



# Roman Heritage of Budapest The Travelling Emperor

Kodolányi János University(Hungary)

Touriboost Project 2018-10TR01-KA203-058344

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# The travelling emperor and the Roman heritage of Budapest



I was born in the Roman province of Hispanica Baetica in the year of 76 A.D. From my early age I have received a very extensive education, but I was mostly interested in Greek literature, philosophy, and art. This earned me my nickname Graesculus, which means the „Little Greek”.

Between 106-108 A.D. I was governor of Pannonia Inferior (i.e. Lower Pannonia, including the Western part of present day Hungary, as well as northern Croatia, north-western Serbia and northern Bosnia and Herzegovina) and I helped to develop this area into an important Limes province. Here and elsewhere my main goal was to make the borders of the Roman Empire as strong and resilient as possible. As I was constantly travelling across the Empire, they also called me the „Travelling Emperor” or, as Tertullian wrote, omnium curiositatum explorator, an explorer of everything interesting. My most memorable achievements include rebuilding the Pantheon in Rome, and the construction of a defensive frontier wall in the province of Britannica (today’s Northern England) that still bears my name. My country residence at Tivoli, near Rome, where I recreated the places and monuments that most fascinated me during my travels, is considered the epitome of the elegance of the Roman world.

I became Emperor in 117 A.D. and reigned for 21 years. My name is Imperator Caesar Traianus Hadrianus Augustus, commonly known Emperor Hadrian. Although I only spent a relatively short time of my life in Lower Pannonia, I have very fond memories, so after almost 2000 years I decided to return and have a good look at how the area has developed since my time.

Of course, I did expect major changes – a very long time has passed, after all –, but what I have seen has surprised me more than I could imagine! Where the Roman city of Aquincum and the fort of Contra Aquincum stood in my time, now there is a great metropolis called Budapest. It’s almost as beautiful as Rome... To tell you the truth, at first it did not seem too easy to find the remains of my era, but as I started walking around this new place, this Budapest (I still have to get used to this name...), I discovered Roman heritage all around the city! So now I invite you to come with me and visit some of the most important Roman sites of Budapest... and at the end of our tour I’ll give you a few more tips and suggestions, in case you decide to continue exploring this marvellous city on your own.

Civil Town Amphitheatre



Aquincum Museum



Roman Bath Museum




Inner City Parish Church

15 March Square



# 1 Budapest: the history of a modern city



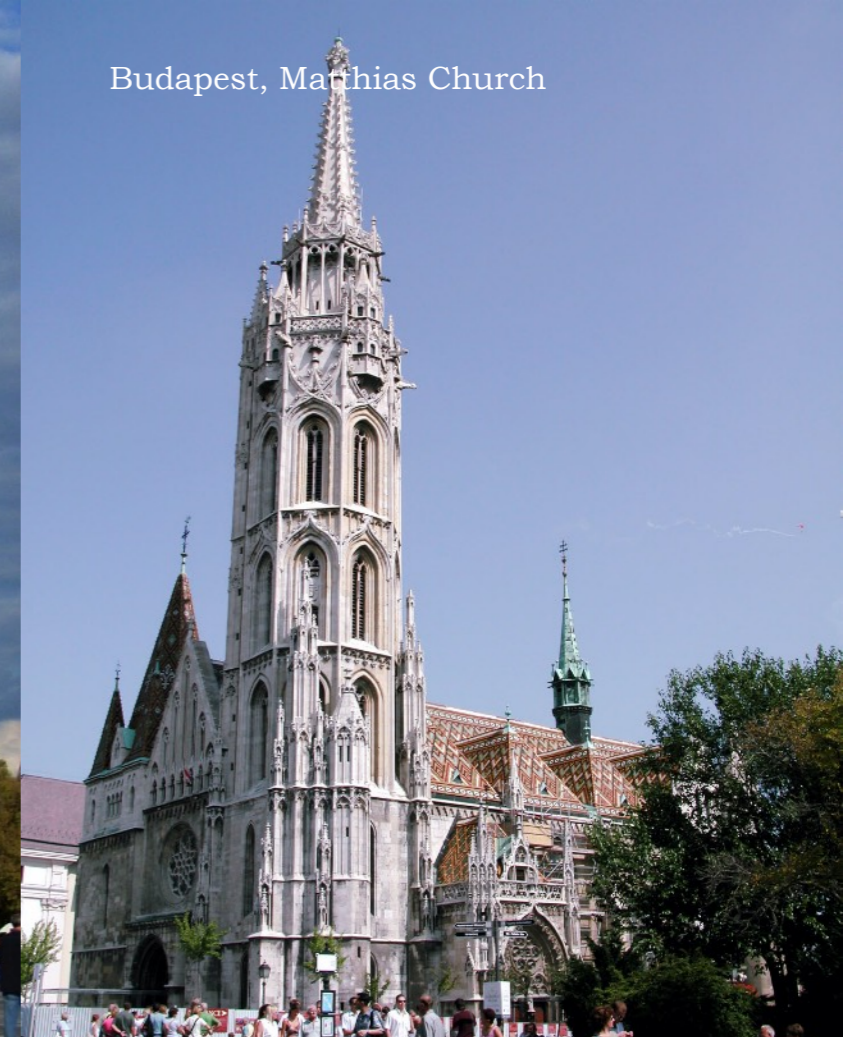
As I learnt from the friendly locals, who all seemed to be intrigued to talk to a real Roman emperor, and willing to share their knowledge about their city, the story of modern Budapest as a major urban centre started with the arrival of us, Romans, in the second half of the first century AD. The first Roman town, Aquincum, was founded around the year 89 AD, when I was already a teenager, on the right side of the Danube River. The area was occupied by the conquering Hungarian tribes in 896, but during its long history it was invaded by the Mongols, the Ottomans, the Habsburgs, the Soviets... Just hearing about all these events reminded me of the importance of planning defensive structures. Maybe I should have built a wall here too... but my time as governor of Pannonia Inferior was too short, and the Danubian Limes based on the River Danube and fortified by strongholds such as Contra Aquincum seemed a sufficiently strong defensive line in itself. And if I look at the city now, I can see a silver lining: all these different groups left their architectural, cultural and intellectual traditions here, creating an amazing place to visit. Today Budapest is the ninth largest city in the European Union and in 2019 it was voted Best European Destination.

Oh, and if you are as interested in the name of the city as I was, you may learn that it is only called Budapest since 1972, when the three separate settlements of Buda, Pest and Óbuda (literally Old Buda, where Aquincum is located) were united!

Budapest, Heroes Square



Budapest, Matthias Church



Elizabeth Bridge with the Inner City Parish Church



View from Gellért Hill



Budapest Liberty Bridge



Budapest, Castle District



Budapest, Gül Baba Street



Óbuda, Ladies with Umbrellas (by sculptor Imre Varga)

# 2 Aquincum Museum



During the first decade of the second century I, Hadrian was living in Lower Pannonia for a while. At that time I was not yet emperor, but the governor of this province. Then Aquincum was the centre of Pannonia and because it was located at the border of the Empire, this town was more culturally complex than other Roman cities in the hinterland.

Aquincum was occupied not only by the Romans but also by other tribesmen around the area such as the Celts. They all came here for different reasons: to sell and buy animals, food, vegetable, crafts, and everyday items.

Aquincum with its 60.000 inhabitants was one of the culturally richest areas in Pannonia and in the wider region. It bore similarities with other province capitals: it was built at the crossroads of the north-south and east-west main roads. As I walked towards this crossroad, I saw a sanctuary where people could make sacrifices to our three gods: Juno, Minerva, and Jupiter. A little further the meat market was located.

