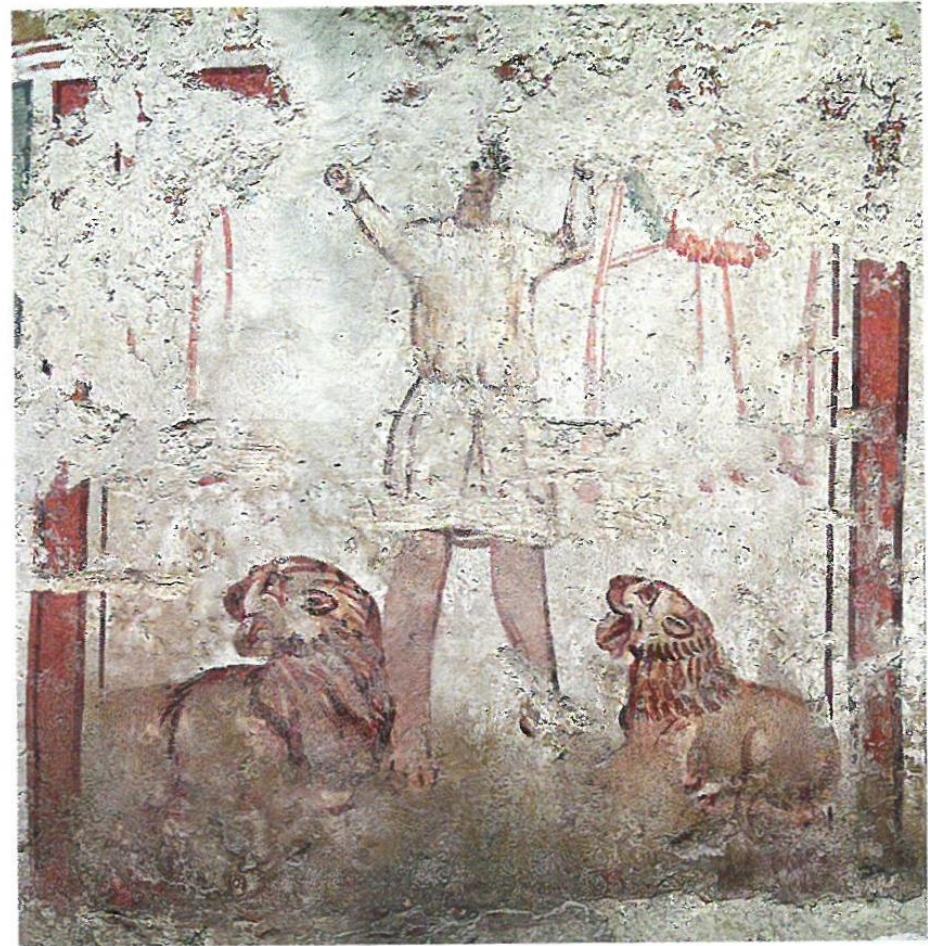
**Apostles Saint
Paul and Peter
Christogram**



