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RECENT DATA ON THE STRUCTURE OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN BURIAL BUILDINGS AT PÉCS

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One of the most important archaeological sites of Pécs is the Early Christian cemetery, part of which, where most burial structures can be found, became part of the World Heritage in 2000.[1] The burial-chambers located among the underground tombs built of brick and stone or the simple west-east oriented graves can be divided into several groups and types. Some of them were built for one person only, others can be regarded as family or community vaults. Accordingly, there is a significant difference in their sizes. Their orientation generally differs from that of the graves; the chambers are north-south oriented except for some. Only the large-size burial edifices like the *cella septichora* or the so-called mausoleum were oriented east-west. The entrance to the edifices usually ending in an apse was in the southern wall. This orientation can be explained as a result of the location of the cemetery in the hillside sloping south. As there were rectangular barrel-vaulted burial chambers or crypts built under each family chapel sized about 3-6 m x 3-4 m, entry had to be gained to both levels. There were not such underground buildings beneath the larger community burial buildings (churches?) with a more complex ground plan. Instead, their floor level was sunk 1-2 metres below ground level.

The overground chapels built for a person or a family and their underground crypts were built one on top of the other in such a manner that their entrances were to be found in the same vertical plane to the south. Unfortunately, previous excavations could not determine the exact locations of the entrances relative to each other, thus different solutions were brought up concerning the access to them. These solutions were all based on the assumption that both entrances were used steadily and simultaneously. Consequently, the problem of the simultaneous use of the two doors one above the other was solved by recon-

[1] *Fülep* 1984 with previous literature; Évezredek öröksége. Historic Millenary Heritage of Pécs. Pécs 2001; *Tóth* 2001, 1129-1136; *Visy* [2004], 117-123. *Kárpáti–Gábor* 2004, 287-290; on recent research see *Visy* 2006, 3-13.

structing a covered corridor with an entrance of its own in front of the crypt.[2] According to recent research these reconstruction suggestions are unacceptable. It was only F. Fülep who, on the basis of his observations, tried to find a different solution for the entrance to the crypt of burial chamber II, but as we will see later his suggestion did not prove to be right either. More detailed examinations were possible to be carried out at burial-chambers I and II and the burial buildings at Kővágószőlős,[3] but the most decisive discoveries were only made after the excavation of burial-chambers XIX and XX then burial-chamber XXIV.

Since its discovery in 1780, burial-chamber I has undergone numerous examinations, out of which only J. Koller's, I. Henszlmann's and O. Szőnyi's examinations could rely on original evidence.[4] Although Henszlmann quoted Koller, it was only E. Dyggve[5] who noticed a fact described by him – that the door of the crypt was walled up with stones. Koller supposed that a Christian martyr had been walled up there alive, whereas Dyggve questioned the existence of the door itself in Roman times. His wrong reconstruction, which assumed that the crypt could be entered via a trap door cut in the floor of the chapel and a way down supplied with steps,[6] was not accepted by Gosztonyi or later by Fülep either. Fülep took notice of the walled up door and thus claimed that access to the crypt was gained through the uncovered door and the passageway running beneath the level of the chapel, which was horizontally cut in the hillside ascending north (Fig. 1).[7]

In the case of burial-chamber I not only do we have to consider the fact that the way to the crypt was closed with stones but we also have to reckon with a detail in Henszlmann's description which mentions the beginning of a wall on either side of the entrance to the crypt (Fig. 2). The two obviously connected walls that diverge east from the axis of the chamber must have been aimed at strengthening the sides of passageway. However, on the basis of Benkő's illustration it cannot be decided whether the two walls were to support the roof or vault, or they were simple stone piles lacking any cementing built to strengthen the sides of the corridor dug in the ground. The two low wall stumps were preserved for two centuries, and with their condition known it was highly ques-

[2] *Dyggve* 1935, 62-77; *Fülep* 1984; *Fülep–Bachmann–Pintér* 1988; *Gosztonyi* [1943]; *Hajnóczi* 1986. 229-236.
[3] *Burger* 1986. 65-228.
[4] *Koller* 1804; *Henszlmann* 1873; *Szőnyi* 1907, 32; *Szőnyi* 1929, 537-544. – The observations made during the repeated unearthing and restoration work of burial chamber I in 1997-1998 and their documentation have not been published yet.
[5] *Dyggve* 1935, 62-77.
[6] *Ibid.* Fig. 1.
[7] *Gosztonyi* [1943]; *Fülep* 1984, 41.

tionable whether they supported a vaulted roof.[8] More detailed analysis can solve the problem. The crypt and its hallway remained intact because Müller's restoration (1913) unearthed the foundation of the second pillar from the north in the chapel's portico on a bit higher level. Thus the covered passageway – if there was such a passage starting from the door of the crypt – could have been expected to be at least partially intact. However, there are no traces of covering. The two buttresses were not wall stumps in ruins but they seemed to be horizontally ended walls. The pair of walls are not likely to have supported the roof of a covered way down, therefore we cannot accept the existence of such a covered corridor.

