

Eger Medieval Cathedral in the Early 13th Century

According to the research that has been conducted into the architectural history of the medieval cathedral of Eger, the chancel is all that remains of the Romanesque building dating from the first half of the 12th century. The central chancel bay with its sturdy, wedge-shaped piers and two side aisles terminates in three semi-circular apses. The polychrome ashlar chancel, excavated between 1928 and 1937, is the only part of the earlier cathedral that remains standing to any considerable height. It would appear therefore that its spatial features and its massing were subsequently preserved and incorporated into later building operations at the cathedral. Although the nave, with its exterior buttressing, is the result of a late 13th century rebuild, its ground-plan nevertheless maintains the contours of its Romanesque predecessor.

The sturdy, shafted Gothic piers were preceded by two arcades consisting of six piers each. The mode of reconstruction can be easily seen as the Gothic piers were placed between the Romanesque ones. While the piers were so closely placed to one another that it was unlikely that the nave was vaulted, the manner in which the piers and walls were articulated in the nave and aisle bays immediately to the west of the chancel make it possible that they were vaulted.

Our study deals with the earlier 12th century arrangement of the western part of the cathedral. The two towers at the west end were built later. This can be presumed due to the presence of the excavated grave of Bishop Miklós Dörögdi, who died in 1361, in the middle of the porch that lay between the towers. One should also mention in relation to the building of the west end and the new chancel that the style of the capitals on the church's western portal suggest they also date from this period.

The issue of accessibility between the bays of the Romanesque chancel, and the reason why the central aisle of the chancel was at a considerably higher level, has been clarified by the existence of a section of staircase. The designated use of the eastern part of the cathedral may be further reduced by the fact that the distance between the piers of the easternmost bay of the nave had already been wider in the 12th century, and that this chancel - canons' choir arrangement was also followed during the course of the later reconstruction work. The layout of the piers and the arrangement of the choir can be compared with the Deanery Church in Székesfehérvár, as well as the cathedrals at Esztergom and Győr.

Apart from the ground-plan there is very little that we know about the formal details of the early 12th century cathedral. Among the details that survive are the steeply profiled Attic bases which carried both engaged columns and piers. In addition there are capitals decorated either with painted designs or schematic foliage, as well as an "ensemble", which has provoked a great deal of research and caused much debate. It consists of richly articulated column shafts, on which there is a capital decorated with a palmette-acanthus motif, whose cross-section continues the contours of the shaft. The arrangement is accompanied by another version lacking any decorative features. The literature has tended to consider the design 11th century, with art historians endeavouring to find a relationship with Feldebrő. In exhibitions this early pier and capital group has usually been paired up with a group of cylindrical billeted moulding fragments. Ever since József Csemegi and Tamás Bogyay's investigations in the mid 1930s, these mouldings have played an important part in their critique of Hamann's "Norman invasion" thesis, according to which Eger became one of the most important local links in both establishing and illustrating Ják's position in the art historical landscape, and

relationships to Bamberg Cathedral in particular. Indeed, Csemegi discovered some remarkably close analogies between the Eger cornice and the motif on the exterior string-course forming part of the articulation of the eastern choir at Bamberg Cathedral. The problem here however is that while the details referring to Bamberg (the billeted fragments, with a saw-tooth band underneath) are of the same date, it may not be certain that the Eger ensemble has been assembled in the correct manner, or that the palmette capital and the cylindrical-billeted moulding were part of the same design. From the point of view of the early dating of the billeted fragments it is also worth considering, that under one of these cornices run a series of small blind arches, of the type that one tends to associate with an earlier date (e.g. Feldebrő). The best Hungarian parallels to the billeted cornices and the earlier Eger pier bases can be found among the finds at of the Deanery Church of St Margaret in Dömös founded by Duke Álmos.