Adam and Eve



Daniel in the lions' den



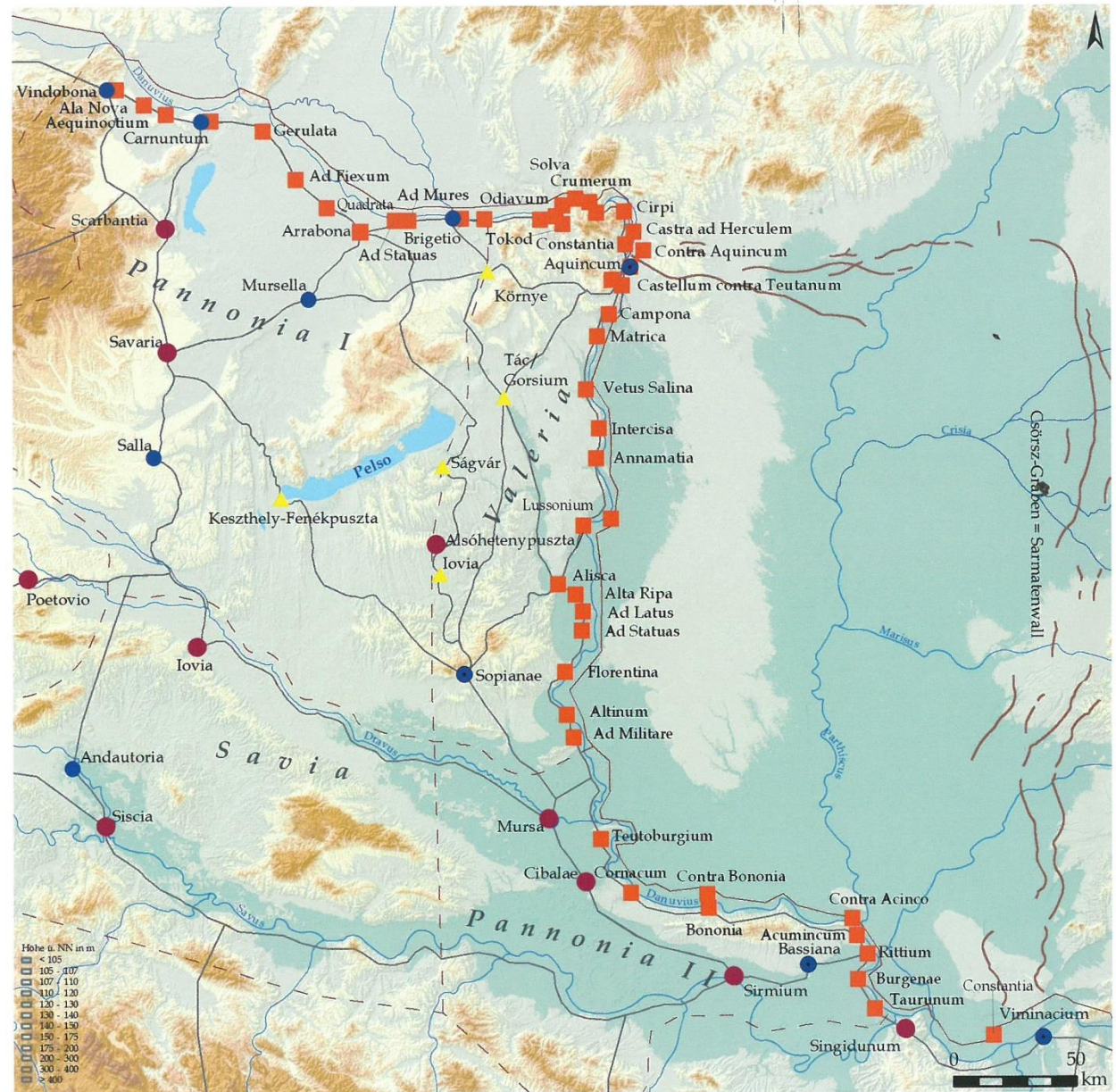
Christian presence from the 5th century

collapse of the empire:

-> flee of Christians from the province

-> interactions with the barbarians

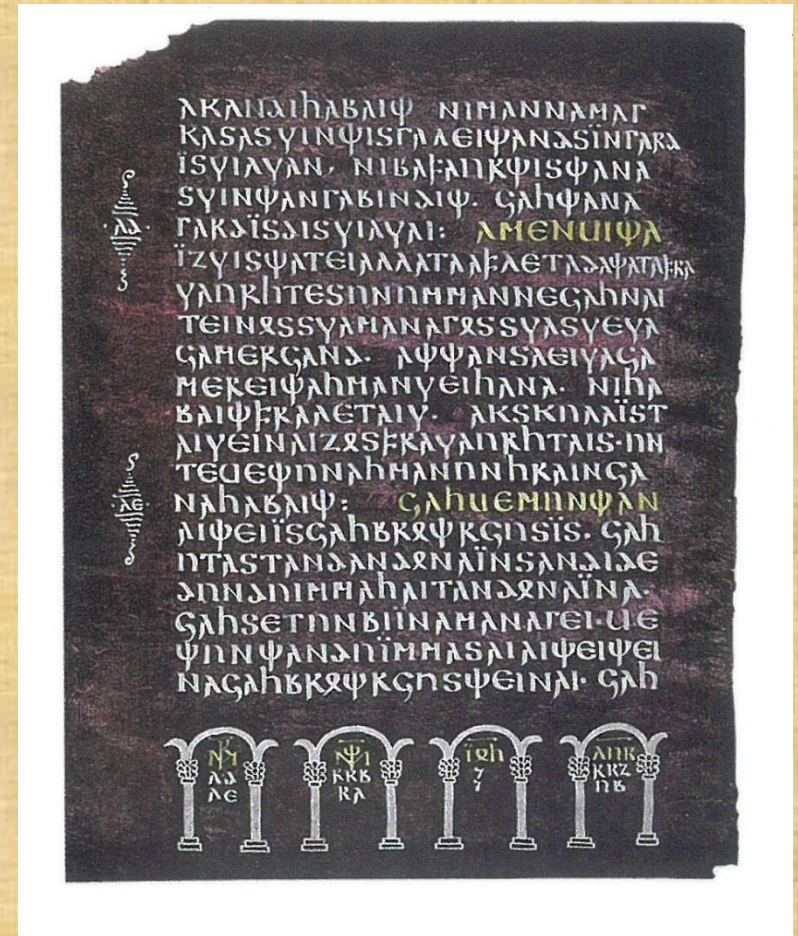
-> power at the bishoprics:
surviving communities,
legends of saints