Burial chamber II was unearthed by Gy. Gosztonyi[9] and later F. Fülep conducted supplementary research in it.[10] Gosztonyi suggested an entrance similar to that of crypt I but Fülep rejected the idea and claimed a complex narrow way down supplied with steps instead (Fig. 3a and 3b). His assumption was based on the fact that in the foundation wall of the chapel he had found the vault of the opening formed for the roof of the corridor, and only 80 cm below that he had also discovered a level that he defined as the Roman ground level. This presumption, however, is wrong, because by comparing the two illustrations we can clearly see that it was not possible for him to find the original Roman level here as there was a modern cellar right in front of the crypt. According to Gosztonyi's drawing the floor level of the cellar was even lower than that of the crypt, and the shoulder of its east-west oriented barrel vault was at the same hight as the top of the entrance to the crypt or even higher. As a result, during the construction of the barrel-vaulted ceiling all the lower layers must have been destroyed. Nevertheless, the southern wall of the chapel remained, thus the vaulted ceiling was formed by underground work and its upper part did not have to be opened from above. Consequently, the foundation wall of the chapel managed to survive, but the level drawn by Fülep – and regarded as the Roman ground level – was in all probability at the height of the shoulder of the vault or of an opening cut in it.

According to Fülep, there was a vaulted doorway in the foundation of the wall of the chapel.[11] His description, however, is not clear enough so it has to

[8] The two short wallstumps could be seen until 1997 but during the restoration work then they were inexplicably pulled down.
[9] *Gosztonyi* 1942, 169 sqq.; *Gosztonyi* [1943], 22 sqq.
[10] *Fülep–Fetter* 1971, 91-103; *Fülep* 1984, 41.
[11] *Fülep* 1984, 44: „… a vaulted door was found in the southern wall of the chapel (fig. 11b). … The threshold lies 5.00-5.20 m below the present surface. The width of the entrance is 70 cm, and its reconstructed heigth is 90-92 cm. The supporting stones of the vault were found on both sides."

be supplemented in some respects. As noted above, hardly could he have found a Roman level or threshold here. Although Gy. Gosztonyi marked an opening in the wall of the cellar on the level of the door mentioned, Fülep was right to identify the 70 cm wide entrance as that of the passage to the crypt. Furthermore, his description clearly states that this passageway was cut in the ground and there were only supporting stones right under the arch. It also turns out that we cannot reckon with the existence of a vaulted corridor because he would have found it at least between the walls of the chapel and those of the crypt. In this part the passage was covered by the unknown material of the floor of the chapel, which was also of unknown structure. Fülep could not find the continuation of the arch of the door in the southern wall of the chapel either, thus we can imply that there was no such continuation. In his opinion the way down was closed by a stone slab[12], thus the crypt could be entered via a manhole cut in the surface, then through a high threshold. The question of the way down will be dealt with later as well.

As we were unable to make thorough observations on the burial chambers excavated in the past, the problem of how the two doors one above the other were used and accessed was questionable until recently. The question has been answered partially with the help of a similar burial building excavated at Kővágószőlős, although it shows a slightly different structure (Fig. 4).[13] Below the hall of the chapel with two adjoining apses was a painted narthex, the entrance of which served as the entrance of the crypt at the same time. In front of the narthex ran an unpainted, 1.7 m long corridor with its sides walled, which had three steps made of stone at its southern end. Even though no evidence of a doorway was found, Hajnóczi supplemented the 40 cm wide walls and reconstructed a covered corridor rising in tiers with a regular entrance.[14] This reconstruction, however, is only an assumption because it is not supported by any

[12] According to his assumption the 106 x 57 cm large stele found nearby may have been used for this purpose but its two figures were damaged before the stone was used again (*Fülep–Fetter* 1971, 100). However, on the basis of its size it could not have been large enough to cover the gap. In addition to the observation made by O. Szőnyi in the cella trichora he also assumed the existence of a *mensa* in burial chamber II. (ibid. 103). In burial chamber XIII. the foundation of the altar was also found (*Fülep* 1984, 100; fig 51). A *mensa* found in situ came to light in the wooden burial chamber IA dating from the turn of the 4th-5th century beneath the cathedral of Xanten. (*Otten* 2003, 46 sqq; Abb 15). All things considered, the stone slab broken into two which was found near burial chamber II was rather part of a *mensa*-construction.

[13] I. Ecsedy, G. Kárpáti and A. Sz. Burger's excavation, which was treated by Burger 1986, 165 sqq. The reconstruction is Gy. Hajnóczi's work: The conceptual and actual reconstruction of the villa and the burial vault at Kővágószőlős. *Hajnóczi* 1986*,* 229-236.

