

JOURNEY TO THE NETHERWORLD

A Roman Age Carriage Burial from Sárísáp (County Komárom-Esztergom, Hungary)

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A unique, spectacular archaeological discovery was made in summer 2012 at Sárísáp, lying in the north-eastern part of Roman Pannonia. The carriage burial can be associated with the elite of the Romanized native Celtic tribe, the Eraviscans, living in the region before the arrival of the Romans and under their rule. The carriage was deposited in the grave pit together with the killed horses harnessed to it. The carriage was believed to transport the deceased to the land of eternal happiness in the netherworld.

NOT A BOMB, BUT A CARRIAGE BURIAL

The excavation conducted at Sárísáp by the Department of Archaeology of the Pázmány Péter Catholic University yielded wholly unexpected results. The control excavation of a 4th century mausoleum, first investigated in 1926, was also an excellent opportunity for archaeology students to become acquainted with archaeological field practices. The funerary building was uncovered by Balázs Major, appointed head of the department, who recorded a wealth of new details on the monument. However, the last day of the planned fieldwork brought an exciting discovery, the most sensational find of the year's research activities. The magnetic anomalies recorded during the geophysical survey of the hilltop at Sárísáp indicated the presence of large metal artefacts near the mausoleum. The bomb disposal experts first uncovered an iron hoop and then three more, after which it became obvious that the magnetic anomalies were not caused by a bomb or some other explosive from World War 2, but by the iron fittings of a buried Roman Age carriage.

The professionally excavated grave discovered at Sárísáp adds to our knowledge of Pannonian carriage burials. Most of the similar finds were usually discovered accidentally, during agricultural or construction work and, being disturbed, there were few opportunities for observing finer details, i. e. original context as well as position of the components and other grave goods. It is a genuine piece of archaeological luck that the intact Sárísáp burial was found by archaeologists during an excavation.



Fig. 1: The hill and the Roman Age cemetery at Sárísáp

READY FOR THE JOURNEY

Lying in a Roman Age cemetery, the large grave pit for the carriage burial was dug on top of a hill offering a spectacular view of the surrounding land. The most unusual trait of the Sárísáp burial was that the carriage had been placed in the grave pit with the wheels fitted to the axles, a practice differing notably from the other known burials, in which the carriage or cart had been dismantled and its components had been deposited in the grave separately. The closest parallel to the Sárísáp burial is the cart burial found at Budakeszi, in which the wheels were similarly attached to the axles.¹ The complete carriage buried at Sárísáp meant that its components were in their original position and that the carriage could be accurately reconstructed.

THE DRAWN VEHICLES OF THE ROMAN WORLD

Continuing Celtic and Etruscan traditions, the production of drawn vehicles in ancient Rome is an exciting, but almost forgotten chapter of ancient technical history.² In the Roman Empire, the custom of depositing carriages and carts in the grave was continued by only the native population in Thrace (modern Bulgaria)³ and north-eastern Pannonia (modern Hungary). Finds of carriages found in these regions have enabled the reconstruction of Roman Age wheeled transport and the technological advances made in their construction.

A four-wheeler of the Roman Age had over two hundred iron components. The period's wagon wrights were true masters of their craft. They were experienced in making pivoting front axles and in the suspension of the chassis because they knew that the box suspended with straps or ropes would absorb the shocks of travelling on rough terrain.⁴

The carriage found at Sárísáp can be assigned to the lighter type, suitable for more rapid travel, which could also be driven on poorer roads. The carriages used by wealthy families, made for personal transport, had comfortable seats. They were elegant pieces, as shown by the iron undercarriage of the piece found at Sárísáp, which the wagonwright had decorated with a profusion of tendrils, even though this hidden structural element was hardly visible.



Fig. 2: Excavation of the Roman Age carriage



Fig. 3: Lifting one of the carriage's iron tyres from the grave (photo by Melinda Nagy)

¹ Mráv, Zsolt: Utas két világ között. A helyi elit kocsi tartalmazó temetkezései a császárkori Pannoniában (A traveller between two worlds. Carriage burials of the local elite in Pannonia). *Ókor* 8/3–4 (2009), 85.