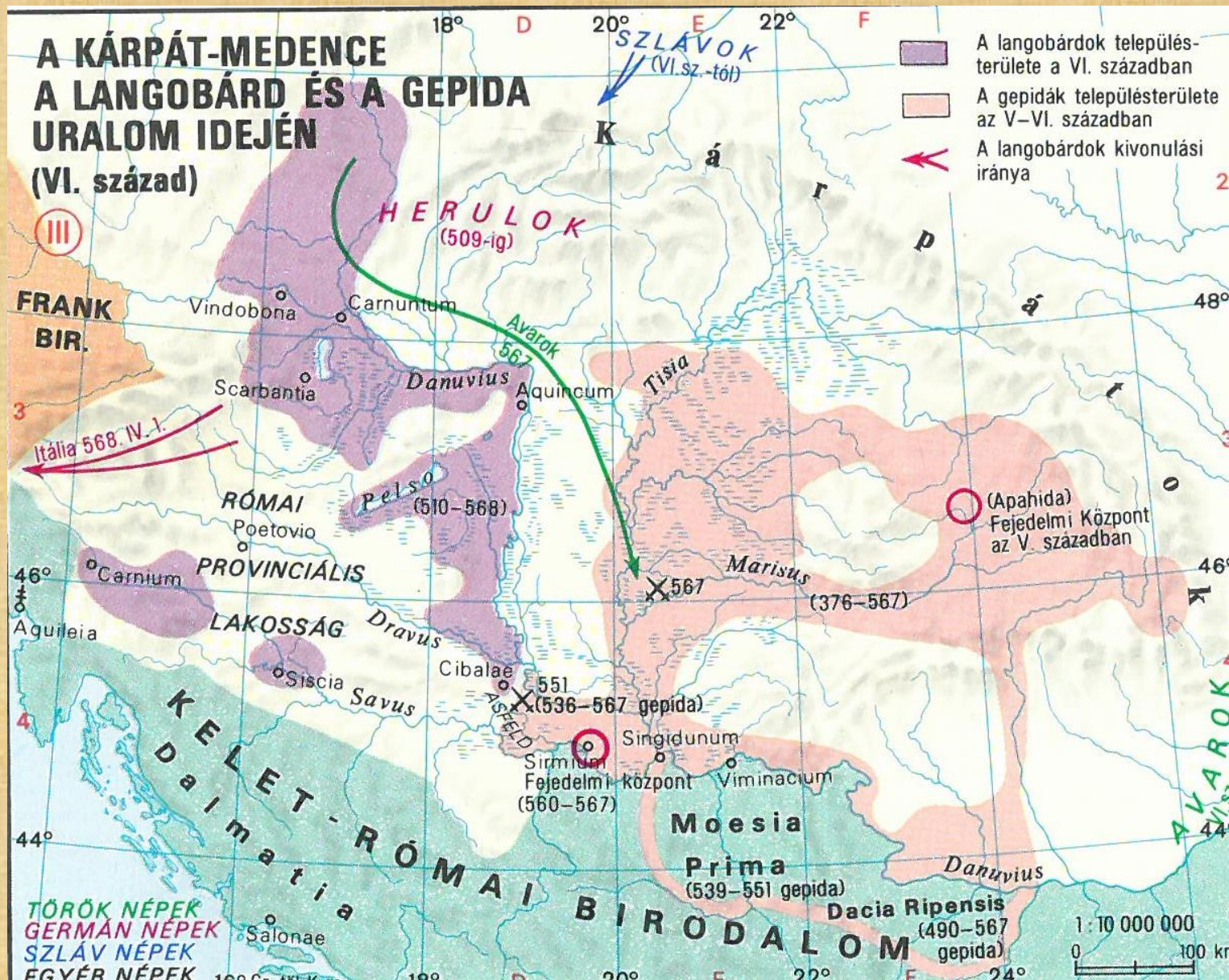


Goths and Suevians (4–5th century)

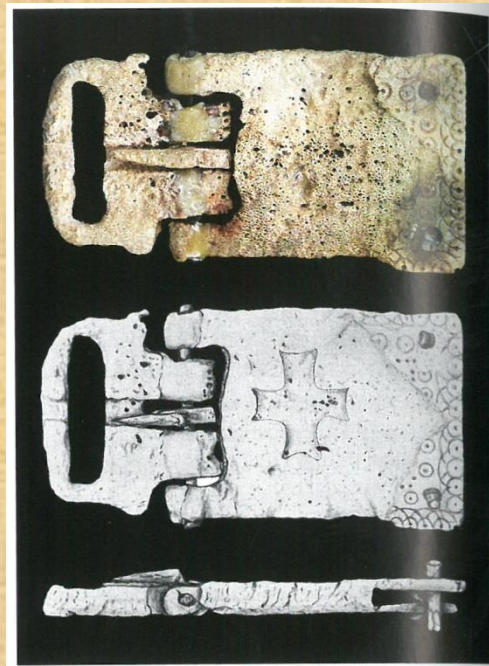
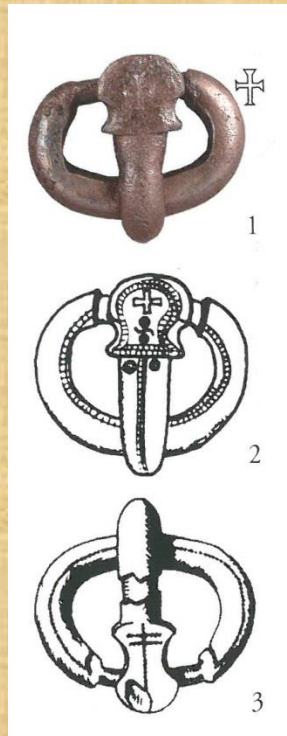
- Gothic Bible: bishop Wulfila
- Goths: after 376, before Huns
- Suevians: after the Huns (453)



