

ZSÓFIA DEMETER

## FINDING THE BURIAL PLACE OF KING BÉLA III AND ANNE OF ANTIOCH IN 1848

On 5 December 1848, the grave of the first, and so far the last, royal couple whose identity was confirmed with certainty – by common consent – was found in Székesfehérvár. We should also add that this was the last proven burial of a ruler of the Árpád dynasty in the capital of the royal house (since the burial place of the child László III, who died in 1205, is unknown).<sup>1</sup>

The finds were, and still are, interesting, not only because they were undisturbed: neither conquerors nor treasure hunters had managed to rob the graves. This was also of particular importance from a historical and cultural history perspective, since János Érdy's archaeological excavation method and the results are still considered exemplary by his scientific successors. It was the excavation and the interest generated around it that led scientists to investigate the person, age, historical role and greatness of Béla III, and the excavation is the only source from which we know about the representation of the ruler in death.<sup>2</sup> The original state of the king's grave and the other graves in the vicinity can be reconstructed from the excavation documentation, such as the drawings made by János Varsányi on site (although Varsányi himself drew the queen's grave based on the accounts of those on site,<sup>3</sup> after the outer coffin had been opened before his arrival). Admittedly after many ups

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1 Kásler and Szentirmay 2019, pp. 32–33; Szabados 2016, p. 200

2 Zsoldos et al. 2016, p. 101

3 Éry 2008, p. 17

and down, the royal skeletons discovered became the subject of study by generations of Hungarian anthropologists. In 1935, Lajos Bartucz expressed the importance of re-examining all the bones that had been discovered by that time: “They will shed some light on the inheritance of certain anthropological stamps in the family of the Árpáds.”<sup>4</sup> It is fitting and just that the finds of the graves discovered in 1848, six hundred years later, are now at the centre of archaeogenetic studies.<sup>5</sup>

## **“At the real seat of the Great King”<sup>6</sup>**

Our subtitle is a quote of the last verse of the chant in honour of Saint Stephen, well-known as a folk song. The first line of the stanza, “Rejoice, royal town!”, is often quoted as the main title of the most important events of Székesfehérvár, especially the St. Stephen years (1938, 1988, 2013). I myself have also quoted it in connection with the discovery of the resting place of Béla III and his wife in Székesfehérvár, because of similar thoughts.<sup>7</sup>

According to written sources, it is certain that 15 kings were buried in the grounds of the collegiate chapter church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, i.e. the royal basilica in Székesfehérvár. Until 1540 (the burial of János Szapolyai), royal burials were mainly associated with Fehérvár. It was in the last century of the Árpád dynasty that the town gained real importance in this respect: the 12<sup>th</sup> century rulers of the Árpád dynasty, first of all King Kálmán (1095-1116) and his successors, considered it particularly important to be buried near the grave of St. Stephen.<sup>8</sup>

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4 Bartucz 1935, Vol. V, p. 28

5 Kásler and Szentirmay 2019

6 Kovács and Medgyessy 2014, pp. 162–166

7 Demeter 1999a, pp. 220-229; 1999b, pp. 25-35; 1999c, pp. 11-23

8 Szabados 2020, 206; Szabó 2018, 177; Based on the details of the reconstruction shown to have been performed in the period, Szabó considers it possible that Kálmán the Learned and his first wife are the royal couple buried in the graves found in 1848. In this case, he agrees with Endre Tóth: Tóth 2006, 141-161. The identification results of the last complex archaeogenetic study were summarised in Kásler-Szentirmay 2019, 62-64.

We know from contemporary sources that the walls of the Royal Basilica were still standing in the 1770s, and were demolished only in 1800 when the bishop's palace was built. It was used by the first bishop of Székesfehérvár, Ignác Séllyei Nagy (1777-1789), who had the surviving and covered parts of the basilica converted for episcopal ceremonies; for example, he had the cathedral chapter invested here in 1777.<sup>9</sup> In 1848, therefore, there were still people alive who had seen the walls of the royal basilica and knew, and indeed were proud of, the fact that it was a royal burial place. However, this was news for most people, even though only 50-70 years had passed! This is a warning sign for any temptation to demolish.

The 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the discovery of the royal graves is an occasion to remember János Érdy (1796-1871), the archaeologist who excavated the tombs, the importance of the royal basilica, King Béla III (1172-1196) and his queen (1172-1184), as well as the circumstances and significance of the discovery of the finds. It was this multiple objective that led the Local Government of Székesfehérvár and the King St. Stephen Museum in Székesfehérvár to mark the anniversary by unveiling a commemorative plaque and organising a scientific conference and chamber exhibition on 4 December 1998.