So it is, that neither the billeted mouldings nor the profiles are date-defining in their own right, and for this reason alternative means of dating are required. It is unnecessary to stress, when seeking to make art historical classifications, the extent to which the same fragments can be used to illustrate very different architectural and art historical hypotheses. In our case, it is by no means inconsequential whether the features in question are part of the early 12th century building style, or one of those early Gothic and late Romanesque sites in Hungary that were dependent on the reception of Bamberg elements during the first third of the 13th century.

Those Romanesque churches in the immediate vicinity of Eger probably play an important role in establishing the position and the influence of Eger's 12th century cathedral. It is for this reason that the study looks at the churches at Feldebrő, Kács, Szomolya, Bükkszentmárton, Váraszó, Noszvaj and Szalonna in some detail.

The Romanesque reconstruction of the cathedral in about 1200, or the renovation of one part of the interior at the very least, is suggested by two attached shafts, pier shaft fragments, painted rib vault fragments, as well as a fine piece of *Kleinarchitektur* and a considerable number of fragments belonging to a decorative pavement. The compound pier form consists of a cruciform core with a half-column attached to each face and an angle roll on each corner. The capitals also abide by this arrangement, providing yet another insight into Hungary's reception of the early Gothic style. While the ornamentation of the capitals deviates from its original models, and represents a certain degree of originality, the rib vaulting and the pier types reflect the most-widespread and common practises of the period, as seen for example at Gyulafehérvár Cathedral and the church of the Cistercian Abbey at Pilisszentkereszt, both begun during the last quarter of the 12th century.

Among the fragments can be recognized a small thin-walled architectural detail crowned by a console consisting of variously sized blind niches. The polychromy used expresses the two distinct elements of the structure, the two different types of stone being white marble and a red-coloured stone (andesite tufa).

The blind niches would most often have been c. 30, or 60cm (one and two feet) wide and framed with plate elements whose classical cyma profiles give the marble niches a classical air. Whereas the niches carved in red stone lack ornamentation, some of the white marble niches have white decorative borders. The spandrel of one of the larger scale niches is decorated with an inlay motif. Various styles of ornament run the length of the cornice, the quality of the red and the white passages of ornamentation varying considerably from one another. On the white marble cornices one can find an undulating tendril trail inhabited by classical-style animals. Among the predators and the birds is a faun accompanying Bacchus, who is picking grapes. The faun is not commonly found in inhabited scrolls in the period

c.1200, and rarely seen in ivories with a mythical iconography after late antiquity or the Carolingian period.

Along one section of smoothly rendered red cornice runs an undulating tendril-palmette pattern, and a fragmented tendril-leaf motif. The latter is a new interpretation of a widespread and popular late Romanesque ornament. For this reason, one cannot avoid analysing the relationships and the influences existing between Bamberg and Hungary at the beginning of the 13th century, particularly with reference to the lost pier shaft in Ercs. The first group amounts to what is a rather provincial interpretation. The possibility that such a transmission of ideas was continued locally by the workshop activities that were closely tied to the local quarries is well illustrated by the small doorway at Szalonna. While we know that the architectural feature was square, and we have some knowledge of how the elevation was expressed, any reconstruction remains problematic. Nevertheless, the liturgical importance of the raised chancel and the canons' choir, and the need to shut them off from the rest of the church, make one suspect that there must have been something along the lines of a choir screen. There is evidence of such a structure crossing the width of the main chancel aisle and continuing along the main aisle at the Deanery Church of St Mary in Székesfehérvár, which dates from the 11th-12th centuries. Like Eger, it is a building that doesn't have a crypt, and has a ground-plan resembling that of Saint Adalbert's cathedral in Esztergom.

A large number of white, grey, pink, black and red marble fragments of various sizes and shapes have also come to light on the site of Eger cathedral. These would have originated from a richly decorated and polychrome pavement, which would in all probability have borne some relationship to the screen. A further aspect in the analysis of the cathedral decoration are those white marble blocks, which have lettering carved into their main surfaces. While the lettering is unfortunately too fragmentary to allow any attempt at guessing their textual context, their calligraphy suggests that they date from either the final third of the 12th century, or the beginning of the 13th century. A comparison with its most notable contemporary, the Porta Speciosa in Esztergom, will help to clarify both the stylistic and the art historical context of the Eger fragments.

