

“EVERY SKIN TEETH AINT A LAUGH”: Medieval leopard find from Hungary

LÁSZLÓ BARTOSIEWICZ¹

The unexpected recovery of a worked skull fragment from a large male leopard at the medieval urban site of Segesd–Pékófold during the 1980s raises important questions. These concern zoogeographical distribution, as well as issues of manufacturing, status, and the circulation of luxury goods. In recent years these aspects of the special artefact could be revisited on the basis of an increasing body of data and new insights into the symbolic use of this artefact in high-status self-representation.

INTRODUCTION

Thousands of heavily fragmented animal bones found in ancient food refuse incite little interest in most outsiders. Frequently archaeologists themselves regard the systematic collection, curation and costly expert study of masses of animal remains a nuisance, as they can make up over half of the finds at some ancient settlements. Archaeological excavations, however, similarly to criminal investigations, must recover each and every piece of evidence. This means that the piecemeal analysis of animal remains cannot be ignored either.

Even 21st century urban dwellers are closely tied to animals. Some eventually cook the Easter bunny brought for the child, others would even feel squeamish about wearing the carefully mothballed fur coat inherited from their grandmother. Such present-day examples are interesting far beyond the biological meaning of the animals involved, because they reveal our mentality and have socio-cultural implications. The two recent cases cited, for example, have trans-generational aspects and are also diagnostic of the broader social and economic context of human relationships. It is likewise important to understand that in such situations animals serve as media, means used in interpersonal communication. Exploiting animals for symbolic aims beyond utilitarian purposes is as old as humankind itself. Archaeozoologists are set out to uncover the emergence and development of such phenomena, in an effort to understand the history of animal-human (as well as human-human) relationships in light of the material evidence of excavated zoological remains.

In the absence of precise zoological identification the special find used to illustrate these thoughts in the present paper would have remained unrecognizable. The artefact in question is a leopard (*Panthera pardus* L. 1758) calvarium fragment from a medieval queens' seat in Somogy County, southwestern Hungary. It was subject to a specialist archaeozoological study only briefly referred to here.²

FIND DESCRIPTION

Segesd is located in southwestern Hungary, half-way on the 110 km long route which connects Keszthely at Lake Balaton in the North and Barcs on the left

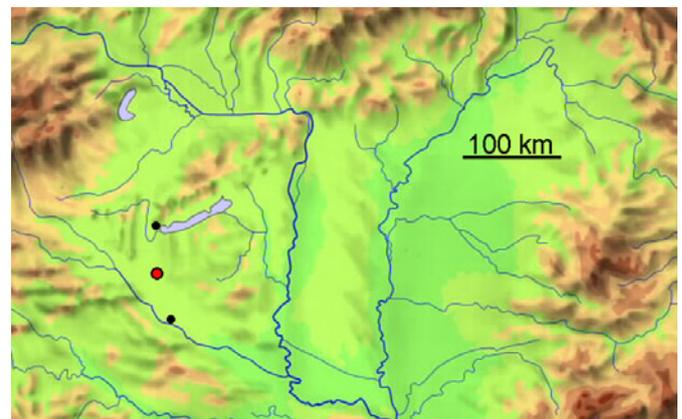


Fig. 1: The location of Segesd (red dot) in the Carpathian Basin in relation to Keszthely (North) and Barcs (South) indicated by black dots (base map: László Zentai, 1996)

¹ Osteoarchaeological Research Laboratory, Stockholm University

² Bartosiewicz, László: A leopard (*Panthera pardus* L. 1758) find from the late Middle Ages in Hungary. In *Animals and Man in the Past*, ed. Buitenhuis, Hiljke – Prummel, Wietske, ARC-Publicatie 41. (Groningen, the Netherlands, 2001), 151–160.



Fig. 2: The worked leopard bone find from Segesd (left) and the side view of the plane of the cut by which the oral part was removed from the facial skull. Scale: 5 cm (photo: Krisztina Pálfay)

bank of the Drava River in the South (Fig. 1). The leopard bone was brought to light from Square I/1 at the site of Segesd–Pékó föld during the course of excavations directed by Kálmán Magyar during the mid-1980s. It was recovered outside the medieval city centre from late medieval (14th–16th century) rubble with no direct association to feature.³ This layer contained shards and daub fragments in addition to the bones of common domestic animals, predominantly the remains of cattle.