[14] The reconstruction was finished in 1987.

traces at all. On the contrary, an entrance merging into the ground without a door is much more likely to have been there.

Between 2000 and 2004 new excavations took place in Pécs, when burial chambers I and IV were restored again.[15] Then in 2005 and 2006 a European grant supporting the presentation of these historic monuments made it possible to carry out thorough excavations again in the Early Christian cemetery of Pécs.[16] These excavations, during which further similar burial chambers were unearthed (XIX, XX, XXIV), proved to be of paramount importance in clarifying the structure of such funerary edifices. In all these cases the hallway of the crypt contained a manhole cut in the ground and the chamber could be accessed and entered through this sloping passage sometimes supplied with steps in the ground. Since no pillars or walls supporting a roof could be observed in any of the cases, it is obvious that there were no structures covering these ways down. On the other hand, they could not be left uncovered because of the danger of inundation, therefore we can only presume that the manholes were either covered by wood or stone slabs or they were partially or entirely filled up with earth and were only opened at funerals.

In order to consider these things we need to know, at least approximately, the Roman ground level. Although there has already been research carried out in this field,[17] it covered a relatively small area, thus the excavations did not make it possible to give an accurate account of the surface because the medieval and modern buildings have significantly changed the former surface. The construction of the cathedral, the castle and its various buildings, then the construction restarted in the 18th century created several artificial terraces, most of which are not exactly known either. The excavations in 2005 and 2006 brought a change in this respect as well. The comprehensive excavations covering the largest area of the cemetery examined so far enabled us to distinguish and assess the different ages when the surface was changed. During the research more than 70 Roman graves and further burial chambers came to light. After the assessment and comparison of their terraces we managed to define, at least approximately, the Roman ground level in the whole area.

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[15] Zs. Katona-Győr, G. Kárpáti and O. Gábor's excavation, consulted by Zs. Visy. *Kárpáti–Gábor* 2004, 287-290.

[16] The excavation made by Janus Pannonius Museum was led by Zs. Visy assisted by Zs. Tóth, Cs. Pozsárkó and G. Orbán (at the beginning O. Gábor and B. Bodó were also present). *Visy* 2006, 3-13.

[17] Except for F. Fülep's excavation at burial chamber II, where he observed a 50 cm decrease in ground level in the length of the chapel. South of it the surface is 40° steep to south (*Fülep–Fetter 1971, 97, A*bb. *8).* A. Burger's excavation at Kővágószőlős is another exception.

It was already observed that not only the burial chambers were underground buildings but partially the chapels as well with their northern side lower in the ground. These observations provided the basis for the previous reconstructions, which presumed a terraced structure of the funerary buildings with separate entrances to the chapel and the crypt on two different terraces. These reconstructions, however, did not take into consideration the fact that the hillside in Pécs was not so steep as to provide two terraces one above the other within a few metres.

The one-room burial buildings were also partially sunk below the surface. Gosztonyi knew that the *cella septichora* was sunk 3.5 m below the surface on the northern side[18] and that the building could only be accessed via a sloping flight of steps.[19]

Relying on the assessment of the excavations and the reconstructed Roman surface the following can be stated: the method used was the same with all the recently excavated burial buildings and there is little difference between the individual cases. The floor level of the chapel (*cella memoriae* or *oratorium*) built on top of the underground crypt was 1-2 steps higher than the surface level in front of the entrance. It is not yet known if the rear wall of the chapel was entirely freed from the layers of ground that were somewhat higher there, but it is most likely. Therefore the smaller chapels stood on a roughly horizontal terrace. On the south a narrow ditch-like passage was dug for the way down to the crypt, the entrance of which could be accessed via this passage sloping north.

The way down could be first examined in front of burial chamber XIX.[20] The crypt and the passage leading to burial chamber XX were excavated in 2005; the two structures were almost the same (Fig. 5). Right in front of the entrance to the crypt another wall was built with a similar arched doorway in it. Nevertheless, the axis of the two entrances is not in the same plane. In front of the outer wall an oblong hole was dug, the two vertical sidewalls of which were parallel. Its floor was gradually rising to the south and its rounded-off southern end led to the surface sloping in tiers. The two sidewalls were strengthened by two piles of stone near the entrance, but no evidence of an openable door was found. The doorway was barred by regular stones placed on top of the other

[18] Unfortunately his remark, which was right and also published, was not taken into consideration when making the model preserved in Janus Pannonius Museum. Thus its ignorance has been an obstacle in getting to know the real situation.

[19] *Gosztonyi* [1943] fig. 1. – As he could not dig up the entrance because of statical danger and thus he did not know the place exactly, he assumed a flight of stairs inside. After recent research we already know that the flight of steps was outside the building.