I always enjoyed to see these busy streets where people and carts made the air noisy. As in other Roman cities, people also built public baths here. The central bath had three pools with different water temperatures and obviously a water pipe carried the water from the springs to the pools. Visiting the baths was always part of the civic life in the Empire and I also greatly enjoyed these places.

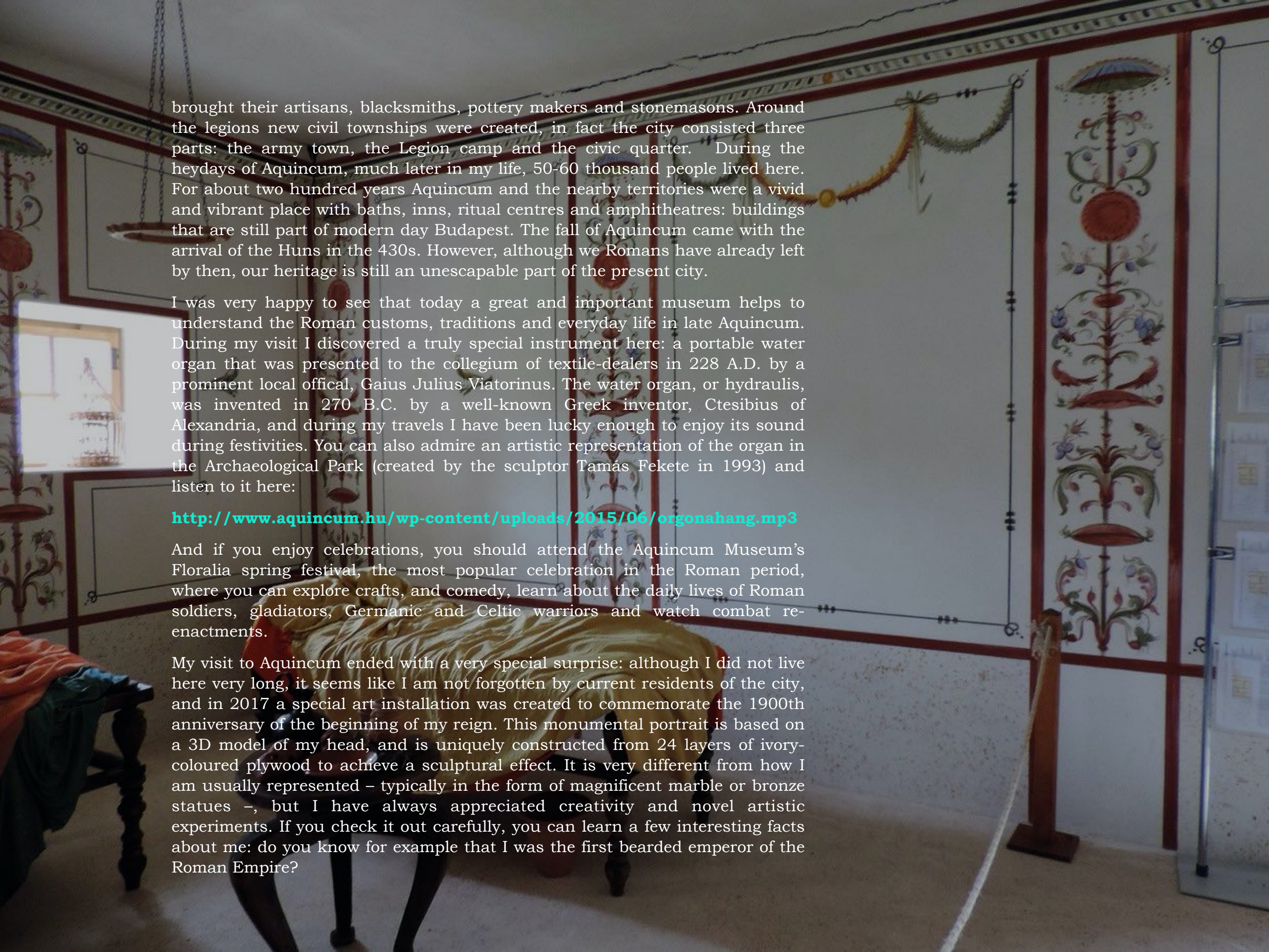
The Roman forts along the River Danube were very important from the defence point of view. During the 40's and 50's A.D. more and more Roman soldiers were sent here, and they also



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## Aquincum Museum





brought their artisans, blacksmiths, pottery makers and stonemasons. Around the legions new civil townships were created, in fact the city consisted three parts: the army town, the Legion camp and the civic quarter. During the heydays of Aquincum, much later in my life, 50-60 thousand people lived here. For about two hundred years Aquincum and the nearby territories were a vivid and vibrant place with baths, inns, ritual centres and amphitheatres: buildings that are still part of modern day Budapest. The fall of Aquincum came with the arrival of the Huns in the 430s. However, although we Romans have already left by then, our heritage is still an unescapable part of the present city.

I was very happy to see that today a great and important museum helps to understand the Roman customs, traditions and everyday life in late Aquincum. During my visit I discovered a truly special instrument here: a portable water organ that was presented to the collegium of textile-dealers in 228 A.D. by a prominent local official, Gaius Julius Viatorinus. The water organ, or hydraulis, was invented in 270 B.C. by a well-known Greek inventor, Ctesibius of Alexandria, and during my travels I have been lucky enough to enjoy its sound during festivities. You can also admire an artistic representation of the organ in the Archaeological Park (created by the sculptor Tamás Fekete in 1993) and listen to it here:

<http://www.aquincum.hu/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/orgonahang.mp3>

And if you enjoy celebrations, you should attend the Aquincum Museum's Floralia spring festival, the most popular celebration in the Roman period, where you can explore crafts, and comedy, learn about the daily lives of Roman soldiers, gladiators, Germanic and Celtic warriors and watch combat re-enactments.

My visit to Aquincum ended with a very special surprise: although I did not live here very long, it seems like I am not forgotten by current residents of the city, and in 2017 a special art installation was created to commemorate the 1900th anniversary of the beginning of my reign. This monumental portrait is based on a 3D model of my head, and is uniquely constructed from 24 layers of ivory-coloured plywood to achieve a sculptural effect. It is very different from how I am usually represented – typically in the form of magnificent marble or bronze statues –, but I have always appreciated creativity and novel artistic experiments. If you check it out carefully, you can learn a few interesting facts about me: do you know for example that I was the first bearded emperor of the Roman Empire?



Hadrian in the Vatican Museums



Aquincum Museum,  
Floralia Festival



Hadrian in the Antalya Archeological Museum



Hadrian in the Vatican Museums



Hadrian in the Vatican Museums

# 3 Civil Town Amphitheatre

A few minute walk from the Aquincum Museum we will find the Civil Town Amphitheatre which was built in the third century, between 250 and 300 AD. This is a smaller of the two amphitheatres in Aquincum, but still played an important role in the political and social life of the town. As the seat capacity was large enough (almost 7000 people), this Amphitheatre hosted sports events, gladiator and animal fights, as well as political gatherings and celebrations. In addition, when the emperors visited Aquincum, the speeches given in their honour were also held here.

After the Roman empire has collapsed and Aquincum was occupied by the Huns, the Amphitheatre was abandoned and laid in ruins for centuries. Fortunately archaeological excavations started here in 1880 and the built heritage was recovered. Can you imagine that even some of the ancient spectators' names are known today as they were carved in the stone seats? Valerius Julianus, Aelius Quintus and Gaia Valeria Nonia must have been great fans of gladiator games!