My own work at the conference covered the discovery of the royal grave finds and the reaction to it. Now, recalling part of my presentation at the conference, I would like to go into detail regarding the historical circumstances and the events of the excavation. I obviously cannot examine the individuals who were found, their historical role, their identification, their grave artifacts and their skeletons. However, December 1848 must be discussed in the context of the war and the particular atmosphere in the town.

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<sup>9</sup> Fejér 1818, p. 42; Pauer 1849, p. 26; Szvorényi, 1851, p. 417; Henszlmann 1864, p. 26, p. 36; Lukács 1868, p. 294; Török 1894, p. 207; p. 311; Károly II. 1898, p. 87; Forster 1900, p. 8; Polgár 1936, p. 31; p. 35, p. 42

## Székesfehérvár between Jelačić's two attacks

After the great relief of the Battle of Pákozd (29 September 1848) and the disarming of Jelačić's garrison in Székesfehérvár (3 October 1848), events which gave the people of Székesfehérvár the right to think of their own heroism, the leaders and people of Székesfehérvár and Fejér County were accused of treason. Lőrinc Tóth and László Madarász accused them of waiting for Jelačić's troops "with open arms" and feeding them,<sup>10</sup> while László Csányi criticised the poor feeding of the Hungarian soldiers.<sup>11</sup>

Ede Eischl, the chief notary, responded to the accusations in a voluminous and indignant open letter in the pages of the newspaper *Közlöny*. He based his defence rejecting the accusations on the minutes of the council meetings of Székesfehérvár, and said in essence that "not a single hat was raised in honour of the enemy."<sup>12</sup> The particular value of the letter lies in its authentic description of the popular uprising in the town on 3 October, which disarmed the enemy garrison and prevented it from uniting with the reserve.<sup>13</sup>

This is how Mihály Boross wrote about the offence caused by the accusations: "Having got rid of the Croats, we were harassed by our own government."<sup>14</sup>

The town and its leaders, however, were not only offended, they also entered into an alliance of defence and defiance against the investigators. Even before the arrival of the government commissioners, the boards had discussed and approved in all respects the previous actions of the town leaders. The actions of the government commissioners here had paralysed the officers' corps, and now, on the eve of a new offensive, it would have been

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10 *Közlöny* (1848), 119, 7 October, National Assembly, pp. 601-603

11 Erdős 1998, pp. 195–196

12 Eischl Ede, town chief notary, *Közlöny* (1848), 126, 14 October, p. 631

13 Demeter 2017, pp. 52–60

14 Boross 1881, p. 110

necessary to concentrate forces again,<sup>15</sup> since the autumn war events were followed by others in the winter. The Hungarian legal revolution could expect an attack from the whole empire.

In the autumn of 1848, both the military party led by Duke Windisch-Grätz and the imperial family were busy preparing for a change of ruler on the throne. The Schwarzenberg government was formed on 21 November 1848. The new emperor, Franz Joseph I – crowned on 2 December – along with the government promoted a programme for a united Austria.<sup>16</sup> The fact that Franz Joseph was not crowned Hungarian king and thus did not take an oath to respect the Hungarian constitution played not just a formal role in this change. It was for this reason that his accession to the throne was in the interests of the monarchy as a whole, and was unacceptable from the point of view of the Hungarian War of Independence.

Duke Windisch-Grätz was given the authority to restore order in Hungary, i.e. to attack, which he did on 14 December. The Hungarian army was then faced with a force that it was unable to stop in Transdanubia: Artúr Görgei surrendered Győr on 26 December, and Mór Perczel's army was defeated at Mór on 30 December, against the I. Corps led by Jelačić. In the midst of a deep political and military crisis, neither Székesfehérvár nor the capital could be defended after the retreat and defeat: Pest-Buda was occupied by the imperial forces on 5 January 1849, and Székesfehérvár on 7 January.<sup>17</sup>

Amidst the troubled times, repeated threats, self-esteem crisis and unjust accusations, Székesfehérvár desperately needed something glorious, something national and heroic. It was in this situation that news of the discovery of the king's grave erupted. This explains the elementary interest that the town showed in the truly glorious and national artifacts evoking a heroic past.