The piece of leopard skull is not a fragment in a literal sense. It was carefully cut from the oral part of the viscerocranium roughly corresponding to the animal’s snout. Due to heavy polish, no sawing marks remained visible on the cut surface. The transversal plane of the cut is parallel with the plane defined by the two upper canine teeth. The remaining piece includes the *os incisivum* and small parts of the *maxilla* fused to it on either side. In other words, the bone was removed to retain the spectacular canine teeth and the row of incisors in between (Fig. 2). However, the tips of both canine teeth’s roots were cut across inside the bone and discarded with the rest of the skull. Therefore the remaining object is relatively flat.

ZOOLOGICAL PROPERTIES OF THE FIND

Today, the ever-shrinking geographical distribution of leopards is increasingly limited to Africa and subcontinental Asia. Importantly, no Holocene finds of leopards have been known from west of the Caucasus Mountains (Fig. 3). Aside from a

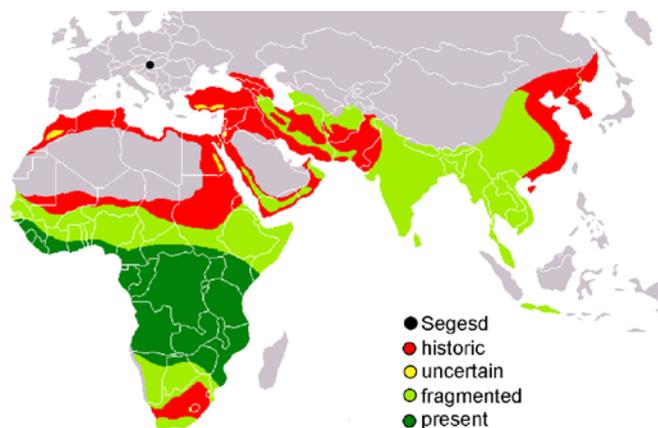


Fig. 3: Historic and modern-day distributions of leopards in Asia and Africa (source: Wikimedia commons)

³ Bartosiewicz, László: Közép- és török kori állatmaradványok Segesdről (Medieval and Turkish Period animal bones from Segesd, Southwestern Hungary). *Somogyi Múzeumok Közleményei* 12 (1996), 183–222.

relatively brief period in prehistory when lions were present in the Carpathian Basin,⁴ the largest felid living in Hungary has been lynx. Due to its relatively small size, even complete skeletons of this fur-bearing game were encountered at two excavations.⁵ Consequently one can safely say that the piece of worked leopard bone originates from either Asia or Africa.

Of the standard measurements available on the surviving bone, the width measured between the lateral sides of the canine *alveoli*⁶ could be compared to the same measurement taken on present-day leopard skulls (57 female and 64 male) from both Asia and Africa.⁷ Leopards occupy a great variety of habitats on both continents. Therefore their sizes reflect adaptations to different climates and types of vegetation that needs to grow high enough for them to hide during the hunt. Consequently, while there is a clear difference between the length of male and female leopards (males may weigh 50% more), no marked size difference could be found by continent. The calculations revealed, however, that the Segesd specimen originated from an unusually large male, rivalled only by a few in the reference material (*Fig. 4*). Due to the high correlation between this measurement and skull length, the skull of this specimen may be estimated as having exceeded 25 cm (10”).

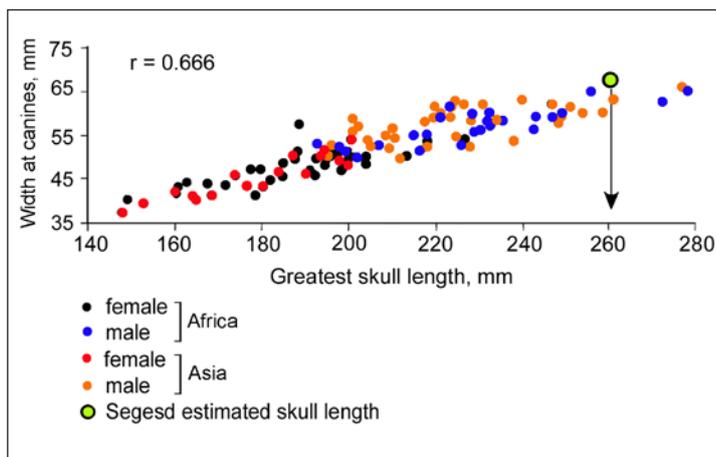


Fig. 4: The relationship between greatest skull length (x) and the width measured at the lateral side of canine alveoli (y) in 67 present-day leopards used in estimating the size of the Segesd specimen (Bartosiewicz, László: A leopard (Panthera pardus L. 1758) find from the late Middle Ages in Hungary. In: Animals and Man in the Past, ed. Buitenhuis, Hiljke – Prummel, Wietske eds. ARC-Publicatie 41. (Groningen: Rijksuniversiteit, 2001), 151–160.

POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS

Due to the high degree of taphonomic loss one may presume that what was found in the form of bone and associated teeth, once formed part of a composite object whose perishable parts disappeared during the centuries spent in the archaeological deposit. In the case of leopards it is not too difficult to imagine that this missing part was the spectacular spotted pelt, whose commanding appearance expressed and perpetually confirmed the owner’s high status.

A chronologically distant piece of iconographic evidence may serve as a technical parallel here. A carefully executed marble tombstone, presumably dedicated to a warrior, was found in the proximity of Larisis railway station in Athens. Dated to either the 4th or the 1st century BC, it shows a high-status horse decorated with

⁴ Vörös, István: Lion Remains from the Late Neolithic and Copper Age of the Carpathian Basin. *Folia Archaeologica* 34 (1983), 33–50.

⁵ Bartosiewicz, László: In *Skeletons in her cupboard*, ed. Clason, Anneke T. – Payne, Sebastian – Uerpmann, Hans-Peter. Oxbow Monograph 34. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1993), 5–18; Gál, Erika: Állatsontleletek a Zamárdi–Kútvolgyi dűlő (M7-es autópálya-ásatás) 370-es objektumából (Animal bone finds from Feature 370 at Zamárdi–Kútvolgyi dűlő. M/ motorway rescue excavations). In *Falvak és sírok az autópálya alatt. Megelőző régészeti feltárások az M7-es autópálya nyomvonalának balatoni szakaszán Somogy megyében (Zamárdi-Ordacsehi)* (Villages and graves under the motorway. Preventive excavations on the Balaton section of M7 motorway in Somogy County, Zamárdi-Ordacsehi), ed. Belényesi Károly – Honti Szilvia – Kiss Viktória. (Budapest: Somogy Megyei Múzeumok Igazgatósága – MTA Régészeti Intézet, 2007), 299–308.

⁶ Driesch, Angela von den: *A guide to the measurement of animal bones from archaeological sites*. Peabody Museum Bulletin 1. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 1976).

⁷ Grateful thanks are due to the curators of vertebrate collections at the British Museum of Natural History (London, n=35), the Royal Museum of Central Africa (Tervuren, n=58), Hancock Collection (Newcastle upon Tyne, n=4), Musée du Histoire Naturelle (Genève, n=8), Naturhistorisches Museum (Basel, n=6).

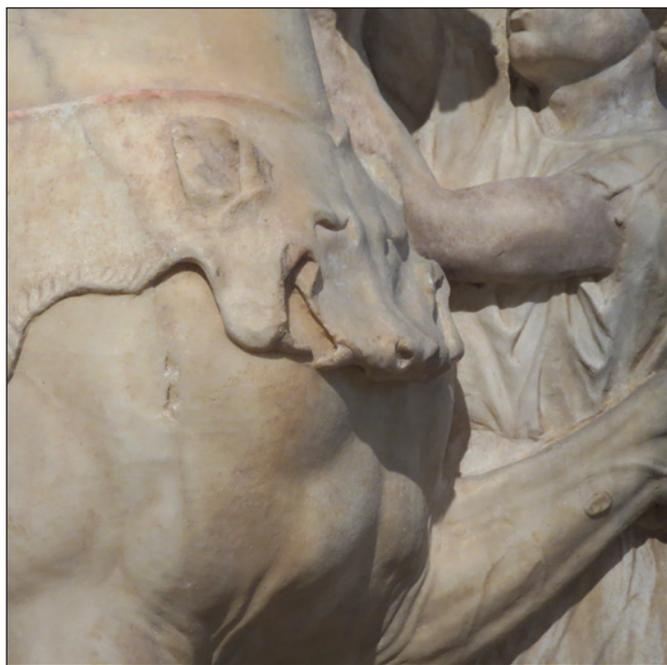


Fig. 5: Leopard skin used in decorating a horse on a 4th or 1st century BC marble statue in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, Greece. Note the angle of the animal's head and teeth (photo: Alice M. Choyke)

a leopard skin.⁸ The skull of the depicted beast had evidently been removed, only smaller parts holding the teeth may have remained in the skin. The head-part of the leopard skin thus smoothly rests on the horse's chest (Fig. 5)⁹ which is consistent with the shape of the bone find recovered at Segesd.¹⁰ Since the archaeological artefact bears no holes or points of suspension, it is reasonable to hypothesize that it did not serve for decoration in itself. It may well have been part of a perishable leopard skin that did not survive in the archaeological deposit.