Not far from the almost circular walls stood the barrack of gladiators where their training and practice took place, as well as a sanctuary to the goddess Nemesis who was very popular among gladiators and soldiers. By the way, do you know that gladiator games were among the most-watched forms of popular entertainment in the Roman world? I also frequently attended these shows and even learnt to use gladiatorial weapons. These fights were literally a matter of life and death, so most gladiators were slaves or prisoners, but some free men (even upper class patricians or senators) were lured into the arena by the thrill of the battle and the glory and fortune that awaited the winners. The games were a great opportunity for us, emperors, to commemorate military victories, celebrate special occasions or simply distract the people from the current political and economic problems. Oh, I still remember the wonderful gladiatorial combats in Rome that I gave to celebrate my 43<sup>rd</sup> birthday – my first birthday as emperor –, they lasted for six days and were truly spectacular!

Today the Amphitheatre is open for visitors and is included in the Roman heritage tour of Óbuda, where most of the sites are located. Although the era of gladiators and animals fights is gone, special events are hosted here today as well. In May 2019 the tribute band Keep Floydng gave a successful full house concert in the Amphitheatre, recalling the legendary 1972 Pink Floyd gig in Pompeii, Italy. Since then the band performed several times in the site, so it is worth to check out their schedule for future events. I am totally new to “rock” music, but I think I like it almost as much as gladiator games!

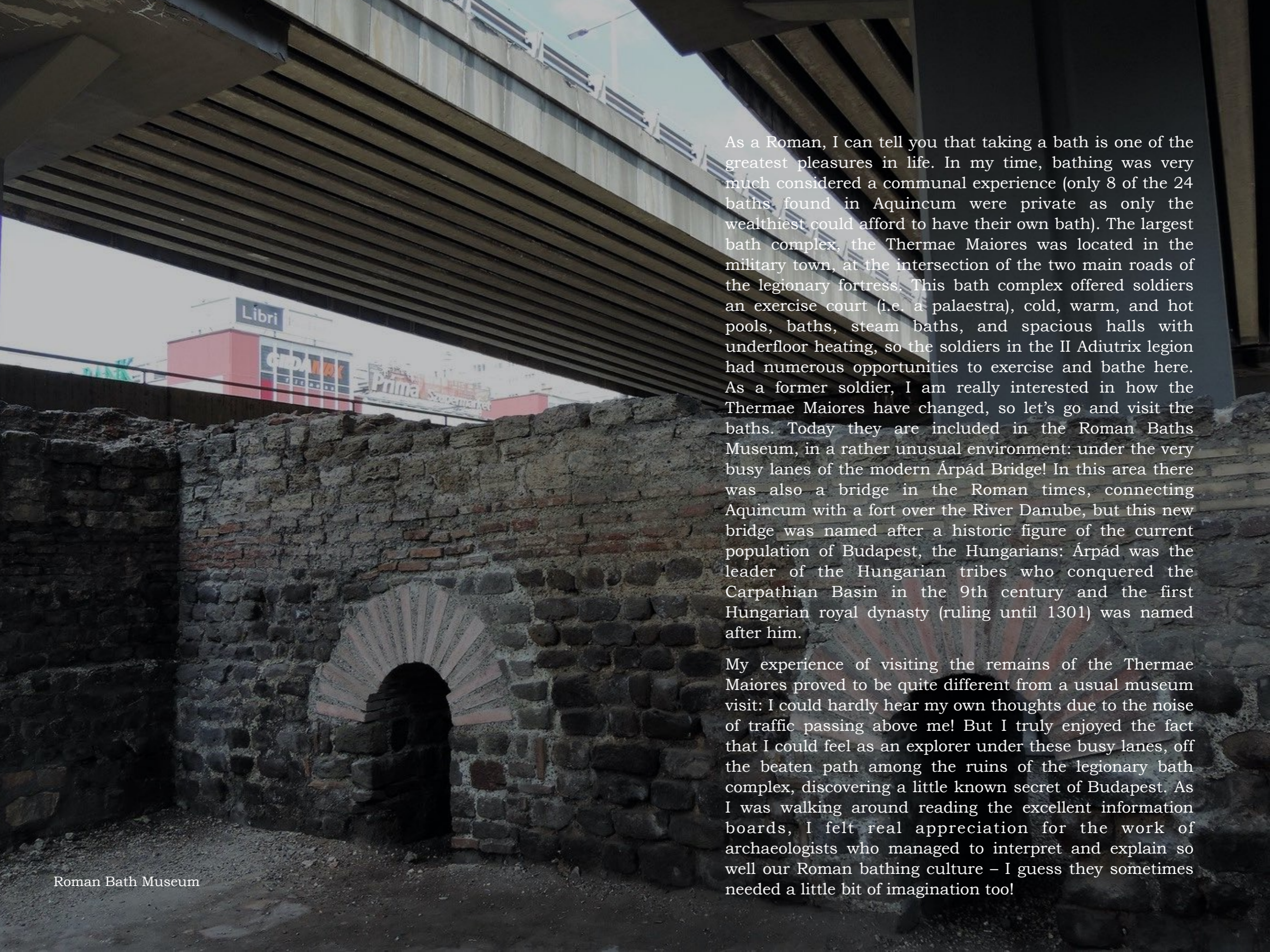


[Watch in full screen](#)

# Civil Town Amphitheatre



# 4 Roman Bath Museum



As a Roman, I can tell you that taking a bath is one of the greatest pleasures in life. In my time, bathing was very much considered a communal experience (only 8 of the 24 baths found in Aquincum were private as only the wealthiest could afford to have their own bath). The largest bath complex, the *Thermae Maiores* was located in the military town, at the intersection of the two main roads of the legionary fortress. This bath complex offered soldiers an exercise court (i.e. a *palaestra*), cold, warm, and hot pools, baths, steam baths, and spacious halls with underfloor heating, so the soldiers in the II *Adiutrix* legion had numerous opportunities to exercise and bathe here. As a former soldier, I am really interested in how the *Thermae Maiores* have changed, so let's go and visit the baths. Today they are included in the Roman Baths Museum, in a rather unusual environment: under the very busy lanes of the modern Árpád Bridge! In this area there was also a bridge in the Roman times, connecting Aquincum with a fort over the River Danube, but this new bridge was named after a historic figure of the current population of Budapest, the Hungarians: Árpád was the leader of the Hungarian tribes who conquered the Carpathian Basin in the 9th century and the first Hungarian royal dynasty (ruling until 1301) was named after him.

My experience of visiting the remains of the *Thermae Maiores* proved to be quite different from a usual museum visit: I could hardly hear my own thoughts due to the noise of traffic passing above me! But I truly enjoyed the fact that I could feel as an explorer under these busy lanes, off the beaten path among the ruins of the legionary bath complex, discovering a little known secret of Budapest. As I was walking around reading the excellent information boards, I felt real appreciation for the work of archaeologists who managed to interpret and explain so well our Roman bathing culture – I guess they sometimes needed a little bit of imagination too!



## Roman Bath Museum

Visiting the museum with students of  
Kodolányi János University in the  
framework of the TOURiBOOST project



Watch in  
full screen



KJU students



Roman Bath Museum under Árpád Bridge



## Roman Bath Museum

Do you know that in the Roman empire every city had bath complexes that were used for bathing, sports, reading, relaxing and socialising? They combined many functions that modern wellness centres offer today, and were probably even more popular, since they were accessible to all at a very low price. A typical bath had a series of rooms and halls and were often decorated with mosaic floors and statues. We would visit the different rooms in a specific order, starting at the apodyterium, or changing room, where we would undress and leave our clothing and other valuables (instead of modern lockers, servants or slaves would watch over our belongings). Then we would have our body oiled before doing some light exercise in the palaestra, a large open-air exercise court: ballgames, boxing or wrestling were particularly popular. Next up was the frigidarium, or cold room, then the tepidarium, or warm room, and finally to the caldarium, a steamy hot room, or the sudatorium, a sweating room. After all this, the oil would be scraped off our skin by a servant, using a special tool called a strigil (women probably used the same tool for removing hair from their bodies). Then we would visit the same rooms in the opposite order, finishing at the changing room.