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15 Erdős 1998, p. 200

16 Hermann 1996, p. 221

17 Boross 1881, pp. 111–127; Hermann 1996, pp. 229–231; Erdős 1998, pp. 215–222; Magony 1998, p. 43

## The site

In 1851, Elek Fényes, in his description of the country, considered not the royal graves but the artesian well drilled in Fehérvár in 1834 worthy of note.<sup>18</sup> At that time there were already three artesian wells in the town.<sup>19</sup> The digging or drilling of wells in the Inner Town, which did not have much good drinking water, was always a central issue. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the town had a permanent well-master, and news of successful drilling spread far and wide: Both Kaposvár and Debrecen borrowed the local well-master Máté Birghoffer.<sup>20</sup> János Érdy himself claims that the first artesian well in the country was drilled here in 1831.<sup>21</sup>

In 1838, Bishop László Barkóczi (1837-1847) borrowed the town's artesian well-drilling tools, and in 1839 a well was drilled in the courtyard of the bishop's palace.<sup>22</sup> A drawing of the well was presented to the council.<sup>23</sup>

The water from the well was also drained into the basin outside the walls of the bishop's garden in Fazekas utca (now partly the National Memorial Site and partly the area of Koronázó tér (Coronation Square)), and the first graves were found and destroyed during the digging of the drainage canal.<sup>24</sup> The 1839 well digging was accompanied by grave robberies: some of the jewellery was taken to Vienna, other parts to the National Museum, but some pieces were also looted by the workers.<sup>25</sup>

In 1846, the water yield of the well in the bishop's garden deteriorated, so the outlet channel had to be lowered. The calculations of the well-master Máté Birghoffer and mason Ferenc Máder did not convince the council: they decided

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18 Czuczor, Gergely 1851, II, pp. 8–9

19 Kállay 1988, p. 406

20 Kállay, 1988, pp. 403–406

21 Érdy 1853, p. 43; Török 1894, p. 177

22 Kállay, 1988. pp. 329–330

23 Archives of the Town of Székefehérvár (hereinafter referred to as SzVL), Council Minutes, 1839. 840, No. 1454.

24 Érdy 1853, p. 43; Lukács 1868, p. 294; Fodor 1992, p. 50

25 Henszlmann 1864, p. 224; Nemeskéri 1983, pp. 110–111; Kégl 1987, p. 14; Fodor 1992, p. 50

to drill a new well outside the bishopric's wall, because they feared that the old well would no longer be able to supply the inner town.<sup>26</sup> The drilling of this new well was only "put in motion" on 14 February 1847 because of the lack of wood for the pipe.<sup>27</sup>

In early September, during excavations around the well, the wall of an old building was discovered. The council looked at it and decided that it should be drawn by the engineer Izidor Kállinger and "out of deference [...] should be removed by those who know how."<sup>28</sup> The town regularly employed a special person to "decipher" the discovered walls, who was paid according to the amount of stone and earth extracted.<sup>29</sup> The quarryman had already stipulated in 1840 that he would only undertake the quarrying if he could own the treasures he found.<sup>30</sup>

## **Actions of the council and the commission on the discovery of the graves of Béla III and his wife<sup>31</sup>**

In 1848 the excavations around the well continued: on 5 May, the engineer Kállinger reported that the stones had been removed, but "in one corner of the rectangular pit dug out there is still a coffin, which can only be excavated after the well is finished."<sup>32</sup> The council ordered the work to continue.

26 SzVL. Council Minutes 1846, 4082; 4124; 4321

27 SzVL. Council Minutes 1847, 3872

28 SzVL. Council Minutes 1847, 3558; Kállay 1996, p. 151

29 Kállay 1988, p. 330

30 SzVL. Council Minutes 1816, 508; 1839, 244; 1840, 106

31 The archivist Károly Moenich's report on the minutes he reconstructed. Manuscript. SZIKM, Local History Collection 70. 364. 1.

32 The archivist Károly Moenich's report on the minutes he reconstructed. Manuscript. SZIKM, Local History Collection 70. 364. 1. SzVL. Council Minutes 1848, 1596; Pauer, 1849, p. 2

Entry 4509 in the council minutes of 5 December 1848 mentions the discovery of marble gravestones “2 and 3 fathoms southeast of the artesian well” and the opening of the first marble coffin. The record vividly describes the “brittle bones of the human body” found in the coffin, which “on examination by the medical gentlemen, was found to be the remains of a woman about 40 years old”. In a tone of utter awe, the minutes describe the “simple crown of 15-lot silver...” and the “pieces of silk veil interwoven with gold threads”. In the decision<sup>33</sup> on the case, “as the circumstances show the human remains to be royal and probably of the Árpád clan”, the artifacts were sent to the museum with Ede Eischl, the notary.<sup>34</sup> Eischl took a letter to the academic secretary János Luczenbacher and the Defence Commission about “this interesting find”; the letter also mentioned that another grave was visible next to the one that had been opened. To open the other grave, they invited the “expert antiquities researcher of national repute”.

