

IN SEARCH OF LATE BRONZE AGE TREASURES

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In 2006, the Institute of Archaeological Sciences of the Eötvös Loránd University began a research project for retrieving Bronze Age hoards. As a result, we have succeeded in salvaging twenty-nine bronze and three gold hoards, and we were also able to clarify their find circumstances. The research project was launched because we found that many Late Bronze Age sites had suffered immense damages caused by looters using metal detectors.

The hoards deposited during the Bronze Age are particularly vulnerable elements of the archaeological heritage. They are endangered by intensive agricultural activities in ploughland areas and by the machinery used in forest maintenance. Although the damage caused by these activities is hardly negligible, it is slight compared to the destruction brought on by illegal metal detectorists working for antiquities dealers, who often sell the pieces separately after breaking up the hoard into arbitrary lots, without documenting the original contexts.

Despite all our efforts, we are losing the race for the hoards against the crooks looting our sites. This is best illustrated by the fact that only two of the sixteen prehistoric hillforts we had surveyed during the past six years were undisturbed, without any traces of illegal metal detecting activities, even though many of these sites are listed and enjoy special archaeological and environmental protection.

There is a general consensus that most hoards were deposited as part of some ritual owing to the selected nature of their content. Hoards are interpreted as sacrificial/votive gifts that embody a structured social action. The detailed assessment of individual hoards and deposition regions is only possible if they are embedded into their cultural, social and economic context, and in knowledge of their find circumstances and find contexts.¹

The hoards we have salvaged conform to the several thousand contemporaneous hoards known from the Carpathian Basin regarding both their composition and the artefact types. However, the arrangement of the finds and a comparison with the other archaeological features of the sites was only possible in the case of no more than a few of the hoards published until 2006, even though this information would be vital for clarifying the circumstances and, more importantly, the possible reasons for the deposition. The precise documentation of the deposited find assemblages and their find context broadens the interpretative framework and brings us closer to understanding why these hoards were hidden.

It was earlier believed that bronze hoards were principally deposited in locations independent of settlements such as bogs, springs and near natural landmarks of unusual form. However, over 90 per cent of the more recently discovered hoards came to light on settlements. This can in part be attributed to the fact that as part of the project, we surveyed site types that are increasingly endangered by the activity of treasure hunters and looters because the location of the one-time prehistoric settlement is indicated by the defences or by the intensive surface scatter of finds. An overview of the find circumstances of the hoards discovered during the past 150 years raises suspicions that many of these assemblages, originally

¹ Hansen, S.: Bronzezeitliche Horte als Indikatoren für „andere Orte”. *Das Altertum* 53 (2008), 291–314; Neumann, D.: Depositions of the Bronze Age – Perception and Cultural Practice in Prehistoric Landscapes. In: *Landscapes and Human Development: The Contribution of European Archaeology*. Universitätsforschungen zur prähistorischen Archäologie, Bd. 191. (Bonn: R. Habelt, 2010), 237–248.



Fig. 2: Gold hoard from the Baks-Temetőpart site

Fig. 1: Bronze hoard from the Baks-Temetőpart site

described as having been found in locations separate from contemporaneous settlements, can in fact be associated with settlements.

We systematically surveyed the sites that promised to be more informative with a metal detector and we also opened excavation trenches with the aim of examining the find context of the hoards and the possible association between the deposition and the settlement.

Our preliminary findings indicate that some of the surveyed settlements had a specific area where there was a concentration of hoards that had been deposited quite close to one another. The most spectacular example is the Baks–Temetőpart site.² Two large bronze hoards with a roughly similar composition of broken artefacts were discovered in an area with a diameter of roughly 25 meters in the central part of the settlement occupied by a community of the Gáva culture (12th–10th centuries BC). Another assemblage made up of thirteen gold lockrings had been placed in a small clay vessel before its deposition in the same area (Figs 1–2).

The bronze hoards found at Szilvásvár–Alsónagyverő were similarly concentrated in a specific area, separate from the other parts of the settlement. We found three bronze hoards, all made up of different artefact types, during the survey of the small, unfortified hilltop settlement. The three hoards lay at roughly the same distance from one another. The first was made up of six small objects, and the place of deposition was very instructive: the hoard lay concealed in a small crevice of a rock (Fig. 3). The second hoard, containing close to a hundred bronze spangles, a phalera and small spiral beads (Fig. 4), was buried quite close. It seems likely that this hoard represents the adornments of a ceremonial dress or perhaps of a harness

² Szabó, Gábor: Ahol a bronz terem... Előzetes jelentés a baks-temetőparti késő bronzkori lelőhelyen végzett fémkereső műszeres kutatásokról. – Wo die Bronze liegt... Vorläufiger Bericht zu Geländeuntersuchungen mit Metallsonden am spätbronzezeitlichen Fundort Baks-Temetőpart. *A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve – Studia Archaeologica* 12 (2011), 91–126.