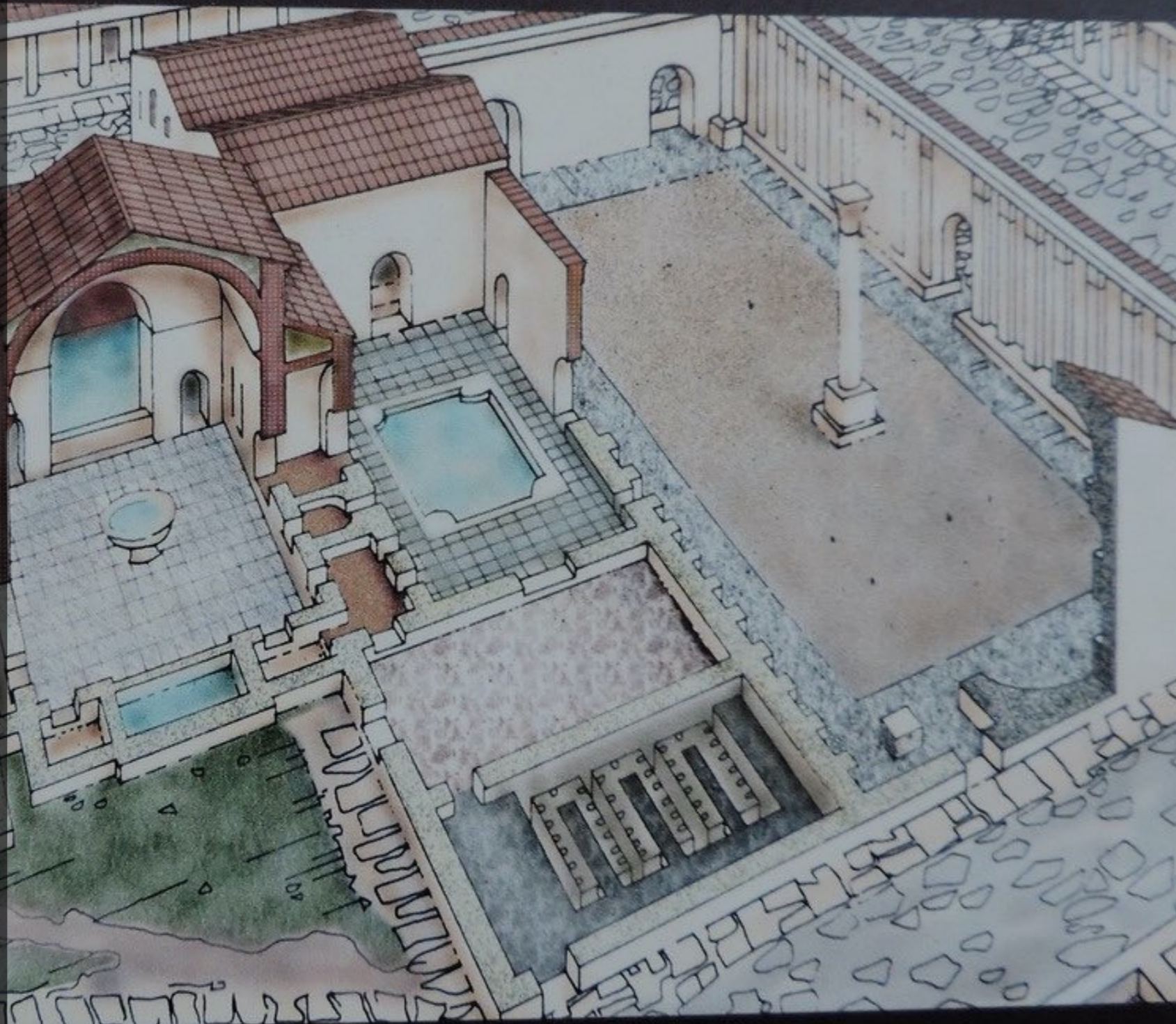
## Roman Bath Museum

In the present day Budapest is known as the spa capital of the world and the thermal baths are among the city's most important attractions offering a variety of spa experiences, from therapeutic treatments to lively pool parties. And although most of the baths that are open today were established in the Ottoman times (16th-17th centuries), the city's spa culture, as you could see, dates back to us Romans. I seriously recommend you to check out here Budapest's spas here:



<http://www.spasbudapest.com>

I wanted to try one, but then could not decide which one as they are all different in their atmosphere and architecture, so I have visited several. It was interesting to notice that in most Budapest baths women and men mixed freely, together with children, while during my reign I as emperor commanded men and women to bathe separately. Another difference is that here I had to wear a swimsuit while in a Roman bath nudity was the norm. But differences aside, when sitting in the hot water I closed my eyes, the lively noise around me, the relaxing effect of the heat and the familiar smell of the mineral-rich water made me feel like I was back to one of my favourite baths in Rome... a very pleasant experience.



5 15 March  
Square

After the nice and relaxing time in the bath, it was time to explore more of the city and take a look at what has become of the Roman fort of Contra Aquincum, originally built on the left bank of the Danube to protect a strategic river crossing. The first Roman military camp was built here in the 2nd century, then it was completely rebuilt in the 4th century into a 84x86 m large fortress protected with fan-shaped towers at the corners and two U-shaped interval towers on both sides. The walls of the fort were really thick, so the builders used up lots of earlier memorials, mainly gravestones and fragments of statues. If you think about it, it is really interesting how our approach to heritage conservation has changed over the centuries: nowadays we aim to safeguard built heritage in an authentic manner, in the original setting, while in the past it was rather common to periodically reconstruct or even to reuse (just look at the Colosseum in Rome, it was used as a quarry in the Middle Ages, its stones can be found even in St. Peter's Basilica).

On the way I could admire the view of the city centre from Elizabeth bridge. Do you know that Budapest, including the banks of the Danube, the Buda Castle Quarter and Andrassy Avenue, is a World Heritage site? "World Heritage" signifies cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding universal value to humanity. There is a list of sites designated as World Heritage (a bit like the seven wonders in Antiquity, but much-much longer) that you can check out if you are interested. I think it could be great fun to visit them all!



<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>

15 March Square, Representation  
of the Danube and the Roman  
forts of the limes on the square



15 March Square, Ruins  
of Contra Aquincum



Budapest is listed as one of the world's outstanding urban landscapes, and the centre for receiving and disseminating cultural influences. For example, Aquincum played an essential role in the diffusion of Roman architectural style in Pannonia and Dacia (another Roman province, now in Romania). Buda Castle played an important role in the diffusion of Gothic art. From the 19th century, Budapest was a centre which absorbed, integrated and disseminated outstanding and progressive European influences of urbanism and architecture, in addition to modern technological developments.

TEUTOBURGIUM  
DALIA - DALI

15 March Square (Március 15. tér in Hungarian) demonstrates very well the progress that has taken place in this area in the last two millennia. Where once Contra Aquincum stood in the Roman times, now there is a beautiful green square that seems to be very popular with locals and visitors alike. The remains of the fort were discovered during various construction works in the last centuries and today they are only partially visible: through a glass cover at the street level, and inside the Inner City Parish church. If you walk around slowly on 15 March Square, you can discover that the outlines of the Roman fort are marked with stone tiles on the pavement, and between the northern and southern sections of the former Roman wall a stylized line representing the Danube river can be seen, with the names and floor plans of the Roman military garrisons in Pannonia province.