[20] The excavations were done by O. Gábor, who will prepare the publication of the chamber.

without any cementing, which prevented earth from getting into the crypt. The burial chamber was broken in and devastated as early as the Roman age, during which a 60 cm high part at the top of the stone wall was removed. As regards the filling of its way down, it can be stated that it was simple earth placed there after the last burial[21] and it was disarranged by the despoilers of tombs. Above this earth were lying the remains of the walls and frescoes of the chapel in a thick layer.

The evidence can be assessed in one way only. After the last burial the entrance was walled up with a stone wall lacking cementing, then the narrow passage sloping towards the entrance was filled up. Thus the entrance to the chapel could be approached without any difficulty because it could only be accessed if there was no gap in front. We can assume that the same procedure was followed in the case of the two previous burials as well. If that is the case, the way down to the crypt was only open at burials, normally it was filled up and allowed free entry into the chapel. It cannot be found out whether the surface of the filling was covered by wood or huge stone slabs or not. It was only the chapel where the commemorations of the dead took place; the crypt was not and could not be entered for this purpose. The crypt was an area preserved for the dead, together with all the grave-goods and sometimes also frescoes surrounding them. The tomb on the right of the crypt is a good example of that because in a similar way to other tombs in Sopianae the inside top of this constructed tomb was coated with a layer of mortar which was painted, and on the part above the head, also inside the tomb, a painted Christogram could be found.

Burial chamber XXIV showed a definitely similar picture, as during its partial excavation a similar chamber was found with an entrance and a hallway in front of that, together with a passage down ditch with two wall stumps adjoining the hall.[22]

The graves and tombs could be closed and made inaccessible in a variety of ways. Simple graves were laid in the ground and the dead could be commemorated outside, above the grave. A good example of the burial edifices built above tombs or graves is chapel XIII, beneath which there was no crypt, only tombs and graves in the ground.[23] Naturally, the community buildings had a

[21] There were three tombs in the crypt.
[22] *Visy* 2006, 3-13, general plan.
[23] *Fülep* 1984, 99 sqq. For an assessment of the chamber different from Fülep's cf. *Schmidt* 2000, 299, according to whom – and I also agree – the semicircular bench and the *mensa* in the middle were the scene and furnishing of the traditional funeral cult. A similar *mensa* came to light in the *cella* memoriae of the Late Roman and presumably Early Christian cathedral of Xanten, *ibid*. 259, as well as *Borger* 1958, 380-390; *Otten* 2003.

door that could be locked. The crypts could be closed in several ways. If the way down started from the chapel, either the door of the chapel was closed or the trapdoor above the flight of stairs was covered by a stone slab or something else. However, our only verifiable example is that of the *mausoleum* at Sopianae.[24] The large size of the chapel provided the opportunity to build stairs inside the building, which fortunately remained. Nevertheless, most buildings were too small to form an inner way down with an entrance and a flight of stairs in them. Anyway, there are no traces of such manholes left. In such cases, by making use of the possibilities provided by the hillside, the structures described above were constructed.

In the case of such burial chambers, no door was built in the entrance of the crypt nor in the arched entrance built in front, at the northern end of the passage. Furthermore, no evidence can prove that the passage was covered in any way. The solution could have been provided by a huge stone slab laid on the surface but we have no trace of that. What is more, the gap was so large in the cases known that we can ignore this solution. Another one could have been a stone building, but in the two cases known (chamber I and II) we only have traces of open porticoes. A covering made of wood cannot be considered either as no post-holes were found. We can totally exclude the existence of an arched stone-walled corridor because its remains would have surely been found.

The ways down must have been covered somehow. On the one hand entry to the chapel had to be provided, on the other hand it had to be ensured that when it rained or snow melted no water would flood the crypt and disturb the dead lying there. It is proved that there was no flooding, there is no evidence of that.[25] The conclusion drawn on the basis of how the way down to burial chamber XX looked after having been filled and later broken in, leads us to further conclusions. Firstly, we can state that the passage was filled up with earth not only after the last burial but the previous burials as well. Secondly, this method was definitely used in the case of many other chambers.

Besides the feeling of duty towards the dead and the above mentioned practical reasons, the crypts had to be closed for safety reasons, too. Despoiling burial buildings was quite general, which was even worse concerning the tombs. Instead of doors it was more practical to fill up the passage with thick layers of earth even if sometimes it did not provide enough protection either.

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[24] *Fülep* 1987, 31-44, *idem* in: *Fülep – Bachmann* 1988, 15 sqq. His other best known example where the way down starts from the chapel, is from Marusinac cemetery in the north-west of Salona: *Dyggve – Egger* 1939; *Egger* 1962, 181-188.

[25] The fact that the steps of the *cella septichora* are slashed by gullies through which water flooded the inside of the building is a further evidence for the interruption of the construction.