It is interesting to note that until his arrival the scientist was always referred to as Luczenbacher, although his name change to Érdi (with an “i”) was published in the newspapers *Közlöny* on 2 July and *Kossuth Hírlapja* on 8 August.<sup>35</sup> It was obviously him who warned the town councillors of the name change when he arrived.

On 5 December at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, at the request of the mayor Hadhalmi, the first skeleton found was examined by the doctors in the town. Their opinion reflects a surprising amount of experience: they were able to determine the sex and age of the first skeleton, as well as the probable date of its burial, to the admiration of modern anthropologists.<sup>36</sup> Town surgeon Mihály Marbik, assistant town surgeon Károly Hellensteiner, chief town physician Ferenc Say, chief physician of Fejér County Ferenc Hanekker, chief physician János Schaller and county physician József Aschner described in their report a “female person” of “advanced age” who had been buried “six hundred years

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33 SzVL. Council Minutes 1848, 4509

34 The receipt of the National Museum confirming the transfer bears the number 4573. The recipient is Ágoston Kubinyi, who received the finds as a gift.

35 *Közlöny* (1848), 23, 2 July, p. 92 l.; *Kossuth Hírlapja* (1848), 23, 8 August, p. 149.l.

36 Éry et al. 1999, pp. 9–15



ago”.<sup>37</sup> At the public meeting held on 7 December, the presiding mayor explained the circumstances and the board decided to continue the excavation<sup>38</sup> and to “have it supported by the authorities”.<sup>39</sup>

The jewellery taken to Pest was entered by Érdy in the acquisition diary on 6 December under number 61.<sup>40</sup> He noted in his study that he had presented them to the competent authorities and, as he wrote, “I was immediately instructed to travel to Fehérvár to seize the jewellery and marble slabs found there for the Hungarian national museum, to bring them up here, and to continue the excavation if necessary, with the intervention of the authorities”<sup>41</sup>. On 7 December, the *Kossuth Hírlapja* already knew about Érdy’s mission<sup>42</sup>. József Szvorényi immediately informed the *Közlöny* about the opening of the first grave in a reproving manner: “the disturbed corpses have already been picked up into baskets by profane hands”.<sup>43</sup>

The work of János Érdy and the engineer János Varsányi, who arrived with him on 8 December, was followed in the minutes from 12 December. According to these, the second coffin, which contained the King’s bones and jewellery, was opened at 9 a.m. before “a large number of spectators”. The description of the grave is very accurate, which suggests that it was perhaps dictated by Érdy himself, as it reflects his later observations. For example, unlike János Pauer, he describes a chain around the king’s neck, but fails to note that the ring is an openable case.<sup>44</sup>

The minutes also note that on the very day of the opening and drawing of the king’s grave, the finds were received with great interest. The jewellery was presented to the public at the site and later in the town hall, i.e. “exposed to the public eye”<sup>45</sup>. The great interest was noted by all witnesses. János Érdy writes:

37 SzVL. Council Minutes 1848, 4510.

38 Ibid. 4542

39 Ibid 4579

40 Forster 1900, p. 9

41 Érdy 1853, p. 43

42 *Kossuth Hírlapja* (1848), 7 December, p. 137, p. 597

43 Szvorényi *Közlöny* (1848), 191, 18 December, p. 901

44 SzVL. Council Minutes 1848, 4613

45 Ibid 4579

“The beautiful spectacle was met by an excited crowd in the otherwise quiet square. They jumped down into the pit in groups, and the inspector was not able to forbid anyone to see [...] [the skeleton] from eight o’clock in the morning until noon; even while it was still being drawn, crowds of people kept rushing in from all parts of the town. Here one could experience the warm sympathy the people of Fehérvár had for the past of their town, and several thousand people saw this scientific treasure in its entirety; I even had to have the jewels displayed in a room of the town hall.”<sup>46</sup>

János Pauer (1814-1889), then 34 years old, educator of seminarians and teacher at the seminary, later bishop, member of the academy, writes: “at the sight of them a great multitude flocked together”<sup>47</sup>. The other eyewitness, József Szvorényi (1816-1892, linguist, literary scholar), a Cistercian teacher who also reported for the *Közlöny*, affirms in the source quoted above that “we are hanging on with a tense desire to discover the reality hidden in the obscurity.”<sup>48</sup>