² Tarr, László: *A kocsi története* (The history of the carriage) (Budapest: Corvina, 1968), 131–148.

³ Венедиков, Иван: *Тракийската колесница* (Le char thrace) (София: Издателство на Българската Академия на Науките, 1960).

⁴ Röring, Christoph Wilhelm: *Untersuchungen zu römischen Reisewagen* (Koblenz: Numismatischer Verlag Gerd Martin Farneck, 1983).



Fig. 4: The Roman Age carriage placed in the grave, ready for travel (photo by Olivér Kovács)



Fig. 5: Excavation of the four-horse draught (photo by Olivér Kovács)

THE CARRIAGE RIDE TO THE NETHERWORLD

The carriages or carts deposited in the burials were the accessories of travel to the netherworld. The less wealthy merely portrayed two- or four-wheeled vehicles on their tombstone.⁵ Accompanied by his servants, the deceased appeared as the passenger of the carriage or, more rarely, cart, often with his saddle-horse and his dogs led in front of the carriage. Wealthy families were not content with merely a depiction of the journey to the netherworld. From the 2nd century onward, the drawn vehicles necessary for making the long journey to the netherworld were also placed in the grave. The carriage was believed to transport the deceased to the land of eternal happiness in the netherworld. The chariot burials⁶ of the Roman Age can be linked to the Romanized elite of the Eravisci, a Celtic tribe living in north-eastern Pannonia.⁷ However, Sárísáp lies in the area occupied by the Azali, a neighbouring tribe, and it is therefore possible that the burial represents the heritage of a family of the Azalian tribe, who buried its dead according to the Eraviscan custom. The native Celtic population often deposited carriages or carts as funerary sacrifices in their burial grounds, meaning that some of the buried vehicles were not associated with a particular grave.⁸

CARRIAGES, HORSES AND HUNTING DOGS

The horses drawing the carriages were also placed in the carriage burials. The carriage of the Sárísáp grave was drawn by four horses



Fig. 6: Scene depicting the journey to the netherworld on the grave stele of a native family from the 2nd century



Fig. 7: Reconstruction of a Roman Age carriage found at Budaörs – The Sárísáp vehicle probably looked the same (reconstruction by Zsolt Mráv)

⁵ Visy, Zsolt: *Wagendarstellungen der pannonischen Grabsteine* (Pécs: JPTE-TK, 1997).

⁶ Chariot burials are tombs in which a chariot or its components were buried, usually together with the horses harnessed to it.

⁷ Mráv, Zsolt: *Loyalty and Wealth: The Native Aristocracy of Roman Pannonia. Acts of the XIVth UISPP Congress, University of Liège, Belgium, 2-8 September 2001. The Roman Age. BAR – IS 1312* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2004), 1–11.

⁸ Mráv, Zsolt: *Utaz két világ között. A helyi elit kocsit tartalmazó temetkezései a császárkori Pannoniában* (A traveller between two worlds. Carriage burials of the local elite in Pannonia). *Ókor* 8/3–4 (2009), 81.

abreast, instead of the more customary two. This type of draught is known from a few depictions, but the Sárísáp grave represents its first archaeologically documented instance. Although more expensive, this harnessing mode was more suitable for travelling on bad roads. The Sárísáp carriage had originally been used on poorly constructed roads, probably the one running nearby, which connected Solva (Esztergom) with Aquincum (Budapest) and led through the Pilis Mountains. The wooden yoke was exceptionally well preserved: it survived in almost the same condition as when it had been buried almost 1800 years ago.

The skeletons of four dogs were found one laid on top of the other beside the horses. Similarly to the horses, the dogs had probably also been killed as part of the funerary ritual. Dogs were bred and trained to be fast runners to be used in rabbit hunting. Well trained dogs were valuable creatures and were regarded as status symbols, similarly to riding horses and lavishly decorated carriages.

RECOMMENDED READING

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