[Watch in full screen](#)

15 March Square, View over the Danube and Buda Castle

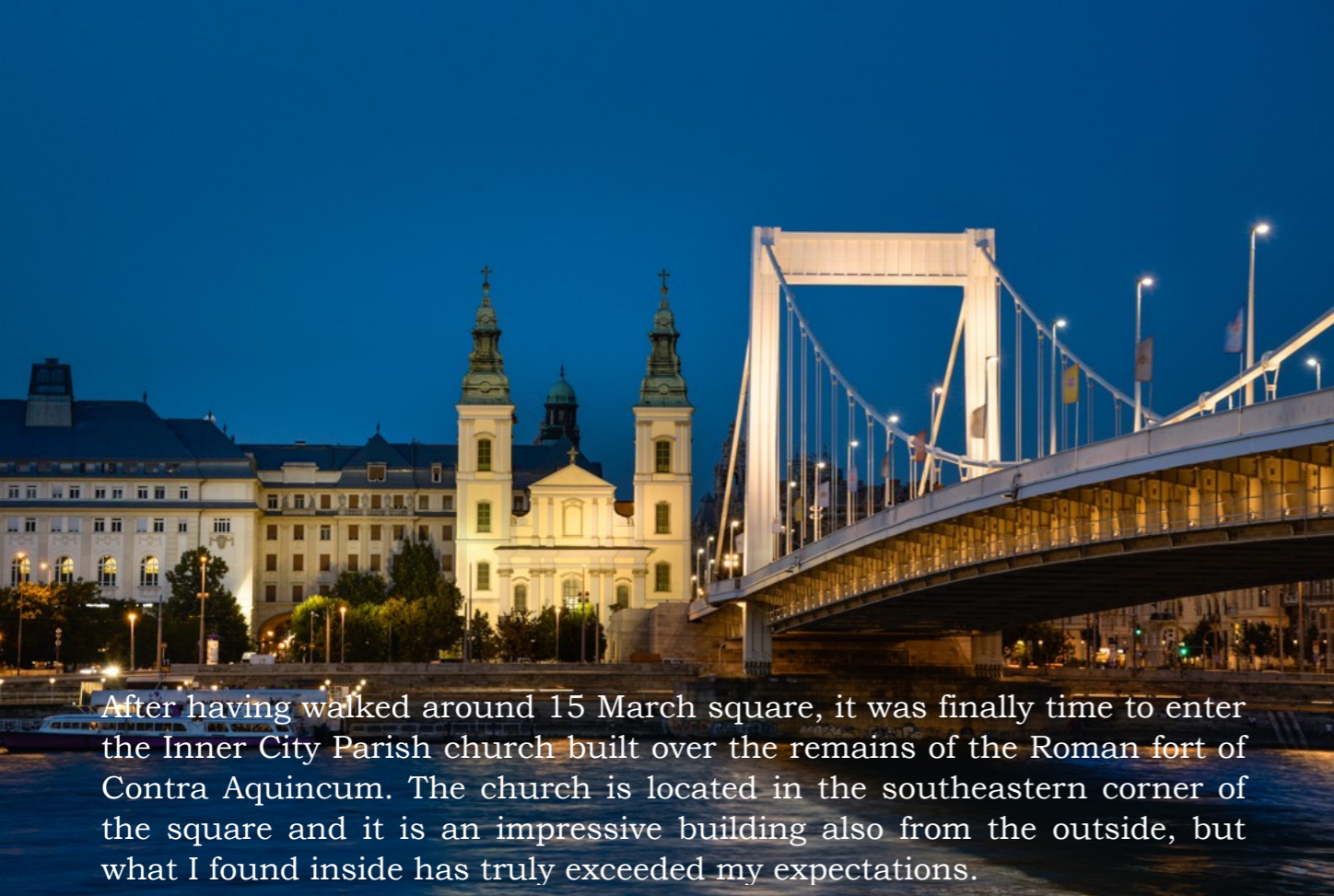


15 March Square, Statue of revolutionary poet Sándor Petőfi (1849)



I was really curious about the origin of the square's name as 15 March is memorable date for us Romans: the dictator Julius Caesar was assassinated by a group of senators on Idus Martiae, the Ides of March (15 March) of 44 B.C. But the figure of Caesar was not history connected with Aquincum or Pannonia province, so then I thought the name was simply a reference to the Roman new year festival held on this day, since this spacious green square seemed like a perfect place for picnics and celebrations. But no, both of my assumptions were incorrect: the square received its name in 1948 and the date commemorates the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 against the Habsburg empire, as the statue of poet Sándor Petőfi, one of the central figures of this revolution reminds us. The anniversary of the revolution's outbreak, 15 March is one of the three national holidays in Hungary.

# 6 Inner City Parish Church



After having walked around 15 March square, it was finally time to enter the Inner City Parish church built over the remains of the Roman fort of Contra Aquincum. The church is located in the southeastern corner of the square and it is an impressive building also from the outside, but what I found inside has truly exceeded my expectations.

Inner City Parish Church of the Assumption and Elizabeth Bridge



Inner City Parish Church of the Assumption

Inner City Parish Church of the Assumption



Watch in full screen





The Inner-city Parish Church of the Assumption has a history of nearly 2,000 years, so if you want to get to know Budapest (and Hungary) better, you should definitely visit it. The building was recently restored and today it offers spiritual as well as cultural experiences, both for visitors and locals.



TOURiBOOST project participants visiting the church



Inner City Parish Church of the Assumption

Remnants of the Roman camp's command building seen through a glass floor



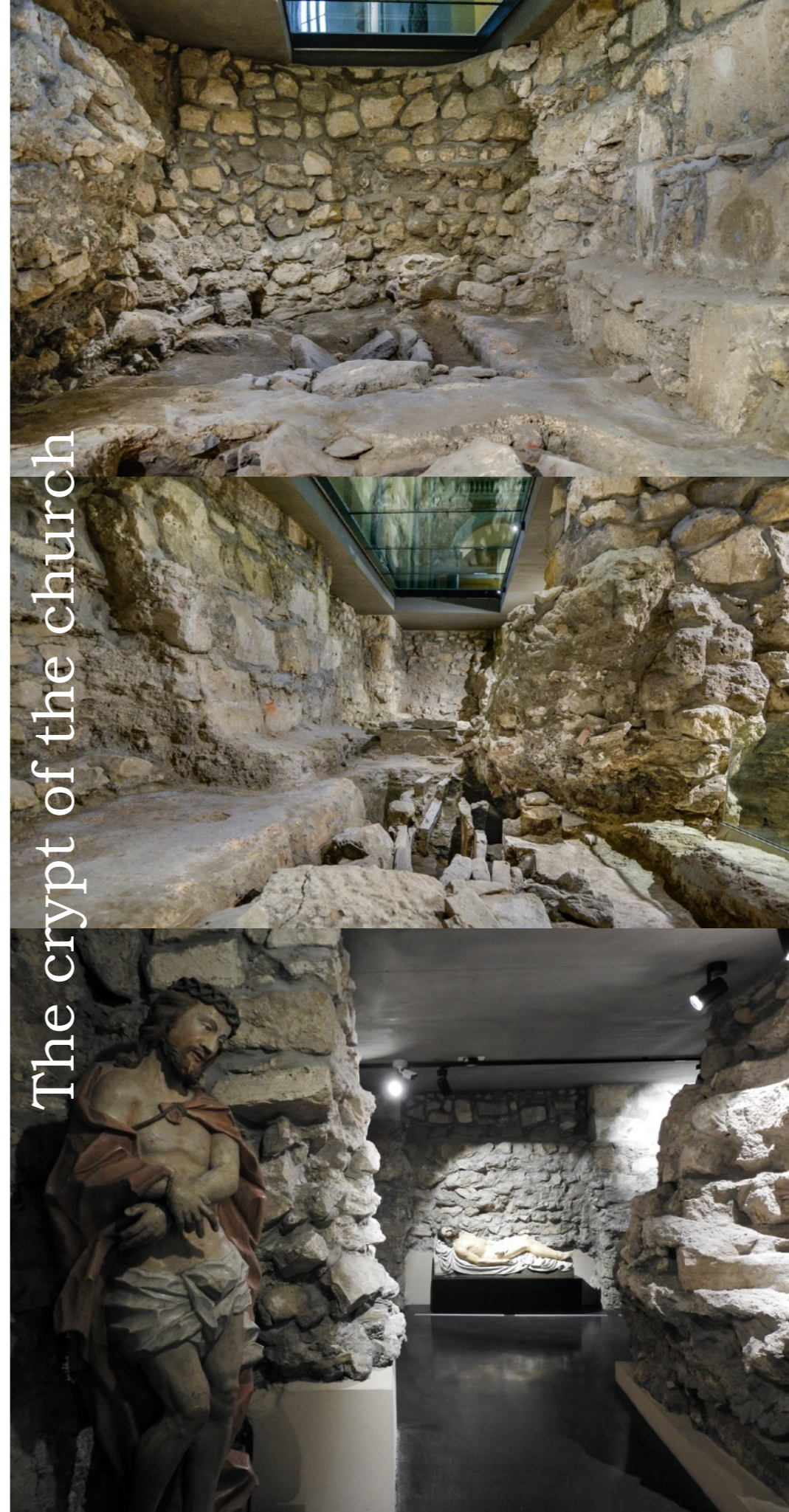
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As I was particularly interested in the Roman heritage of the church, I started my visit in the southern aisle where the remains of Contra Aquincum can be seen through a glass floor.