Lombards and Gepids in the Carpathian basin (5–6th centuries)

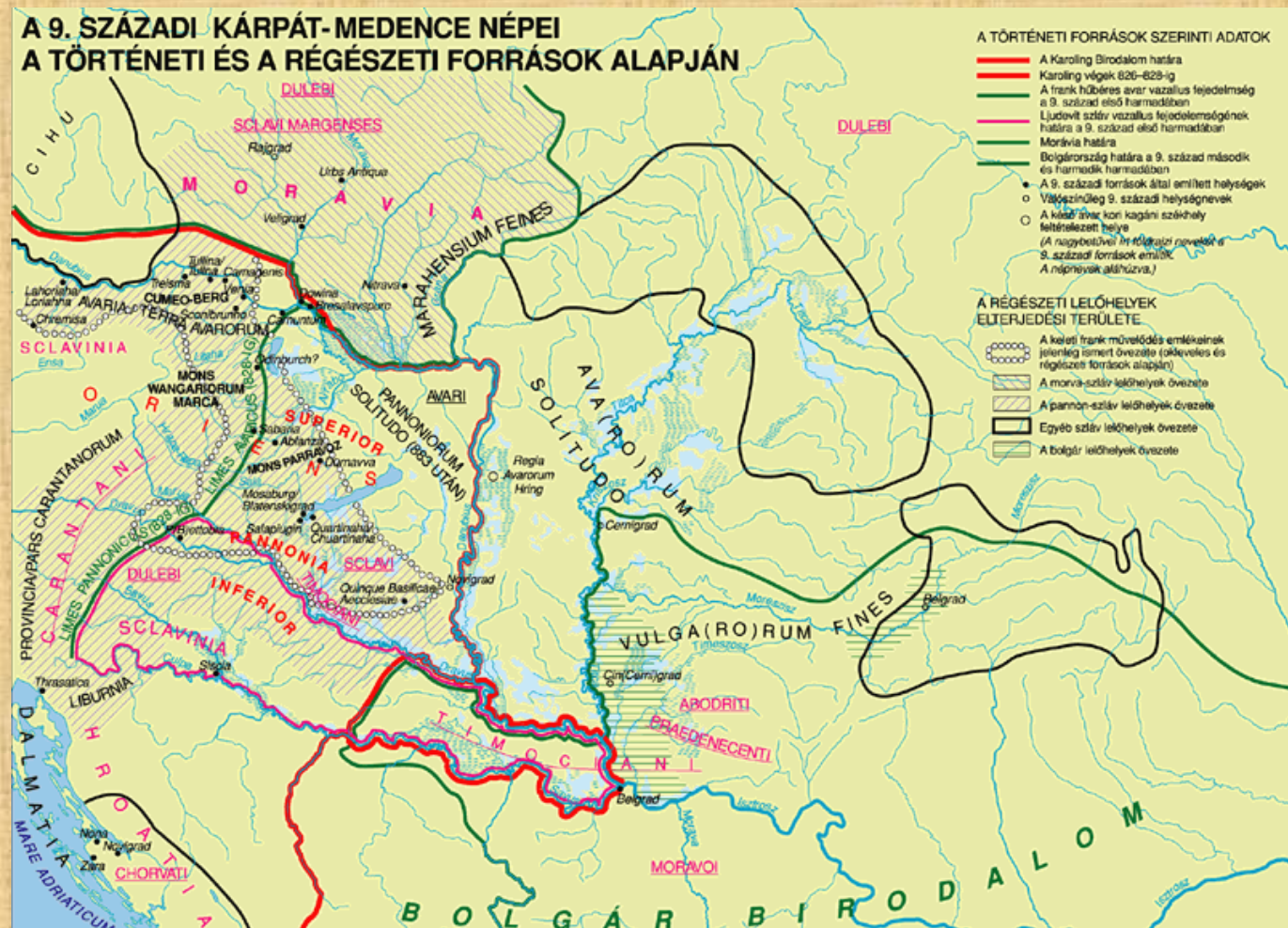


Lombard and Gepid findings



Christianity in the Avar khaganate (6–9th centuries)