Relying on these pieces of information, we must also consider the question of the entrance to the previously excavated and described burial buildings (Fig. 6). As regards burial chamber I Koller made an accurate description of how the entrance to the crypt was covered by broad stones while Benkő focused on the stone walls on the sides of the way leading down. Knowing the reconstructed Roman surface, we must assume that the crypt could only be entered through a steep vertical manhole, and the fact that the entrance was walled up suggests that the way down was filled up with earth. The analysis of burial chamber II led to a similar result. There an open corridor sloping towards the entrance of the crypt could be reconstructed, which was running under the foundation wall of the chapel. It was highly advisable to fill it up because in the absence of a covered and vaulted corridor the foundation wall of the chapel would have been endangered. The foundation of both buildings starts about 1 m above the floor level of the crypt, whereas in the case of the other crypts it starts at the height of the shoulder of the vault or even higher. This fact might also have caused misinterpretations when reconstruction suggestions were made, whereas the solution suggested by us is not particularly influenced or excluded by the different foundation levels or the colonnaded portico with 4 pillars built in front of the chapel of burial chamber I. Therefore it is obvious that the structure of these similar buildings including the one at Kővágószőlős should be reconstructed in the way we have presented and proved. Moreover, although not considered by us, the passages leading to burial chambers III, IV and all the others belonging to this type may have been built in a similar fashion.

The Early Christian finds at Pécs are in close connection with the Late Roman and Early Christian ones found in the Balkans and the provinces of the Danube region.[26] The burial chambers found and excavated in Pannonia and the neighbouring southern provinces are extremely varied but only in a few cases are the ways leading to their entrances known. Various methods were used in the crypts excavated in the Early Christian Monastirine cemetery in Salona.[27] The hall of burial chamber 1 and 2 were not possible to be excavated except for their doorways. The entrance to burial chamber 3 was covered by a stone slab. In the bottom of the passage leading to burial chamber 4 a sliding door was found, which could be pushed along stone rails. According to Rendič Miočevič the way down was closed by a large stone slab. All the crypts had high thresholds. Likewise, the flight of stairs in the passage leading to the crypt in Niš ended in a high berm like structure.[28] Thus the passageways to the crypts are

[26] *Bender*; H. *Ubl*; E. *Tóth* 1994.
[27] *Rendič-Miočevič* 1954-1956, 53-70; Abb. 2; Taf. I.4.
[28] *Mirković* 1954-1956, 87, fig 2.

similar to those in Sopianae but they were built and presumably not filled up with earth. Therefore the ones in Sopianae form an individual type having been simply cut in the ground and sometimes strengthened on both sides by low stone walls lacking any adhesive.

To sum up, the ways down to the burial chambers of the edifices excavated in Sopianae were different from their analogies to be found in southern regions. They were crypts closed not by a simple door or a stone slab but usually by earth (occasionally supplemented by wood or stone slabs) and were opened on burial occasions only. As our examples show, the opening of the crypt was in all cases closed by a stone wall built without any cementing. As regards purpose, this solution does not differ significantly from the one used in Salona or in the case of other burial chambers. It coincides with the Roman and ancient burial customs, according to which the grave and its chamber belong to the realm of the dead. By laying the dead under the ground, the living fulfilled their duties towards the dead as well as the basic health requirements. The relationship between them, however, did not come to an end. Those who gathered together for burial feasts sent down mainly libation to their dead and this custom did not disappear after the adoption of Christianity either. Through a hole or the *fenestella* sometimes, the dead were given some of the offering presented either outside or on the *mensa* built or set up in the chapel (*cella memoriae*, *oratorium*).[29] Accordingly, the crypt belongs to the realm of the dead, hence the images of the frescoes are all connected to their salvation. The Biblical scenes presenting Christ himself or his monogram were all carefully chosen to represent salvation, Paradise, eternal happiness and glory.[30]

[29] Marusinac: *Egger* 1962, 185. Pécs, I. sírkamra: *Fülep* 1984, 41. with further literature.
[30] Cf. *Nagy* 1938, 31-148. *Nagy* 1939; *Fülep* 1984, passim. Recently *Pozsárkó* 2004, 2-10. and *Hudák–Nagy* 2005.