Walking above the ruins on the glass surface was quite a special experience in itself, but then I realised that the Baroque crypt of the church is open as well, so I went down to have a closer look at the Roman fort's ruins.

Today the crypt is a sanctuary, so I was walking around very quietly to not disturb those immersed in prayer. Besides the remnants of the Roman camp's command building, I could also admire small wooden Baroque sculptures of the 12 apostles and a beautiful Carrara marble statue of the Nuremberg Madonna in a niche in the stone wall.

The exterior part of the crypt, which is also used for cultural events, hosts an exhibition of archaeological findings and large photos show details of the restoration works.



The crypt of the church

Although I was aware of the existence of the Roman ruins in the crypt, visiting the Inner-city Parish Church felt a bit like opening a box of treasures: there are so many interesting details to discover!

For example, there is a mihrab, a prayer niche indicating the direction of Mecca, in the wall of the sanctuary. Mihrabs are essential elements of Islamic architecture, but seeing one in a Catholic church is quite surprising (coming from the ancient Roman empire, I had to stop here and search for more information on world religions, but I am sure that you are familiar with the basics of Christianity and Islam).

I learnt that after 1541, during the Ottoman rule, the sanctuary was used as a mosque for a while, and the mihrab is a witness of this historic period. On the wall you can also see the remnants of an Arabic text painted in black, the meaning of which has not been deciphered yet.



[Watch in full screen](#)





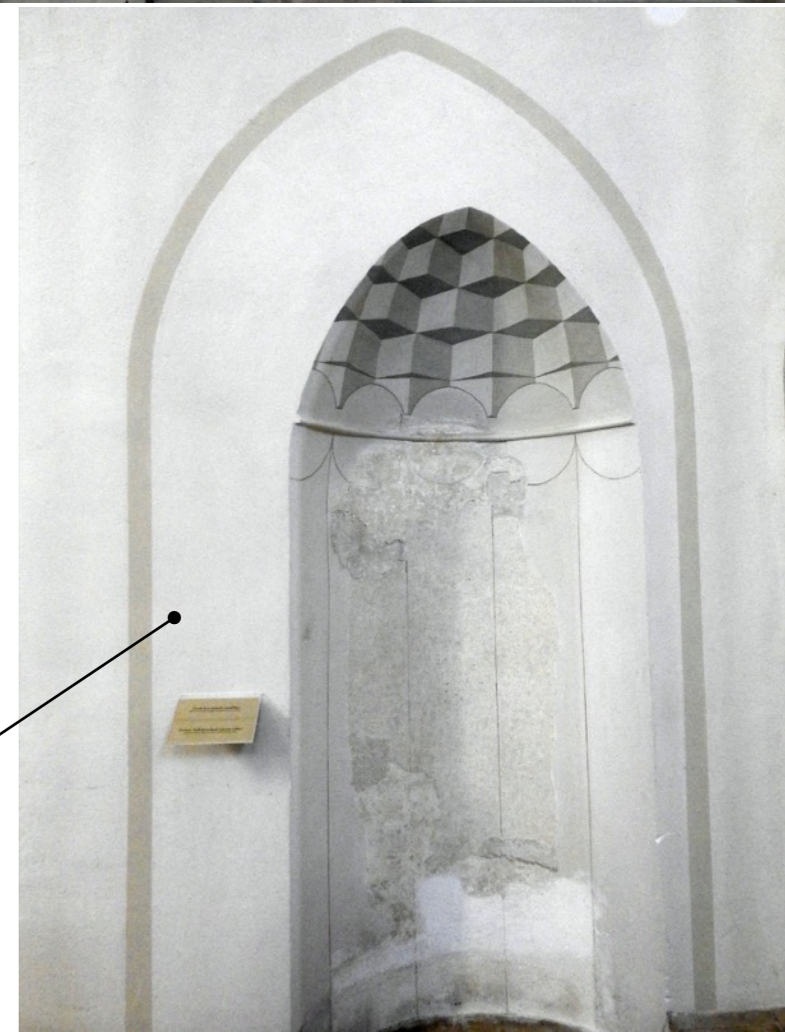
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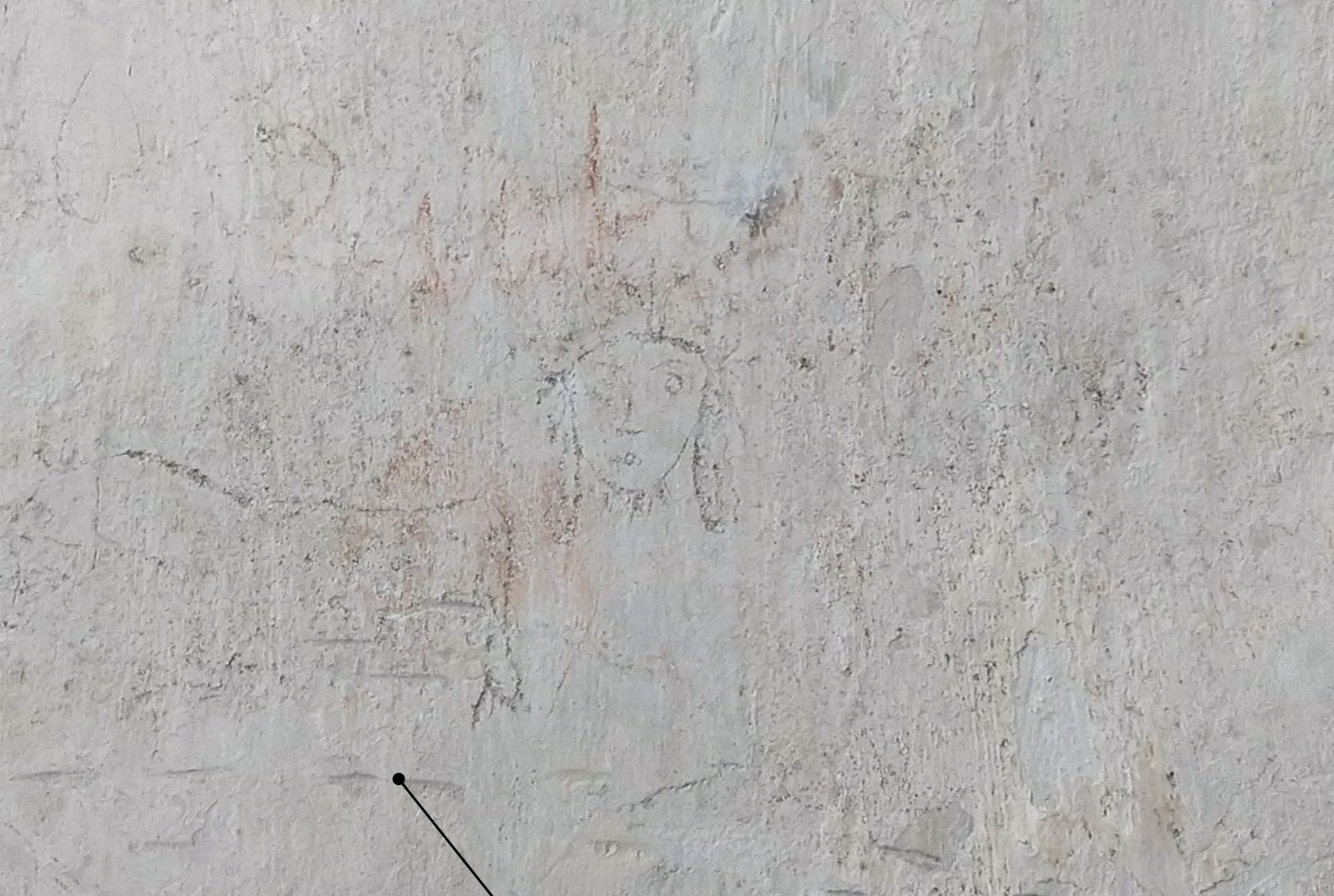
15th century  
fresco remains