Although Arnold Ipolyi mentions King Imre's burial in 1204 in his 1865 monograph of the cathedral, one needs to go back to the correspondence of the first antiquarians who had witnessed the demolitions at the end of the 18th century, to find the first references to the relevant medieval sources, such as the Zagreb Chronicle and the 14th century chronicle composition written shortly afterwards.

In 1937 the documentation that survives tells us that in the middle of the cathedral nave, under pavement level, lay an ashlar walled, vaulted tomb chamber in which they uncovered a tomb chest made up of four large slabs of stone. The 1937 excavations and the most recent archive sources make it likely that the tomb chamber was broken into in the middle of the 1750s. A straight staircase leads down into the tomb chamber with a segmented barrel vault from a rectangular doorway in the western wall. The tomb chamber is positioned towards the west end of the cathedral on the central axis of the main nave aisle, between the two westernmost Romanesque pillars. The tomb chamber therefore meets the criteria of *in medio ecclesiae/in medio domus*. Its ashlar walls are made of the same materials and share the same surface handling as the Romanesque parts of the cathedral still in evidence today. Immediately below the vault in the eastern wall of the tomb chamber one can find a Greek cross carved into a block of dressed stone, parallels to which can be found in the 12th and 13th century fragments in Eger.

The tomb chamber would therefore appear to have been built either during the 12th century, or the first half of the 13th century, forming an organic part of the Romanesque cathedral. Within this period of a hundred years or more, however, the construction of the

tomb chamber with its “marble tablets” built into the foundations – perhaps the workshop leftovers from the decorative pavements and the *Kleinarchitektur* - makes it possible that it dates from the redecoration of the cathedral in about 1200 and the construction of the “marble architecture”. Whether it dates from the 12th century or the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries, with the aid of the written sources and the historical data it is possible to narrow down considerably that circle of people who may have been responsible for the burial and its accompanying representative funerary monument. The tomb chamber took a form that was reserved for saints, and saintly individuals and monarchs. There are two examples of tomb chambers in Hungary in the Árpád era, both of which were accessible by stairs and positioned within the main body of the church in a position of some importance: the Deanery Church of St Mary in Székesfehérvár and Várad Cathedral. From the archaeological drawings which derive from the 19th century excavations at Várad Cathedral, one can only assume that there was an “underground vault” along the lines of that lying at the centre of Székesfehérvár Cathedral, which contained the remains of a canonized Hungarian king. At Fehérvár the tomb chamber to the west of the chancel wall and the establishment of a liturgical area took place in connection with the canonization of Saint Stephen in 1083. In the case of Pécs Cathedral, Melinda Tóth has suggested that there is link between the crypt, and the existence of a tomb chamber underneath the Altar of the Holy Cross, and the burial place of King Peter, the patron of the cathedral. Tóth has also noted the relationship between the position of the tomb chamber in relation to the western part of the church at both Pécs and Feldebrő. Although the formal arrangement of the Feldebrő tomb chamber and its segmented barrel vault – often mentioned as the first burial place of Aba Sámuel – has been the subject of much dispute, it may nevertheless be considered an earlier version of Eger’s tomb chamber, and one that is also within its geographical proximity.

From the 1184 register for the royal tithe which also gives the amounts to which Hungary’s bishops and archbishops were entitled, it emerges that after the arch-episcopacy of Esztergom, the diocese of Eger was in possession of the highest income (see for example the cases of Martirius and Lukács, when promotion to the post of archbishop of Esztergom went by way of the bishopric of Eger). At the turn of the century, between 1198 and 1217, it was Katapán who held the position of bishop of Eger. Of his career we know that he was dean of Székesfehérvár and that he served in the royal court of both Béla III and Imre, initially as deputy counsellor from 1190 to 1192, and then as counsellor until 1198. During the course of the internecine struggle that followed the king’s death the presumably pro-Imre prelate was forced into opposition, where he stayed right up until his death in 1216/17. Apart from Eger’s prominent position among the dioceses it was probably bishop Katapán’s close contacts with the court that contributed to Imre being buried in Eger, thus breaking the tradition of royal burials in Székesfehérvár. The choice of memorial is represented by an ashlar-walled, vaulted tomb chamber in the central aisle of the nave. In this vaulted setting the tomb contained relics, and took a form that combined all the necessary representative and referential elements reserved for particularly respected persons such as rulers and founders. Apart from the questions first of whether its architectural form had already been settled before the place of burial was finalized, secondly of whether the tomb made a deliberate reference to its setting, and thirdly of whether there was any relationship between the embellishment of the marble architecture and the tomb chamber, there is the issue of the extent to which any royal patrons were involved.