- eastern origin, nomadic
(from the Steppe)
- resettling Christians to
the khaganate
- ideas of converting them
- fate of the Avars

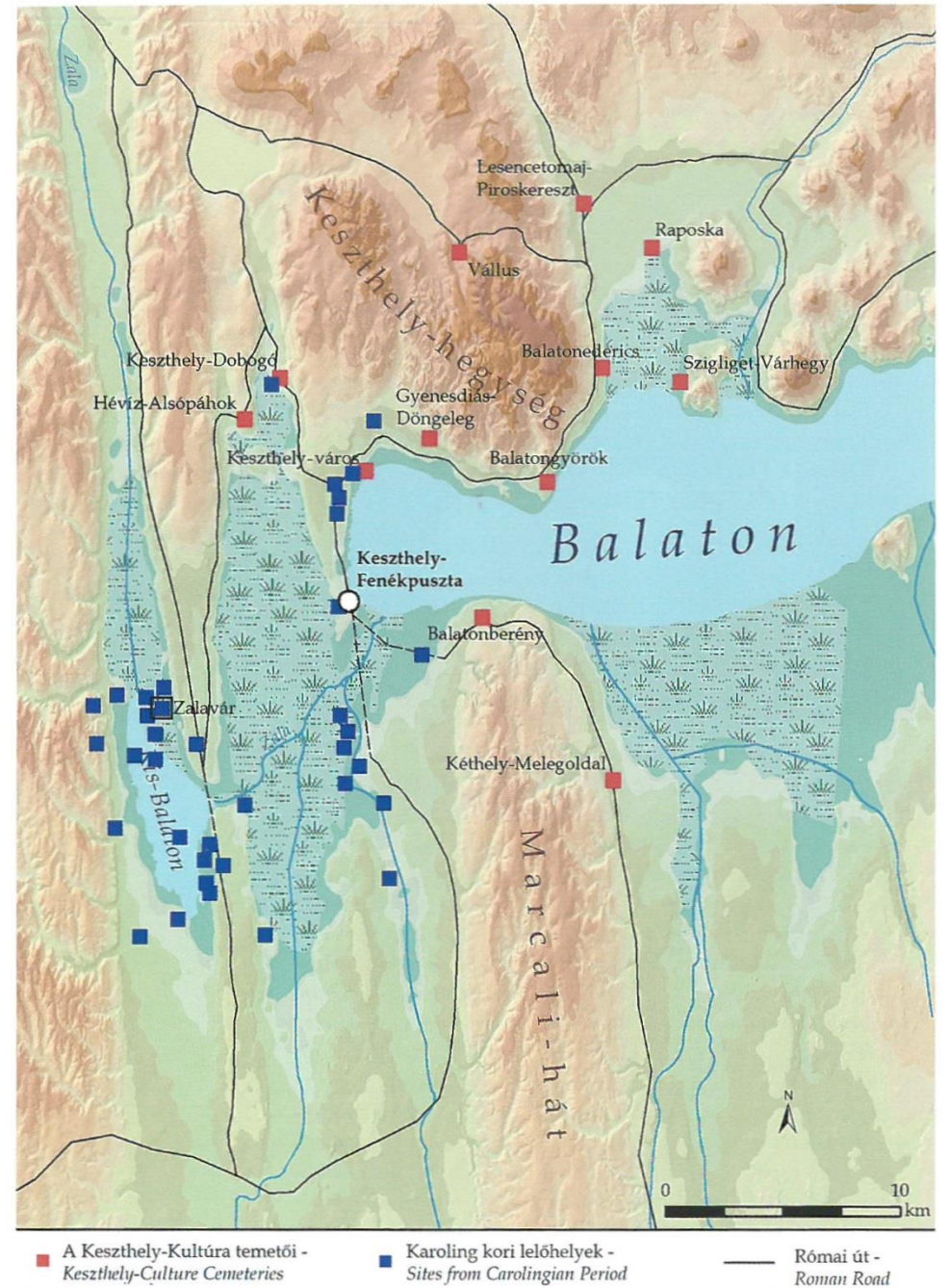


Christian findings of Byzantine type under the Avars (7th century)