The mihrab among medieval  
sedilia

Sedilia are stone seats found  
on the liturgical south side of  
an altar, used by clergy as  
seating during services

The mihrab





The Matthias Oratory

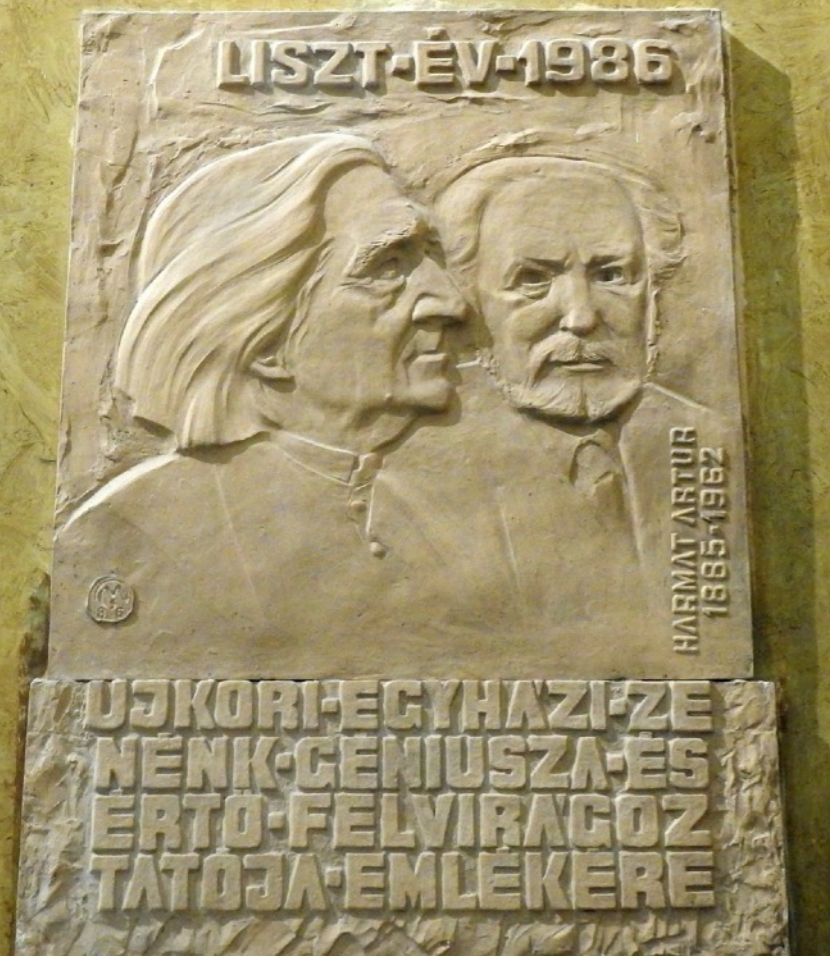


Gothic chapel with  
Neo-gothic altar

Above the beautiful gothic chapel on the right, you can see the oratory of Matthias Corvinus, Hungary's probably most beloved king. One of the most important events in the church's history was the meeting of noblemen on 23 January 1458 who agreed to elect Matthias as the next king. The next day the people of Pest gathered on the frozen River Danube and unanimously proclaimed Matthias King of Hungary. He ruled until 1490, and during his reign Hungary became the first country outside Italy to embrace the Renaissance. His legend as "King Matthias the Just", a monarch who mingles among people in disguise, delivering justice to his subjects, rewarding the good and punishing the evil, is still alive in many tales. If you go up to the oratory, you can have a good view of the church, and if you look very carefully at the wall, you may discover a little drawing of a face, probably from the Middle Ages.



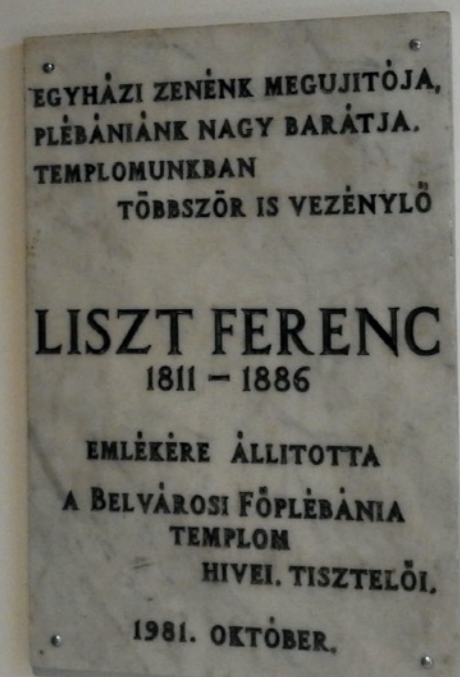
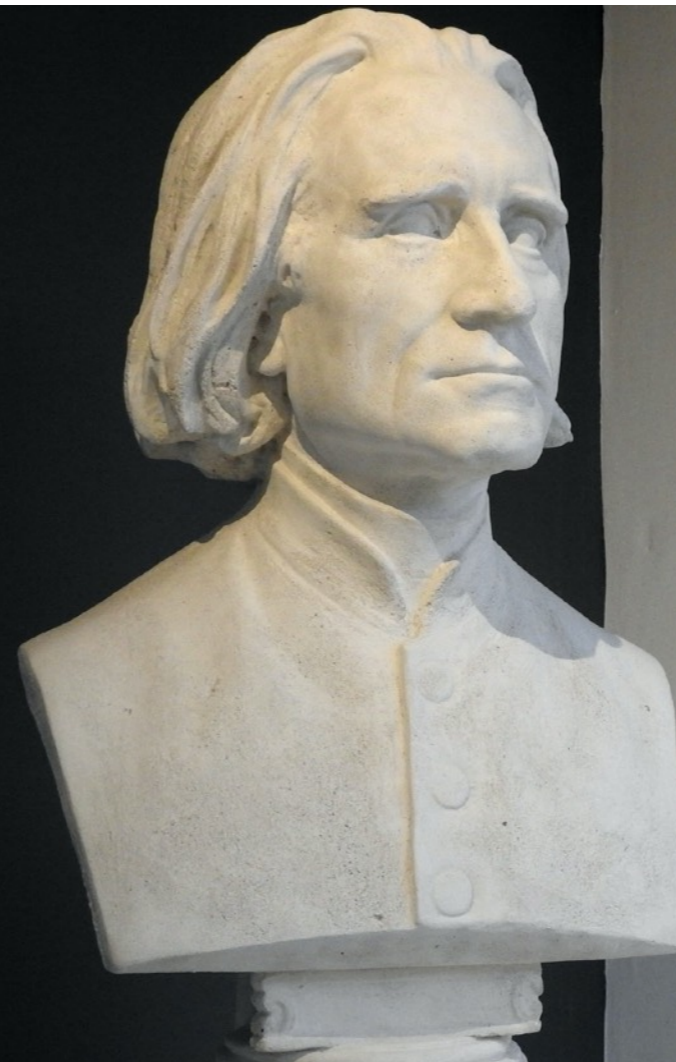
View from the  
Matthias Oratory