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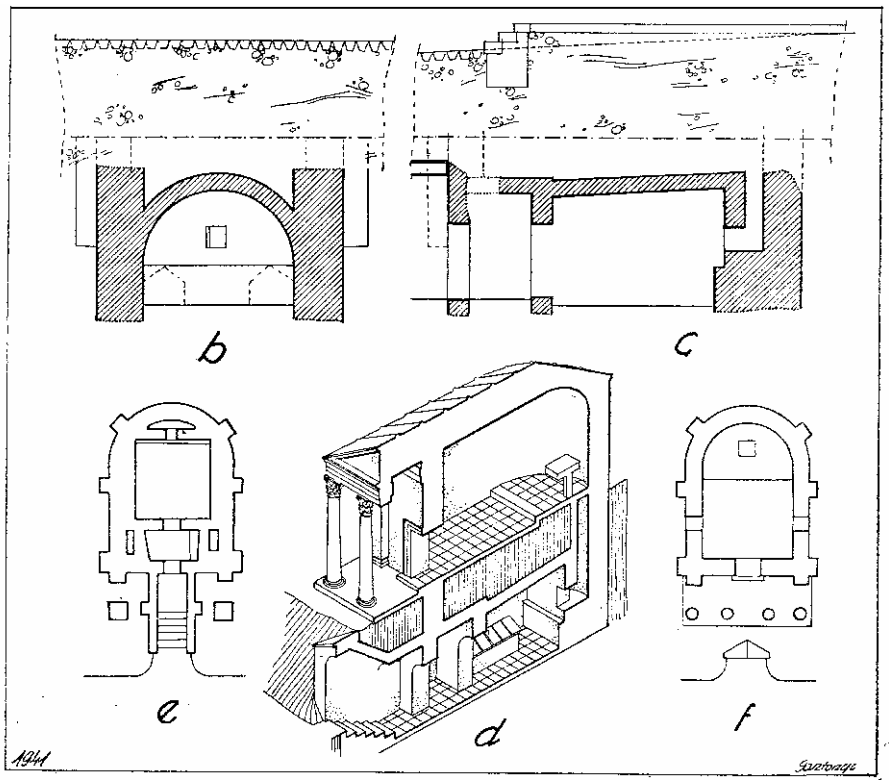

Figure 1. The structure of burial chamber I
according to Gy. Gosztonyi (1943, Fig. 6).

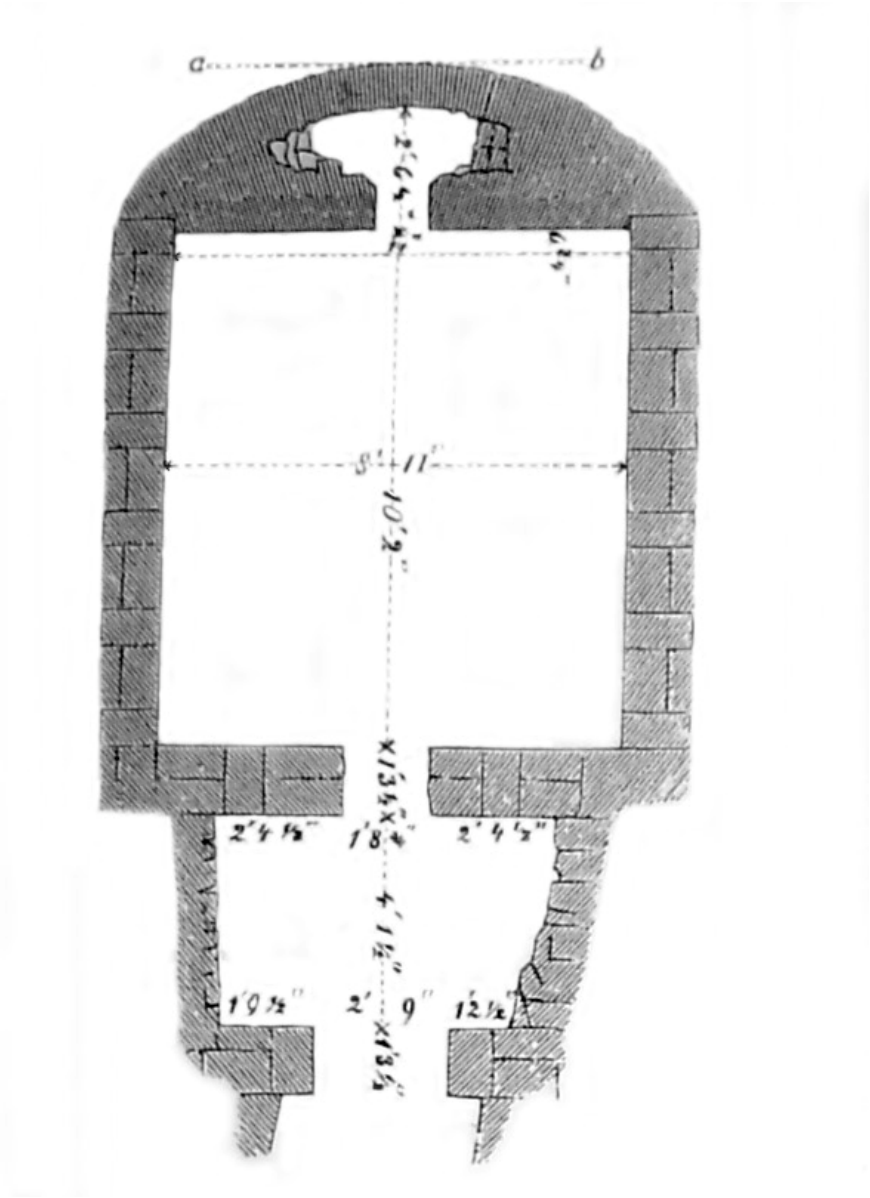

Figure 2. The ground plan of burial chamber I
made by H. Benkő in I. Henszlmann *op. cit.* Fig 4.

