

IN SEARCH OF LESSER-KNOWN NEANDERTHALS IN HUNGARY

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Neanderthal Man (Homo neanderthalensis) developed in Europe as a descendant of Heidelberg Man (Homo heidelbergensis). They inhabited the continent from the Atlantic coast to the Caucasus and beyond as the only human species before the arrival of Anatomically Modern Humans (Homo sapiens) ca. 40 thousand years before present (BP). All cultural remains preserved from the period of the Middle Palaeolithic (250–35 thousand years BP) unearthed at archaeological sites attest to the capabilities and knowledge of Neanderthals. The diversity of their cultural traditions is represented mainly by their lithic tools. Despite the fact that these were generally made of flakes removed from cores (flake tools), there are considerable differences in the final products due to the methods used. Based on these differences, three great technical traditions can be distinguished: microlithic (Taubachian), unifacial (Mousterian) and bifacial (Micoquian) industries.

Due to Hungary's geographic location in the Middle Danube basin, human groups belonging to all three technical traditions once lived in its territory. However, up until the 1970s, only microlithic and unifacial cultures were known, through the assemblages of the important Middle Palaeolithic sites with international reputations of Tata, Érd and Subalyuk Cave. The recognition of Middle Palaeolithic bifacial industries throughout Europe has been impeded by the fact that there are leafpoints among their lithic tools, and due to this prior to World War II these sites were usually classified in the Solutrean unit of the Late Upper Palaeolithic. It was demonstrated through the results of new excavations made in the 1950s that the bifacial leafpoint tools found in the region of the Western Carpathians are thousands of years older and belong to the Szeletian culture of the Upper Palaeolithic. This was also the case for the leafpoint tools found in Jankovich Cave located in the Gerecse Mountains (Transdanubia, Western Hungary) until Veronika Gábori-Csánk demonstrated in the 1970s that these tools represent a Middle Palaeolithic culture characterized by bifacial tools, named the Jankovichian. At the same time, Árpád Ringer recognized another Middle Palaeolithic bifacial industry while studying lithic assemblages collected on the surface at several open-air sites of the eastern foothills of the Bükk Mountains (in northeastern Hungary). This was designated the Bábonyian culture, named after the Sajóbábony-Méhész-tető site that yielded the richest archaeological material (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. View of Sajóbábony from the Méhész-tető Palaeolithic site (photograph by P. Szolyák)

Only leafpoint tools made by bifacial working were present at the Jankovichian sites, while the leafpoint tools of the Bábonyian were accompanied by the characteristic bifacial knives (Keilmesser) of the Micoquian industries. Although Árpád Ringer conducted excavations on some more important open-air Bábonyian sites during the 1980s, these results have not been published in detail. In fact, the discovery of the Bábonyian culture brought to the forefront the question of the origins of the Szeletian culture in Hungary as well. Because a genetic relationship between the Micoquian and Szeletian cultures had already

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been shown by Czech researchers at Moravian sites in the 1970s, it was logical to search for the roots of the Szeletian in Hungary in the Bábonyian. This hypothesis was supported by the fact that the sites of both cultural units are located in the same region, as well as both using the quartz-porphry (metarhyolite) from the eastern part of the Bükk Mountains as their preferred raw material.

In 1997–98, Árpád Ringer together with Brian Adams (University of Illinois, USA) performed new excavations at Sajóbáony and Mályi aimed mainly at clarifying the chronological position of the Bábonyian. Although the attempt to directly date the archaeological level was unsuccessful,



Fig. 2. French-Hungarian excavation at the Sajóbáony-Méhész-tető site in 2019 (photograph by Zs. Mester)



Fig. 3. Excavation work in trench T1 (photograph by Zs. Mester)

Árpád Ringer concluded from indirect thermoluminescence dating that the age of the industry should be placed between 130 and 93 thousand years BP. From the beginning of the 2000s onward, new field surveys undertaken in the Cserhát Mountains (ca. 100 km to the west of the Bükk Mountains) have discovered open-air sites where characteristic tool types of the Micoquian were present in the assemblage. Moreover, the dominant raw material was the aforementioned quartz-porphry (metarhyolite) from the eastern Bükk Mountains. Therefore, the question arose whether these lithic assemblages also belong to the Bábonyian or represent another Micoquian industry. Unfortunately, it is clear that we do not know enough details about the Bábonyian industry to be able to answer to this question.

This is the reason why the study of Bábonyian sites have been chosen as the main goal of the French-Hungarian research collaboration project



Fig. 4. Sampling in sounding S1 to analyze the stratigraphic sequence (photograph by Zs. Mester)



Fig. 5. Leafpoint made from transparent limnosilicite after discovery (photograph by T. Desmadryl)

started in 2019 (Fig. 2). “The Palaeolithic of Hungary” archaeological mission involves 17 specialists in prehistoric archaeology and geosciences from the partner institutions – the University of Lille, the Natural History Museum in Paris and the University of Lyon from France, and Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, the Herman Ottó Museum in Miskolc and the University of Miskolc from Hungary. In the framework of the project, we are performing excavations at the key sites of the Bábonyian culture to gain information on the stratigraphic context of the archaeological materials. We are studying the sediments in the stratigraphic sequence using various analytical laboratory methods to clarify the taphonomic site formation processes and the chronostrati-

graphic position of the industry. We are reconstructing the palaeo-environmental context to understand human adaptation strategies. The detailed technological and typological study of the lithic assemblages will be completed by use wear analyses to reconstruct the technical behavior, cultural traditions and subsistence activities of the prehistoric human groups of the Bábonyian culture. The Hungarian sites will be the subject of comparative studies with other Central European and more distant European sites to understand palaeo-historical processes. These research projects began in 2019 at Sajóbáony-Méhész-tető, the eponymous site of the culture (Figs 3–5).

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