The great 19th century Hungarian composer and pianist, Franz Liszt (Liszt Ferenc in Hungarian), often stayed in the parsonage next to the church as the guest of the parish priest, and conducted his and other composers' work here on many occasions. For example, on 4 February 1872, his composition "Missa Choralis", also conducted by him, was presented in this church. I found it an interesting coincidence that Franz Liszt composed an oratorio entitled "The Legend of St. Elizabeth", since the engagement of Elizabeth, a Hungarian princess of the Árpád dynasty, to Ludwig IV, Landgrave of Thuringia, was celebrated in this very church in 1211. (Even if you are not very familiar with the stories of saints, you may have heard about the best known miracle of St. Elizabeth of Hungary: the miracle of roses. As the story is told, during one of her many trips delivering bread to the poor in secret, her husband – or in other versions her brother-in-law – asked her to reveal the contents under her cloak, and as she did, the bread had been transformed into white and red roses. Her legend is one of the first stories that associate Christian saints with roses).



Statue of St. Elizabeth from Coimbra





View from the tower, Castle District



View from the tower, Elizabeth Bridge and Gellért Hill with the Statue of Liberty

The latest development in the life of the Inner City Parish Church is the opening of the towers to the public in June 2020. I decided that going up to the lookout point for a final view of the centre of Budapest would be a fitting way to finish my visit, almost like watching the world go by from the tower of Contra Aquincum that once stood in the very same place. The view from the towers was magnificent, I could see that the city has grown and changed enormously since my time as governor of Aquincum. What we Romans have started in terms of urban development has become, through the ups and downs of almost 2000 years of history, a colourful and vibrant place worth to discover.



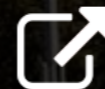
View from the Tower, 15 March Square



Watch in  
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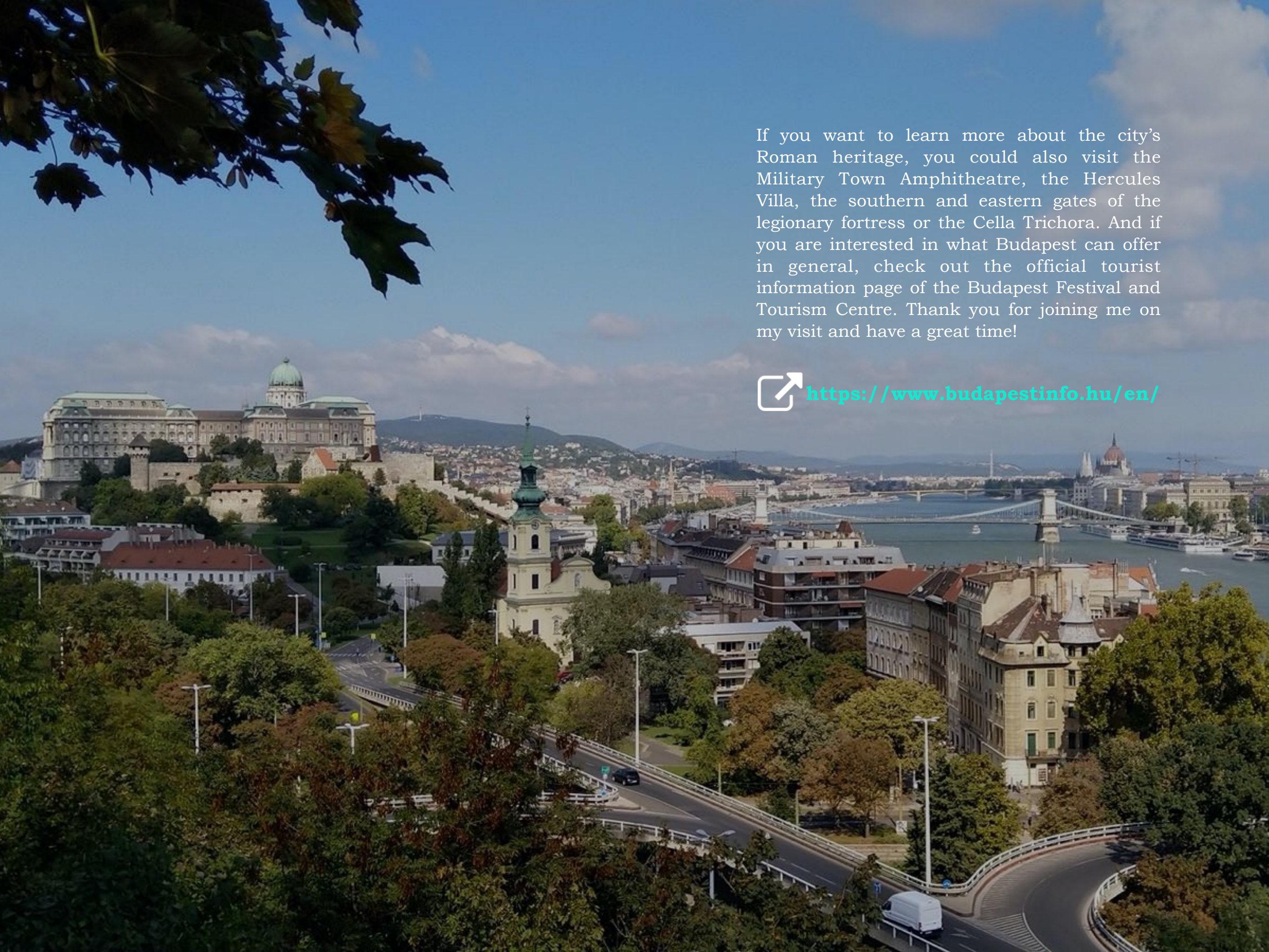


Watch in  
full  
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Watch in  
full  
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If you want to learn more about the city's Roman heritage, you could also visit the Military Town Amphitheatre, the Hercules Villa, the southern and eastern gates of the legionary fortress or the Cella Trichora. And if you are interested in what Budapest can offer in general, check out the official tourist information page of the Budapest Festival and Tourism Centre. Thank you for joining me on my visit and have a great time!

 <https://www.budapestinfo.hu/en/>



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