

BRONZE AGE TREASURES IN HUNGARY

In Search of Hidden Weapons, Tools and Jewellery, by Gábor V. Szabó

A personal book review

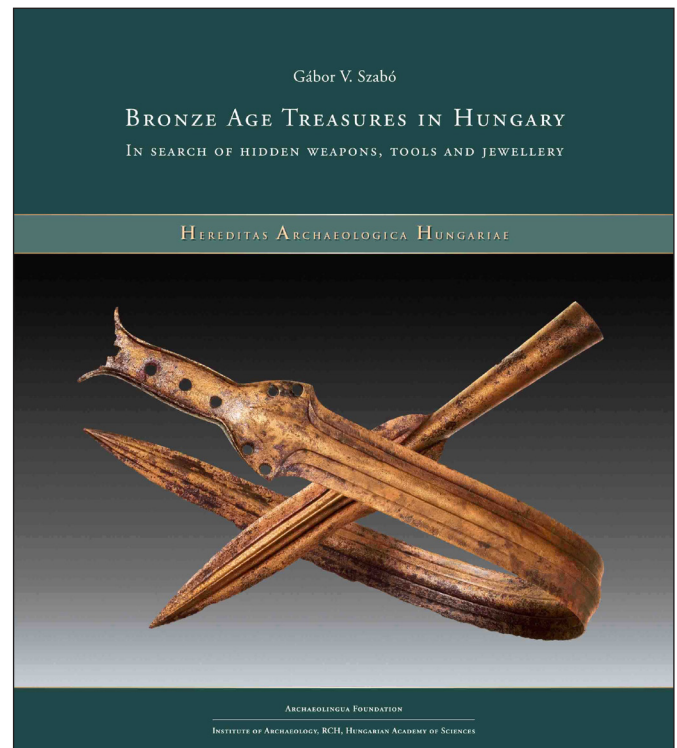
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As an opening remark I would like to note that I cannot speak objectively about this book. Since 2008 I have been part of the extraordinary expeditions that gave birth to this book: except for a few locations presented in the volume I was personally involved in the survey of these sites, and sometimes it was even my metal detector that first signalled the bronze or golden assemblages discussed in these chapters. This makes the book even more interesting to me, and it was a deeply personal read; my perspective is a bit different from that of other experts. The reading experience was further enhanced by the excellent illustrations, the beautiful writing style, and the atmosphere of the short paragraphs introducing each chapter. While reading, I was able to re-live the ‘treasure hunt’, and remembered the meandering pathways in the mountains, the foggy and steep Bronze Age landscape, and, of course, the somewhat romantic experience of discovery, which is hardly matched by anything else in our profession. The reader can also embark on this adventure: in addition to the results themselves, the volume also conveys the process of research and the joy of discovery. In this personal book review, I aim to highlight the main messages in the book, the key lessons drawn from the presented hoards and their stories.

A key message is formulated in the introduction.

This addresses a severe archaeological and social question, namely nighthawking and the illegal international trade in archaeological artefacts. This is a hot topic; there is hardly any archaeologist who remains untroubled by the problem, at any European institution, be it a research centre, a museum, or a university, from the United Kingdom to the Ukraine. From this point of view, this book is a cultural ‘trump card’ for archaeologists: it reflects the whole phenomenon through the Hungarian example. The author discusses questions that may be obvious for archaeologists but are certainly unclear for the wider domestic and international audience, and he does it in a plain language and through concrete examples. Among the issues addressed in the text we find questions such as: What is a hoard? Why is it important to know the exact provenance of a find and the context in which it was found? Why does it have to be the archaeologist who excavates the findings? Why should metal finds have associated GPS coordinates? How do archaeologists analyse a deposition? What kind of historical information is lost when someone loots the site and sells the finds abroad? The stories told in this book are exemplary



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in terms of cooperation between museum experts and metal detectorists who are interested in history and culture. Some of the most essential findings presented here were, in fact, discovered accidentally by these laymen, thanks to their enthusiasm and meticulous fieldwork.

The second important lesson to learn is that although this book was written for a wider audience, its content and approach is of key importance for the whole profession, and it will count among the standard works in the future. From the introduction and the list of hoards it becomes clear even for lay readers that instead of Northern and North-Western Europe – usually overrepresented in the scholarship – it is the Carpathian Basin, a key region with the most potential, where new methods of analysis should be tested. From this point of view, the book makes up for a long-term neglect of Central European Bronze Age research. Although this place is richest in hoards in the region, until now, depositions in the Carpathian Basin could only have been approached through descriptive and theoretical methods formulated by British, German, Scandinavian or Dutch authors who have been “mandatorily” cited over and over again, while secondary literature written by Hungarian or Central-Eastern European authors was absent. Gábor V. Szabó brings novel approaches into the world of standard yet unfinished works of typo-chronology, left after the generation of archaeologists such as Amália Mozsolics, Tibor Kemenczei and Pál Patay, who conducted significant research into Hungarian hoards and metal artefacts. His interpretations are complex and will certainly serve as a starting point for future dialogues, discussions, reflections and analyses. The presented assemblages, primarily from North-eastern Hungary, reveal a multifaceted and dynamic Bronze Age world. Funerary sacrifices, hoards of warriors and metalworkers, metal assemblages collected by multiple generations in houses, cursed treasures, and ritual depositions are all discussed in the book. One branch of modern deposition analysis, that is, the landscape aspect is especially emphatic throughout the volume; within the sacral Prehistoric landscapes around the hoards the book explores cave systems, islands, mountains and monumental animal figures. Persons and ritual events behind the depositions, the process of choosing the artefacts, and their symbolic messages are also touched upon. From a strictly scholarly point of view, some of the narratives and possible interpretations presented in the case studies may seem audacious – however, it must be kept in mind that they are always based on assemblages that are studied with proper source criticism, and by methods of fieldwork and analysis that are up-to-date and refined even in a broader European context. The greatest scholarly merit of the work may be the fact that, as opposed to approaches in the theoretical literature, it does not promote a universal interpretative model for all hoards, but emphasises how manifold the custom of depositing such objects was in the Bronze Age in the Carpathian Basin. Causes behind these depositions may be rooted in radically different phenomena, rituals and motivations, and the different theories in the international secondary literature on these findings may be equally valid, or even complementary.

In summary, the three greatest virtues of the work are the presentation of a current archaeological and social problem, the solid and up-to-date methodology, and the audacious approach to interpretation. Of course, there are other messages conveyed – just as an archaeologist carrying several bags when searching for depositions “in the mountains”, the author touches upon several subtopics in this summarising endeavour. However, the 246 page-long book does not “fall apart” but smoothly guides the reader through the text, creating a narrative enjoyable both for lay people and professionals. The book will certainly be a success, also due to the extensive and exceptionally rich illustration material, the meticulous editorial work and the high-quality print.