The entry of 14 December tells of the discovery of the new graves containing only bones and that the finds were going to be taken to the museum – the National Museum – and that the costs of the excavation would be borne by the “public constitution”, i.e. the state.<sup>49</sup>

If the note from a few years earlier is to be believed, János Érdy’s work was very well received given that, according to the editor’s comment, “Mr. Érdy was financed for this excavation in Fehérvár with only 200 forints [...]”<sup>50</sup>

In the commission president’s publication announcing the arrival of János Érdy and his team in Fehérvár, the request was made that “some of the antiquities found should be kept for the town.”<sup>51</sup>

It is known that Érdy arrived with the order of the National Defence Commission to seize the artifacts for the museum and transport them to Pest. In his report of 12 December, József Szvorényi called Érdy no less than

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46 Érdy 1853, p. 44

47 Pauer 1849, p. 4

48 Szvorényi, *Közlöny* (1848), 191, 8 December, 901. l.

49 SzVL. Council Minutes 1848, 4619

50 Érdy 1853, p. 48, editor’s comment

51 SzVL. Council Minutes 1848, 4579

a government commissioner,<sup>52</sup> and let us add that at that time, any person arriving with a government mandate had the right to this title.

At the general assembly of 14 December, i.e. after the discovery of the grave of Béla III, when Érdy was still working here, Grand Provost Ferenc Farkas proposed to petition the government to keep part of the finds “as a token of the glory of this town from the cemetery of kings”. The general assembly was disciplined in stating that the “request would be contrary to the purpose of the national museum”, and therefore did not support the proposal, but decided that “the place of the graves will be marked with an ornate column, and the date of their discovery will be noted on it for the later generations”.<sup>53</sup> If not the decorative column, the promise of a note for later generations was completed with the unveiling of a commemorative plaque at the entrance to the ruin garden on the anniversary in 1998, 150 years later.

The last record of Érdy’s stay in Székesfehérvár in the minutes is a receipt dated 17 December, in which he acknowledges receipt of the finds of the excavation performed from 11 to 16 December “for transport to Pest for the National Museum”.<sup>54</sup> This receipt must have been written immediately before the departure, as the passport for the transport of the finds for Ferenc Balogh Jr., signed by mayor Pál Hathalmi and vice-notary Vilmos Orsonits, was issued on the 16<sup>th</sup>,<sup>55</sup> and it bears Érdy’s signature, dated 19 December, confirming receipt of the finds in Pest. János Érdy entered the finds transported to Pest into the National Museum’s records under the number 1848/64.<sup>56</sup>

The story of finding the graves also includes the question of why the work had to be stopped. Both János Érdy and János Pauer referred to the “fierce winter” as the cause.<sup>57</sup> Those who reflected on the discovery later rightly note that the war was another reason why the work could not be continued. Both circumstances are fair enough, but in my opinion, the situation was much

52 Szvorényi *Közlöny* (1848), 191, 18 December, p. 901

53 SzVL. Council Minutes 1848, 4619

54 SzVL. Council Minutes 1848, 4664

55 SzVL. Council Minutes 1848, 4684

56 Éry 2008, p. 17.

57 Érdy 1853, p. 43; Pauer, 1849, p. 5

simpler. Érdy did what he was commissioned to do: he excavated the finds visible and accessible from the opened pit, and had them transported to Pest. This is not to say that in the period following 17 December the excavation could not have been continued, despite the weather or the war, but the fact remains that Érdy himself had no regrets about the halting of the work and did not blame external circumstances for it.

## **“Science must not be forgotten, even in the midst of fighting”<sup>58</sup>**

In the local history literature of Székesfehérvár, Gyula Lauschmann<sup>59</sup> sometimes makes the remark that Lajos Kossuth would have visited the excavation in Székesfehérvár. I have just presented several entries in the minutes of the council meetings; in these, the well-master, the town engineer, the doctors, the canon and the teacher are all mentioned. I find it impossible to believe that if Kossuth had visited here by the morning of 17 December 1848, he would not have been mentioned in the minutes.

On the other hand, one record indicates that Kossuth viewed the finds in the National Museum in Pest on 22 December.<sup>60</sup> If we accept the date, we can deduce that Kossuth would not have had time for a lengthy visit on that day: this was when he issued his call for a general popular uprising in defence of the homeland.<sup>61</sup> The day before, he appointed István Batthyány as the Government Commissioner of Székesfehérvár and Fejér County and charged him with organising the free mobile troops. To support this activity, the Ministry of Finance transferred 12,000 forints to Batthyány.<sup>62</sup>

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58 Decree of Lajos Kossuth as Chairman of the National Defence Commission, published on 30 November 1848 in the *Közlöny* of 2 December 1848, No. 175, 825.l.