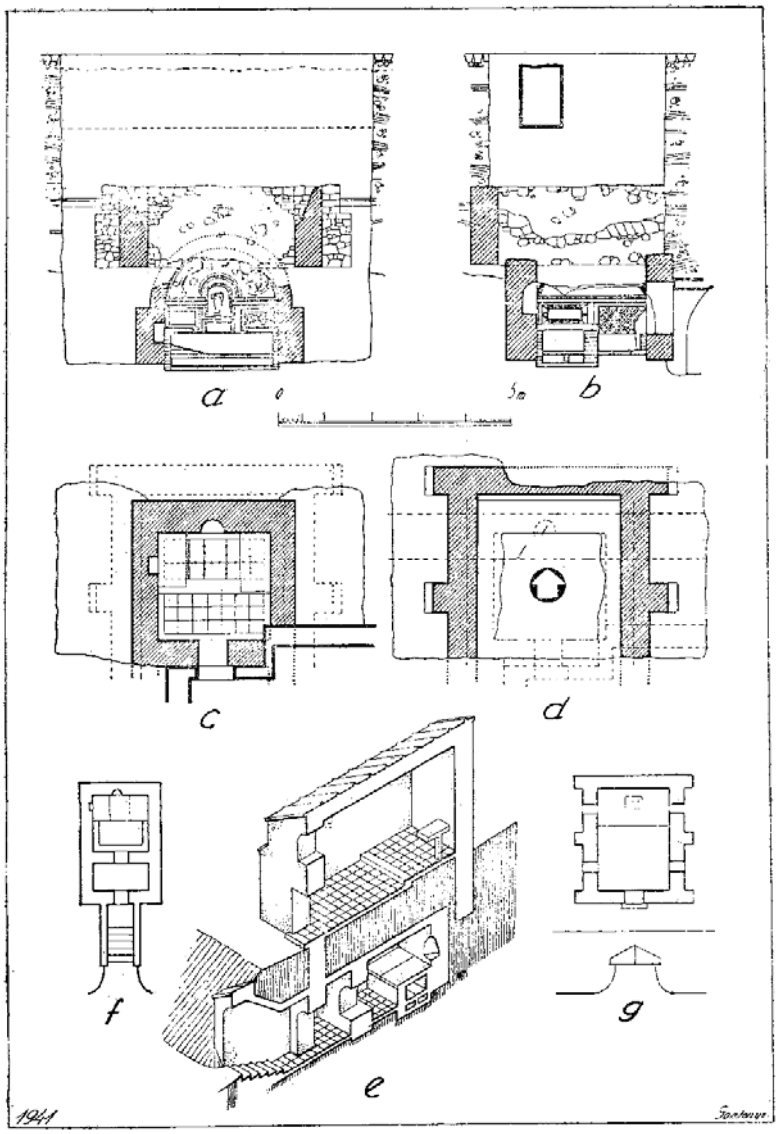

Figure 3a. The structure of burial chamber II
according to Gy. Gosztonyi (*op. cit.* Fig. 9.)

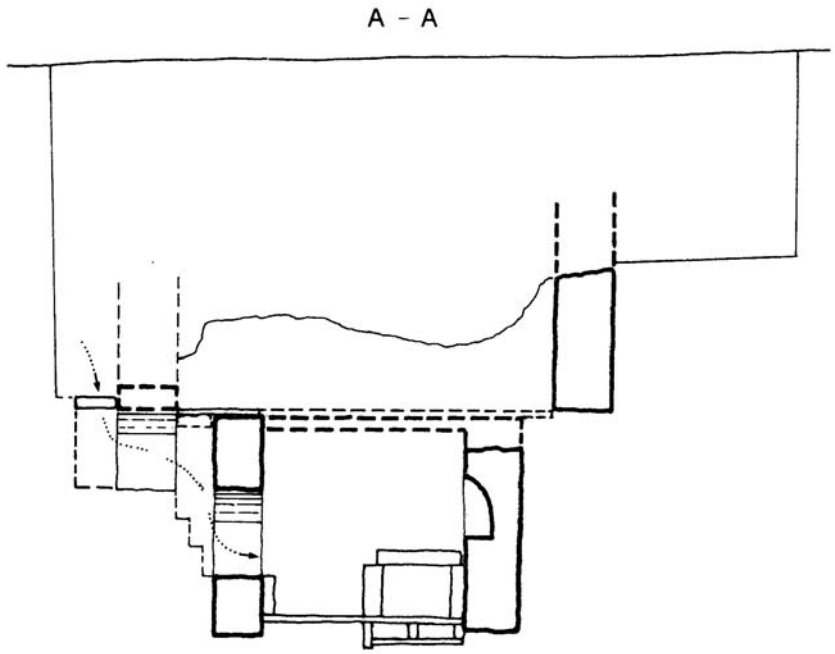

Figure 3b. The structure of burial chamber II
according F. Fülep (*op. cit.* Fig. 11b).