Although the owner of this artefact was indubitably of high status, it is impossible to precisely identify the social context of the find. We do not know whether he killed the animal himself on a far-away continent or the original object was inherited, purchased or received as a present. While technically the bone was almost certainly attached to a prestigious skin, it remains a question how that skin was used. Even if the primary purpose of such a pelt was display, it may either have been part of someone's attire or a skin used in the internal house decoration of either a luxurious home or some

important communal place. Both possibilities are congruent with the fact that no special suspension holes were found on the bone and its cut surface was heavily polished. While the large canines must have been displayed, the reverse side of the bone was worn off by some soft material, e.g. the owner's clothing, a soft wood floor or some kind of upholstery although contact with the latter probably would have produced less fine polish. The front (oral surface) of the bone seems to have been protected by the skin that was presumably left on it.

Probably related to easy availability, leopard skin capes were popular among knights of the Teutonic Order (*Ordo Teutonicus Sanctae Mariae in Jerusalem*), founded during the Third Crusade in Palestine.¹¹ Knights of the order had settled in the southeastern territory of the Hungarian Kingdom for over a decade before they were expelled by King András II in 1225 due to their political ambitions. Their presence thus pre-dated the putative dating of the Segesd find. Evidently, however, leopard skins were popular among high-ranking officers in Europe. Among other representations, a leopard fur cape, complete with the animal's head, is shown in a print by Abraham de Bruyn¹² from the 16th century (Fig. 6). This image dates to a time of intense Hungarian and Polish political relations hallmarked by crowning István Báthory, sovereign of Transylvania, king of Poland (1576–1586).¹³ During this period traditions and paraphernalia of the Polish and Hungarian military began influencing each other. Some three hundred years later, a romantic picture, painted at the turn

⁸ National Archaeological Museum of Athens, Greece. The exact dating of this piece of art is being debated, but does not affect the relevance of the technical analogy.

⁹ Using leopard skin was not an antique curiosity. In the mid-19th century the 11th Hussars of the British Empire adopted the full leopard skin saddle cover following the abolition of the embroidered shabraque. In this case the leopard's head pointed toward the horse's tail: <http://www.britishempire.co.uk/forces/armyunits/britishcavalry/11thussars.htm>

¹⁰ The statue also shows the mandibles with the lower canine teeth.

¹¹ According to Figure 3 leopards commonly occurred along the Levantine coast at the time.

¹² de Bruyn, Abraham: *Equitum descriptio, quomodo equestres copie, nostra hac aetate, in sua armatura, per cunctas, videlicet Europae, Asiae et Affrice, nationes in re militare sese habent nunc primum* (Köln: Caspar Rutz, 1577).

¹³ The Báthory family and its historical link with Poland is of special interest here as they also had landed estates in Segesd during the 15th century.



Fig. 6: Polish cavalry men wearing leopard skin capes in an etching by Abraham de Bruyn, 1576 (source: de Bruyn, Abraham: *Equitum descriptio, quomodo equestres copie, nostra hac aetate, in sua armatura, per cunctas, videlicet Europae, Asiae et Affrice, nationes in re militare sese habent nunc primum* (Köln: Caspar Rutz, 1577); Wikimedia Commons)

of the 19th–20th century by Mikoláš Aleš, shows the 15th century kings Jiří of Poděbrady of Bohemia and Matthias Corvinus of Hungary.¹⁴ The latter, the conqueror, is clad in a lavish leopard skin cape as a sign of his raw power. Although this anachronistic representation should by no means be regarded as a document, it clearly demonstrates the continuity of medieval fascination with this powerful predator.

Similarly, it is impossible to prove whether the artefact belonged to the personal attire of a high ranking, perhaps military, officer. Alternatively it may have been imported in a pelt as a present or exotic ware. The fine wear on the bone surface may have been thus caused by a wooden floor or some other relatively soft substrate upon which the skin was placed. It is not unusual to dramatize such decorative skins with fierce-looking canine teeth even today (Fig. 7). The significance of exotic animal skins in internal decoration is shown from a far earlier time by the Roman Period wall-painting recovered from the provincial town of Brigetio (Komárom/Szőny) in Hungary.¹⁵ This image imitates the stretched skin of a lioness “hung” on the wall. At the other end of the time scale, a modern-day imitation tiger skin blanket is worth mentioning (Fig. 8) which illustrates continuity in the fascination with large felid symbolism also embodied in the unique archaeological find from Segesd.

CONCLUSIONS

Animals have constantly played key roles in symbols, similes and metaphors. Vicious predators have been used as a means of self-representation by persons (usually men) of supreme power. The aim of such displays has evidently been inciting fear or at least awe.