59 Lauschmann III, 1995, p. 253

60 Hermann 1996, p. 10

61 Kossuth XIII, 1952, p. 839

62 Kossuth XIII, 1952, p. 837

Érdy, who returned to Pest, was demonstrably occupied with the finds of the royal graves. He wrote that in one of the rooms of the museum in Pest, the finds were “assembled as I found them”; he organised a professional presentation for 27 December. At this time, he had the bones examined by renowned physicians,<sup>63</sup> and according to later recollections, in his lecture given around the same time he expressed his views on the dating and identification of the finds.<sup>64</sup>

The National Museum, as the first Hungarian public collection, was placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Public Education by the national government on 19 December.<sup>65</sup> This was preceded by a series of provisions that helped to bring the heritage of the past into the National Museum. In 1804, a provision was made for the surrender of the obligatory deposits of prints, and in 1836 the Jankovits collection was purchased. It is typical and interesting that the sarcophagus of King Stephen, found in Székesfehérvár in 1803, was transferred to the National Museum in 1814 on the initiative of the Palatine Joseph,<sup>66</sup> and was only returned in 1936. The same procedure was applied to the royal graves found in 1848 in Székesfehérvár: together with the bones and other artifacts found, the pieces of the red limestone outer coffins were taken away as well.<sup>67</sup> The latter were returned to Székesfehérvár in 1936, and are now on display in the lower section of the Episcopal Cathedral.<sup>68</sup>

The opening sentence quoted in the subtitle rightly continues as follows: “To cultivate [science] is our duty at all times.”<sup>69</sup> It was in this spirit that Kossuth, at the suggestion of Count József Teleki, President of the Academy, formulated his decree on the obligation to hand over the antiquities found during the fortification and rampart construction works.<sup>70</sup> Minister of War Lázár Mészáros

63 Érdy 1853, p. 45. No further information is available on the identity of the doctors.

64 Henszlmann 1864, p. 215; Török 1894, p. 176

65 Hermann 1996, p. 10; Fodor 1992, p. 8

66 Fitz 1980, p. 77; Buzinkay 1986, p. 39

67 Éry ed. 2008, p. 17

68 Demeter and Gelencsér 2002, p. 152

69 Decree of Lajos Kossuth as Chairman of the National Defence Commission, published on 30 November 1848 in the *Közlöny* of 2 December 1848, No. 175, 825.l.

70 Kossuth Lajos Összes Munkái XIII, 1952, pp. 594–595; Szabad 1994, p. 129

opened the arms depots for the museum's collection,<sup>71</sup> one of the sources of the historical weapons collection. Károly Szász, a person particularly committed to the preservation of antiquities, was appointed as head of the State Secretariat for Cultural Affairs attached to the National Defence Commission.<sup>72</sup> At this time, however, the idea had already been formulated that not only antiquity, but also present-day relevance could make objects worthy of being placed in a national museum. During the capitulation at Ozora (7 October 1848), the 5 captured flags of the reserve army of 9,000 soldiers led by Roth and Philippovich were also placed here after being presented at the National Assembly.<sup>73</sup>

## News of the “dead kings”

Many of the witnesses immediately promoted the Székesfehérvár finds. Of course, János Érdy himself, keeper of the National Museum and leader of the excavation, spoke about them at the site and at the presentation of the temporary exhibition in Pest on 27 December. The events were also reported by József Szvorényi, then a high school teacher in Fehérvár, in the *Közlöny* on 12 December, and by Mihály Boross (1815-1899), a lawyer, then a member of several committees and later second deputy ispán of Fejér county, as a correspondent for the *Közlöny* and *Kossuth Hírlapja*. The scientific work of János Pauer, then a seminary teacher in Székesfehérvár, published in 1849, can also be considered a contemporary writing;<sup>74</sup> as Aurél Török rightly remarked, “[...] I am of the opinion that in our dear country there has never yet been a book published which provides such a remarkable and interesting discovery for Hungarian scientific circles at six pengős as Pauer's book.”<sup>75</sup> Érdy's scientific summary, the ideas of which he is said to have already presented in a lecture on 27 December 1848, was only published in 1853. The editor described the work

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71 Hermann 1996, p. 10

72 Buzinkay, 1986, p. 42

73 Hermann 1996, p. 10

74 Pauer 1849

75 Török 1894, p. 197

as follows: “Among our Hungarian antiquities, our national artifacts, no other discovery exists that would be more noteworthy and important. It may justly be regarded as the most outstanding achievement of Hungarian historical finds to date.”<sup>76</sup>