The choice of model may have been influenced by that part of the legend of Saint Stephen that refers to his foundation at Székesfehérvár. After all, Saint Stephen had been both the founder and a donor of Eger Cathedral. Indeed the standard image of the donor overseeing the suitable decoration of his church, may have extended to Stephen having had

the choir walls, screens and pavements covered in marble. Beyond the marble decorated choir, a further architectural reference back to Fehérvár as “prototype” for the royal burial could have been the relationship between the tomb and the choir screen and the form it took. Such a “Fehérvár reference” appearing in connection with such the short-lived monarch, can nevertheless be explained by Imre’s being closely bound by his father’s cultural inheritance. Consequently the solution was not totally independent of “the historicism of c. 1200”, a phenomenon which research has become increasingly aware of in relation to the art of the court of Béla III. References to Saint Stephen during the reign of Béla III can be found in both royal representation (the regalia, the mantel, the modification of the crown) and the remodelling of the coronation church and necropolis in Székesfehérvár. Indeed, Béla III’s first-born son and successor shared the name of St Stephen’s eldest son and successor, Imre.

Another component of the art historical (stylistic and iconographical) analysis of the featured *Kleinarchitektur* is the examination of the use of materials and polychromy. As far as can be gauged from evidence that is so fragmentary, it was white marble (or to be more exact an occasional veined pale grey version thereof) that dominated, while the less prominent sections were executed in red stone (the colour of the incrustations are unknown, and there is no surviving mortar). In the decorative pavement, however, it was the white and black/dark grey contrast that came to the fore, with the red and pink inserts being used to pick out the motifs executed in smaller pieces. Within an architectural programme like this, such a widespread use of marble, and in such a variety of shades, prompts the question of where they came from, and any other quarry-related issues. The materials used were once believed to have been imported. In the meantime, however, fragments from some Renaissance reliefs carved from the same material have also come to light, while written sources from the end of the 18th century have focused our attention on more local causal factors. The archeometric examinations into the marble (MTA Geochemical Institute) have given rise to the possibility, as has been the case with the Gerecse red marble, that we are dealing here with a local material. The hard crystalline limestone, which probably came from a quarry somewhere in the Bükk Hills, was a marble similar to that used in the “Diósgyőr Madonna”. Thus, the c.1200 Eger finds and the Renaissance work may have come from the same source.

The discovery of the relationship between the c. 1200 representative architectural fittings and the local white marble can also be seen in parallel with that phenomenon that we know about concerning the origins of the decorations and the use of Gerecse red marble at the cathedral of Saint Adalbert in Esztergom. Unlike Gerecse red marble, which enjoyed widespread use, spreading indeed beyond the borders of the Kingdom of Hungary, it would appear that the use of white marble in Eger at the end of the 12th century remained a local phenomenon. Indeed, beyond the practical issues concerning the use of materials, the lack of stylistic parallels in the Eger work may shed some light on one particular circumstance. Eger’s use of its own marble took place at a time when Hungary’s significant recipients of the early Gothic style were never without works executed in red marble. While Esztergom Cathedral and Székesfehérvár Cathedral were covered in “shades of purple” (Székesfehérvár to a lesser extent, as the use of red marble was restricted to those parts of the building connected with the burial of Béla III), Eger’s use of its own marble suggests references to altogether different sources.