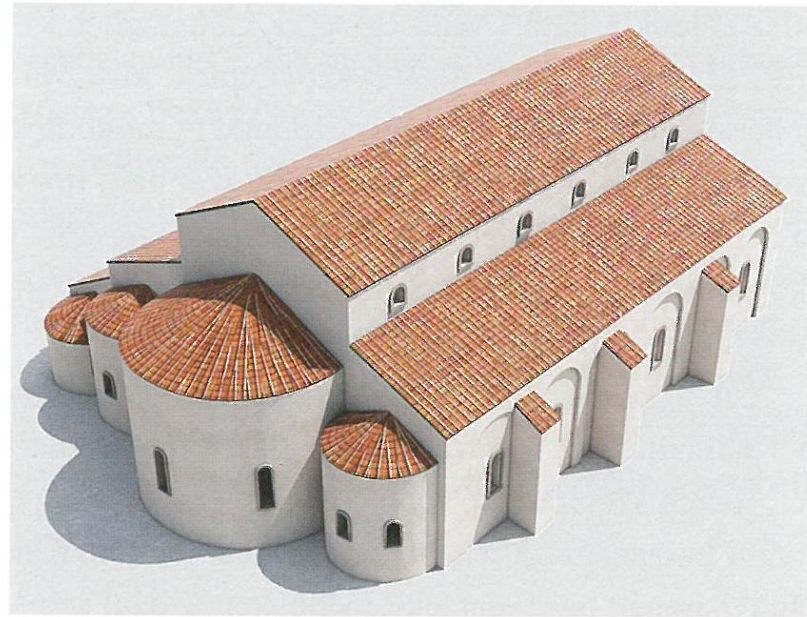
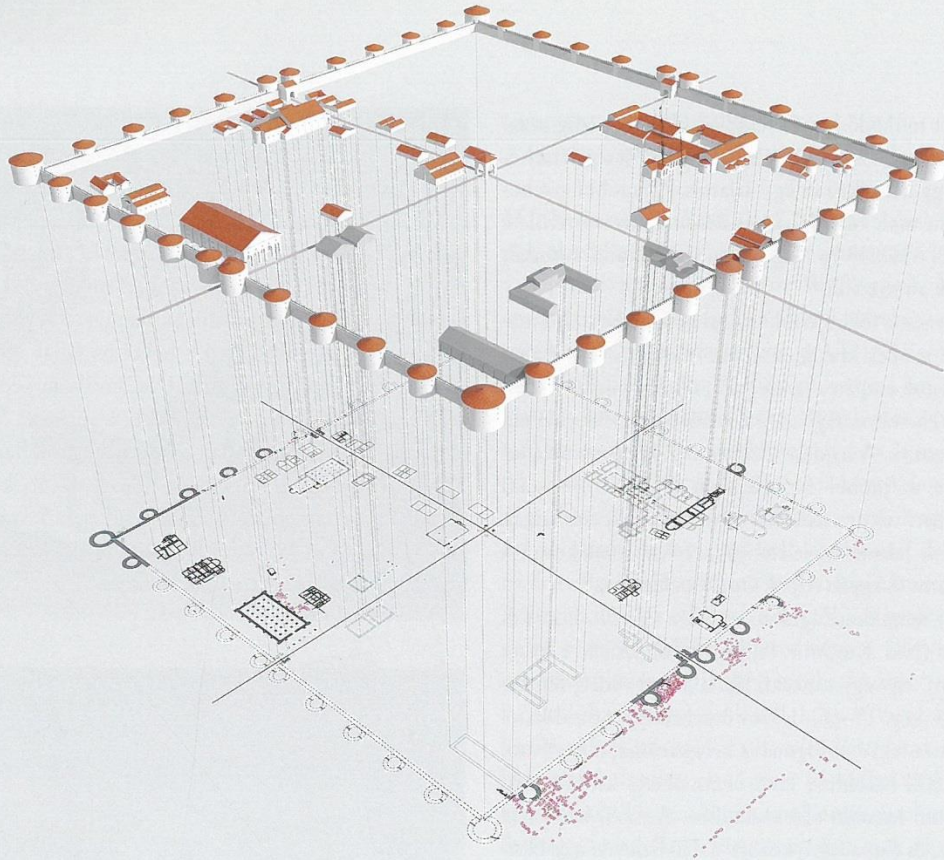


Keszthely–Fenékpuszta culture

- new fortified settlement-type occurred
- Fenékpuszta survived to the mid 7th century
- scattered around in the region
- survived to the 9th century



**Keszthely-Fenékpusztja:
groundplan of fortress and
reconstruction of the *basilica***



3D reconstruction of the *basilica*



**Archeological findings of
the Keszthely–
Fenékpuszta culture**



Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian basin (end of 9th century)