In the 1850s, neither József Szvorényi, nor Imre Palugyai or Elek Fényes mentioned the then unpresentable affair of 1848.<sup>77</sup> János Érdy was the only one who could do so, as a scholar and the most knowledgeable person on the subject, and he himself mentioned János Pauer and József Szvorényi as eyewitnesses.<sup>78</sup>

The news of the royal graves inspired János Garay’s poem entitled *Síri hang az élőkhöz* (*A Voice from the Grave to the Living*),<sup>79</sup> in which he also aimed to use the relics of ancestors to inspire his contemporaries to fight for freedom:

“[...] the grave of your forefathers was opened to you,  
So that your heart might beat faster at the sight of the dead,  
Not for he may have been a king, but for he was a son of an age  
When our homeland was glorious, free and independent.”

It is interesting and characteristic that the new emperor, Franz Joseph, whose accession to the throne was not recognised by the Hungarian Parliament, is mentioned several times in the poem. The fourth stanza in the original poem scourges “the infidelities of the apostate king”, and the sixth stanza the fact

“That his faithless king, transgressing his holy faith,  
betrayed, sold, destroys his ancient people.”

The poem was also published in an appendix by Aurél Török, the first anthropologist to examine the skeletons,<sup>80</sup> but he replaced the parts compromising the king with suspension points. This was no coincidence, since

76 Érdy 1853, p. 42. The editor’s comment.

77 Szvorényi 1851; Fényes 1851, Palugyai 1853

78 Érdy 1853, p. 45

79 Garay 1956, pp. 135–136; cited by Török 1894, pp. 156–157

80 Török 1894, pp. 154–157

by that time Franz Joseph I had already been crowned as the Hungarian king, and after a new examination of the bones, the nth funeral, ordered by the king and financed with 25,000 forints, took place on 21 October 1898, this time in the Chapel of the Holy Trinity of Matthias Church in Buda.<sup>81</sup>

János Garay reports on the enthusiastic mood in which he wrote the poem in a letter to Sándor Petőfi on 25 December 1848.<sup>82</sup> Here he expresses his opinion about the graves in prose: “the day after tomorrow, we scientists are invited to the Museum to view the ancient finds of Székesfehérvár. I, who have so much reverence for the great age of our ancestors, am filled with joy to see an Árpád king, even if only in his skeleton, not because he is a king, but because he is a Hungarian from an age in which this nation was free, independent and great. Would that from his bones such a miasma might spread through our foul air as would make us all feverish for freedom!”

Sándor Petőfi was then living at 2555 Színház utca in Debrecen, and since 15 December he had been primarily occupied with the birth of his son Zoltán. Unfortunately, his letters to Garay have not survived,<sup>83</sup> but we do know his views on the royal grave. In his note of 12 January 1849, found among his notes on history, he of course expresses a very different opinion, worthy of a true republican: “For several centuries the place where kings were once buried in the town of Székesfehérvár had been forgotten. Towards the end of 1848, the grave and in it the bones of two Árpád kings were found. This would have been a national holiday only a year earlier; now, except for a few antiquity-loving scholars, nobody was interested [...], as the nation was fighting a war against kings. It was as if these dead kings had come out of the grave to drag their living successors from the throne to the dust.”<sup>84</sup>

The poetic image is different – one might say it reflects a movement in the opposite direction – yet the report written by Mihály Boross in *Kossuth Hírlapja* on 20 December 1848 suggests a similar view. “When the crown of the

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81 Forster 1900, pp. 269–270; p. 276; Békefi 1900, pp. 279–292

82 Petőfi 1974, pp. 529–530, cited by Török 1894, pp. 155–156; Buzinkay 1986, p. 47

83 Petőfi 1964, p. 457

84 Petőfi VII, 1964, p. 142



Habsburgs falls into the dust on the one hand, the crowns of the deceased kings rise from the dust on the other.”<sup>85</sup>

A number of other examples could be given here, but it is clear from the ones mentioned that our ancestors had different perceptions of the discovery of the “dead kings”. The enthusiasm of the scientists is understandable, the judgment of the known persons is as can be expected in light of their views, and the elemental enthusiasm of the locals is natural.