It is worth remembering that when being introduced to someone we inadvertently pay a lot of

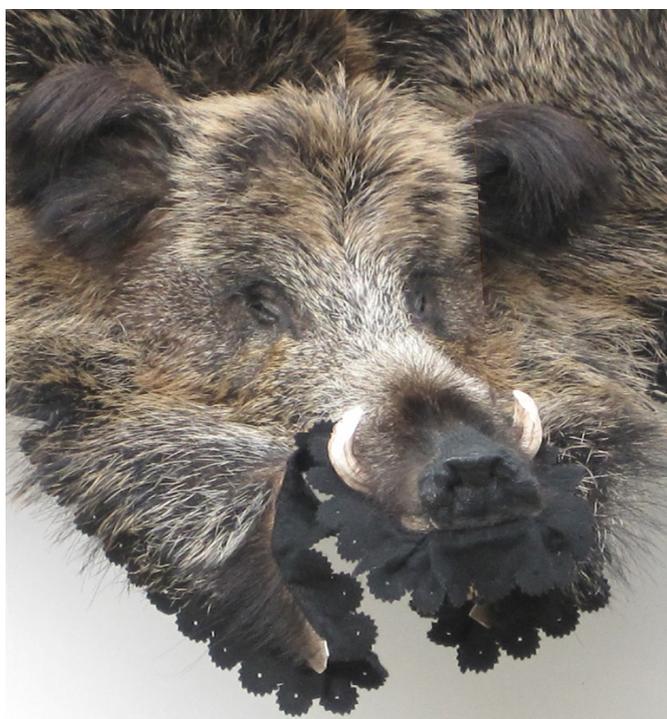


Fig. 7: Present-day wild boar skin decorated with upper canine teeth (photo: Anna Bartosiewicz)

¹⁴ National Gallery, Prague

¹⁵ Borhy, László: Hagyma – kupola. [Római kori falfestmények Brigetióból \(Komárom/Szőny\)](#) (Onion – dome. Roman Period wall-paintings from Brigetio [Komárom/Szőny]). *Trefort Campus* 2013/I. évfolyam 1. szám 26 – 28.

leopards (extreme right) in Hungary may be likewise discounted in the absence of both archaeological and documentary evidence.¹⁸ Naturally, various modes of exploitation shown in the analytical diagram may overlap. For example leopards which were killed in defence of a herd or died in royal captivity were probably skinned as well. However, osteological evidence of the last stage of use still tends to be diagnostic.

The politically turbulent wake of the Middle Ages and the onset of 150 years of Ottoman Turkish occupation in Hungary marked a time period of unusually intense cultural interaction. Intense population movements and alternating military occupations brought about not only the introduction of numerous new domestic animal species and breeds,¹⁹ but also increased the flow of exotic animal raw materials, often in the form of luxury goods, from distant parts of the Ottoman Empire and even beyond.²⁰ (Fig. 10) In addition to commercial circulation some such objects may tentatively be attributed to the movement of high-ranking people such as diplomats and military leaders, a likely phenomenon in a place like Segesd, a town that served as a Queen’s residence in the 13th to 14th century and maintained importance until Ottoman Turkish occupation and perpetual warfare took place in the mid 16th–17th century.²¹



Fig. 10: Military officers wearing leopard skin capes in the 1657 procession of Sultan Mehmed IV in Istanbul. Painting commissioned by Claes Rålanb, then Swedish envoy to the Sublime Porte (Nordiska Museet, Stockholm; photo: László Bartosiewicz)

¹⁸ This possibility could have been slightly more likely in the Roman Period province of Pannonia.

¹⁹ Bartosiewicz, László – Gál, Erika: Animal exploitation in Hungary during the Ottoman Era. In *Archaeology of the Ottoman Period in Hungary*, ed. Gerelyes, Ibolya – Kovács, Gyöngyi. Opuscula Hungarica 3. (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, 2003), 365–376; Gál, Erika – Csippán, Péter – Daróczi-Szabó, László – Daróczi-Szabó, Márta: Evidence of the crested form of domestic hen (*Gallus gallus f. domestica*) from three post-medieval sites in Hungary. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 37 (2010), 1065–1072.

²⁰ Gál, Erika – Kovács, Gyöngyi: [A walrus-tusk belt plaque from an Ottoman-Turkish castle at Barcs, Hungary](#). *Antiquity* (2011) 85/329: Project Gallery.

²¹ Marti Tibor: Az Esterházyak vitézi ethosza a 17. Században (The warriors’ ethos of the Esterházy family during the 17th century). In *Identitás és kultúra a török hódoltság korában*, ed. Ács Pál – Székely Júlia (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2010), 402–403.

RECOMMENDED LITERATURE

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