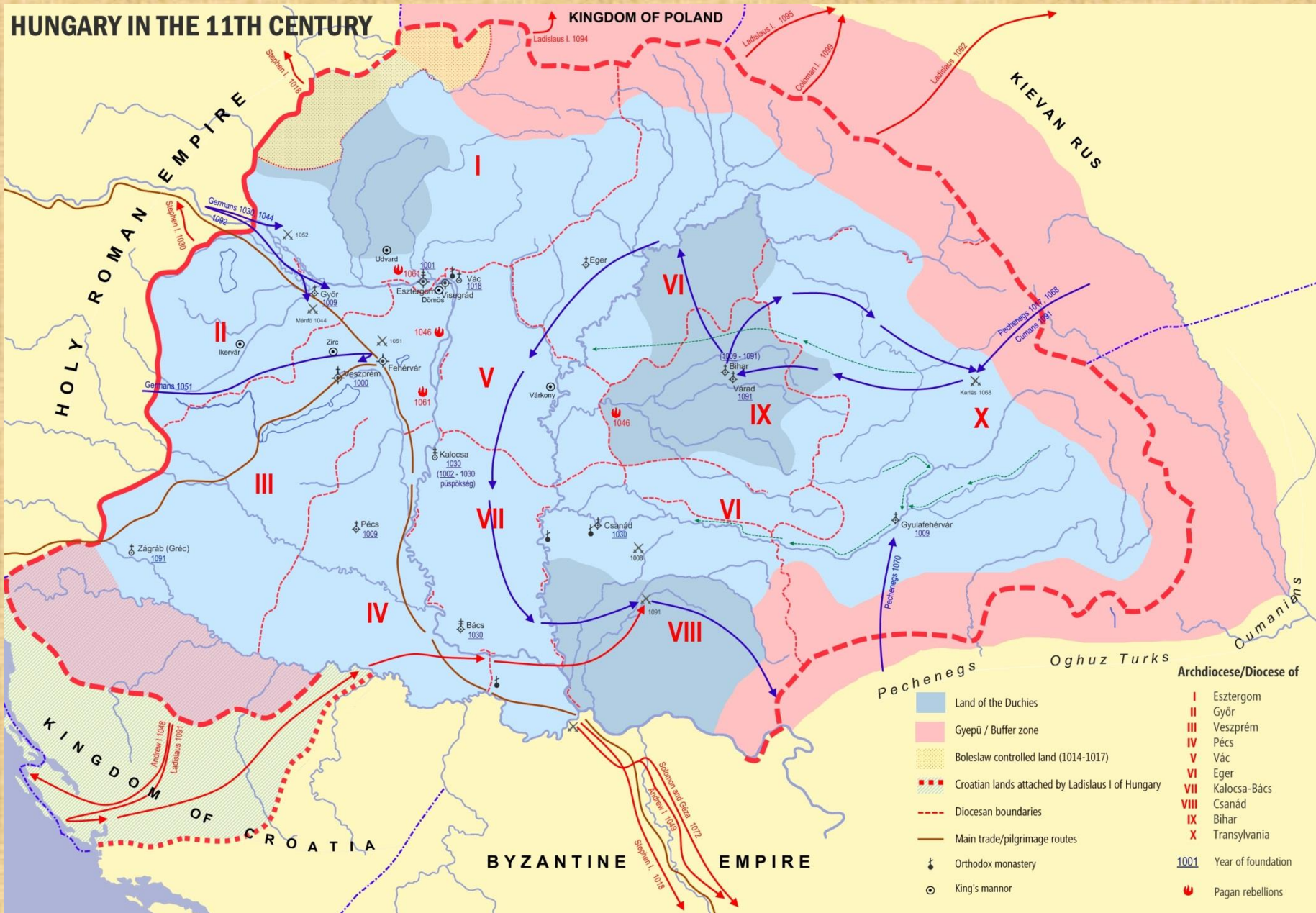
Holy King Stephan and the struggle for the united kingdom