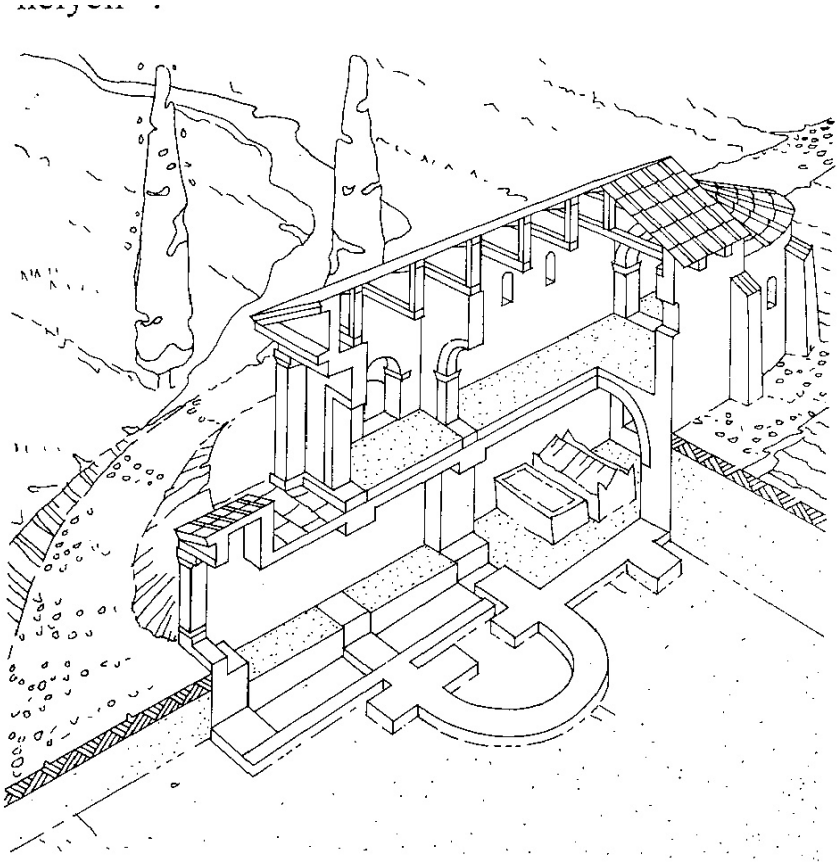

Figure 4. Gy. Hajnóczi's reconstruction drawing
of the funerary edifice at Kővágószőlős (1986, Fig. 5).

Figure 5. The way down to burial chamber XX
and the entrance to the crypt (Zs. Visy).

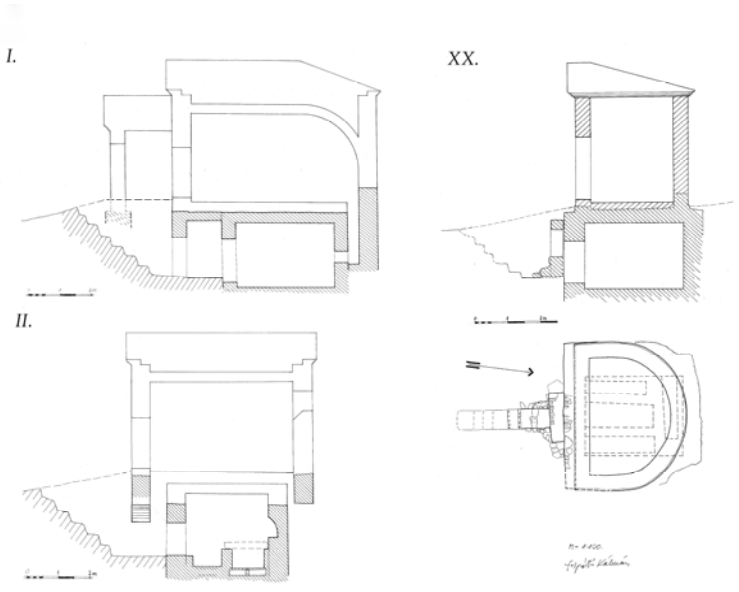

Figure 6. The structure of burial chambers I, II and XX
according to Zs. Visy (drawing by K. Szijártó).