Fig. 3: The find location of the second hoard discovered at Szilvásvárads-Alsónagyverő



Fig. 4: A detail of the first hoard discovered at Szilvásvárads-Alsónagyverő

set, suggested by the small, 1–2 cm large leather scraps corroded to the bronze objects. The third hoard comprised a pair of bits, a knobbed mouthpiece and about a dozen harness mounts (Fig. 5). Dating from the 9th–8th century BC, the typical Early Iron Age harness set was deposited at a shallow depth in an orderly arrangement.

The two bronze hoards discovered at Zsáka in 2008 too confirm the existence of discrete deposition areas on settlements. Two bronze hoards were buried some 8 meters apart, in the two corners of a larger building of a small, farmstead-like settlement dated to the early Gáva period (12th century BC). One hoard contained sixty broken artefacts and metal ingots, the other was made up of bracelets, two socketed axes, a winged axe and bronze lumps (Fig. 6). Both hoards were placed in clay vessels before their deposition. Large, finely decorated storage jars were dug into the floor of the building in which the two hoards were found.

The find contexts of the two hoards uncovered at Pázmándfalu in winter 2011 were also quite similar. The two outstandingly rich hoards lay 8 meters apart. Although the first hoard was turned up by the plough, most of the over one hundred artefacts remained *in situ*. The burnt objects, some of which had fused together, included the fragments of a bronze vessel, armour plates, a helmet and horse harness, as well as of a winged axe and a dagger. The second hoard contained intact artefacts: a good-quality, massive sword folded in a U shape, four large spearheads, a knife with ornate blade, a socketed chisel and a short sword (Fig. 7), all placed in the fold of the sword. Although we did not excavate a larger area to clarify the find context, it was nonetheless clear that the deposition pattern was the same as at Zsáka: two hoards, one made up of intact, the other of broken artefacts, had been deposited simultaneously a few meters apart. The similarities between the deposition of the hoards suggest a uniform deposition practice across an extensive region.

The hoard of elegant torcs, brooches, socketed axes and spearheads dating from the onset of the Iron Age (10th–9th centuries BC) found at Parád–Várhegy (Fig. 8) offers important clues for the interpretation of deposition activities. Although we did not discover any other closed



Fig. 5: A few objects from the third hoard discovered at Szilvásvárads-Alsónagyverő, still before restoration



Fig. 7: The second hoard found at Pázmándfalva in situ



Fig. 6: The second hoard discovered at Zsáka



Fig. 8: A detail of the hoard found at Parád, in situ



Fig. 9: The hoard discovered at Tállya-Várhegy

find assemblages during our survey of the roughly three hectares large site, we did find several intact bronze artefacts and a gold ring. The trial trenches opened near the findspot of the hoard and in other locations of the site did not yield any pottery and neither did we find any archaeological features, suggesting that even though the area was enclosed by ramparts, it was not occupied. The deposited artefacts suggest that the site was perhaps a location used on special occasions.

During our project, we only encountered a single assemblage that was deposited in a location outside a settlement.³ In 2011, we found an unusual bronze hoard of the Hallstatt A1 period (13th–12th century BC) on the steep slope below the medieval castle at Tállya–Várhegy. In addition to a spearhead, a dagger, sickles, dress ornaments and bracelets, the hoard also contained a metalsmith's toolkit of anvils, punches, chisels and socketed hammers (Fig. 9). No traces of a prehistoric settlement have been found on the Várhegy, and thus the motives for the deposition of the hoard found at this site probably differed from the reasons behind the burial of the hoards described in the above.⁴

³ A comparable deposition area separate from settlements has been reported from Austria: see Winholz-Konrad, M: Die Rabenwand – ein neuer prähistorischer Depotfundplatz im Ausseerland, Steiermark. *Fundberichte aus Österreich* 43 (2005), 289–349.

⁴ The research project was funded by an OTKA grant (no. T037315).

RECOMMENDED READING

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