## The afterlife of desires

The yearning of the town expressed in 1848 to recover some items from the royal graves did not cease. In the process of developing Székesfehérvár in the 1930s – the main aim of which was to prepare for the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of King St. Stephen – this goal was linked to urban planning both under the mayor Aladár Zavaros (1919-1931)<sup>86</sup> and the mayor Dr. Emil Csitáry (1931-1941), who was to define the whole era. The restoration of the cathedral, the renovation of the lower section, the completion of the square in front of the entrance and the monument to the heroes were all part of this process. The Pásztor-Hikisch composition was completed by adding the figure of the reclining soldier, which could only be erected in the space created by the demolition of the Szigethy house. It was then that Heroes’ Square was opened.<sup>87</sup>

The restoration of the cathedral also reflected the expectation that, following the initiative of Arnold Marosi (1873-1939), the museum director who had recently been awarded the title of Chief Advisor to the Government,<sup>88</sup> the mayor Emil Csitáry wanted to have the remains of Béla

85 Boross, 1848. *Kossuth Hírlapja* (1848), 148, 20 December, p. 641.l.

86 *Székesfehérvári Napló* (1929) 25 December.

87 Schmidl 1940, p. 168

88 Repository of King St. Stephen Museum, Repository of Museum History. Secretarial report, 22 May 1932

III and his wife returned to the town in 1931.<sup>89</sup> The effort was supported by Bálint Hóman himself when, in 1933, Arnold Marosi “put forward a proposal for the recovery of the royal graves found in the basilica”.<sup>90</sup> However, the grand plan failed; although the *Székesfehérvár Friss Újság* already reported in enthusiastic articles about the negotiations on the return of the remains<sup>91</sup>, only the original hard limestone pieces of the outer coffins were taken back to the town<sup>92</sup>. Mayor Emil Csitáry wrote in his memoirs: “We have recovered the original red marble coffin of the great King Béla III and his wife, the lower slab of which beautifully shows the figure of the royal couple thanks to secreted acid. (This also shows what a giant man Béla III was.) These coffins were placed in the lower section of the cathedral, the lower slabs of the coffins being placed under a glass wall.”<sup>93</sup>

In 2017, the figure of Béla III was brought to life at the Coronation Festival Games in Székesfehérvár. In a related exhibition, the King St. Stephen Museum presented the original grave artifacts found in 1848 and the grave paintings were reconstructed (with copies) as well. The exhibition entitled “His body rests in Fehérvár” was opened on 12 August 2017. The curator of the exhibition, Dr. György Szabados, mentioned that the king was venerated as Béla the Great by his successor (and grandson) Béla IV. His reliably identifiable grave finds were found in 1848 in Székesfehérvár, the Árpád-era capital of Hungary. Béla III himself designated the burial place between the grave of his first wife and that of his grandfather Béla II the Blind (1131-1141).<sup>94</sup> This honouring of the blind king is understandable since he was the forefather of all our subsequent Árpád dynasty kings.<sup>95</sup>

89 Dormuth 1935, I.II, p. 6. *Székesfehérvári Friss Újság* (1938), 8 July, p. 10, p. 12, p. 24

90 Dormuth 1938, p. 2

91 *Székesfehérvári Friss Újság* (1938), 7 July, p. 10, p. 12

92 *Székesfehérvári Friss Újság* (1938), 24 July; Szarka and Láng 1939, p. 9

93 Csitáry 2013, 148-149; On the outer coffins: Kégli 1987, 13-17; Buzinkay 1986, 91; Éry et al. 1999, 12-14.

94 <http://www.meht.hu › radioadas › 180702-teste-fehervarott-nyugszik>. Kontakt Rádió. Tárlatról tárlatra. 20 August 2018. Downloaded on: 7 January 2022; Kásler and Szentirmay 2019, p. 32

95 Szabados 2020, p. 207

Dr. András Cser-Palkovics, mayor of Székesfehérvár, said the following about the artifacts of the graves of Béla III and Queen Anne at the press conference introducing the games: “An inhabitant of Fehérvár can never give up the desire to have a place in the former coronation town at some point in the future, in accordance with the King’s will.”<sup>96</sup>



The place of coronation and burial of Hungarian kings, a miniature of the former Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.  
“Kings and Saints – The Age of the Árpáds”

96 <https://magyarhirlap.hu/cikk/91612>. Downloaded on: 7 January 2022. *Magyar Hírlap* (2017), 28 June; [https://www.szekesfehervar.hu/Szekesfehervar\\_Varosportal](https://www.szekesfehervar.hu/Szekesfehervar_Varosportal) – This year’s Coronation Ceremony Games bring Béla III’s life to the stage

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Interceding Theotokos engolpion with enamel icon, late 13th century,  
Treasury Basiliek Onze-Lieve-Vrouw 'Sterre der Zee' Maastricht