Western traditions: ecclesiastical hierarchy and Benedictine monks

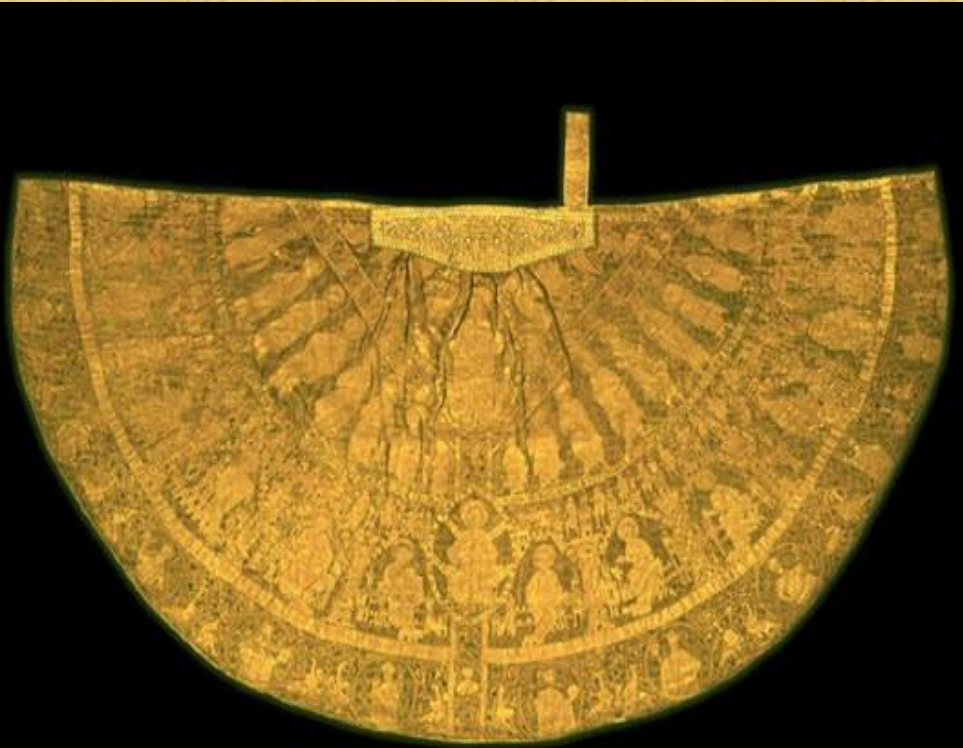


Episcopacies of the new Christian kingdom



The church in Veszprém around the first millennia

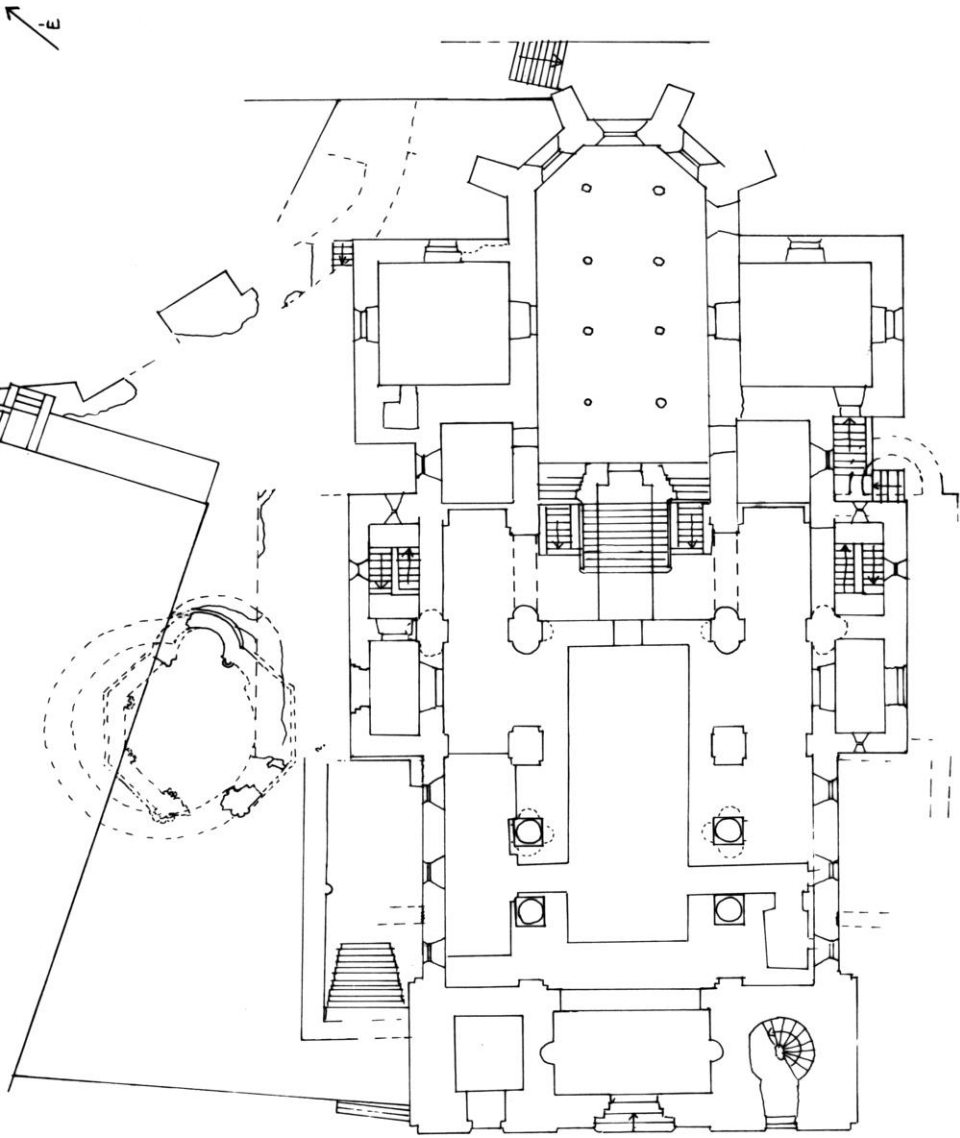
- the nunnery at the Veszprém valley
- founded as one of the earliest episcopacies



Chapel of Saint *Emericus*



Groundplan of the cathedral and its interior





**Reconstruction of the
cathedral, 1907–1910**

