

A 7000-YEAR-OLD MESSAGE. REMAINS OF THE NEOLITHIC WORLD IN AND AROUND BUDAPEST Thoughts on the temporary exhibition of the Budapest History Museum at the Aquincum Museum

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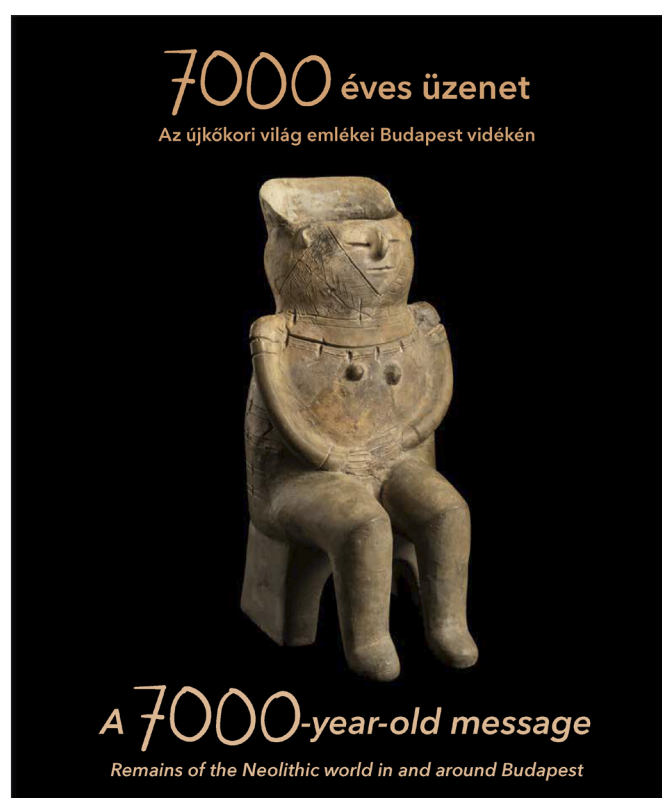
The Budapest History Museum's Aquincum Museum opened its new temporary exhibition in December 2019, which presents the world of the first food producers based on their archaeological remains uncovered in Budapest. The exhibition is an important milestone in the research of the Neolithic in many ways. Only rarely do we get to see exhibitions focusing on this exceptionally exciting period which brought major changes for humanity.² It is also highly significant for the Hungarian capital. Although Neolithic settlements and select finds uncovered by excavations on different construction sites have been presented before in exhibitions with a broad range (ZSIDI 2005; 2017), such a detailed and concentrated overview of the subject has long been missing from the rich exhibition repertoire of the museum.

THE CONTENTS

Zsuzsanna M. Virág is the curator and organiser of the exhibition as well as the author and editor of the connected catalogue (*Figs 1, 6*). Her many roles, too, show how much this is – in the best sense of the word – a personal exhibition. Furthermore, a significant part of the remains exhibited came to light during archaeological excavations in which she took part or which she led herself.

The organiser dedicated the exhibition and the book to the memory of archaeologist Nándor Kalicz. He was a defining figure in Prehistoric and Neolithic research, and had many ties with Budapest and the BHM (M. VIRÁG 2018), as also highlighted by Pál Raczky, professor emeritus of the Eötvös Loránd University Institute of Archaeological Sciences at the opening ceremony (*Fig. 2*). His work significantly contributed to our understanding of the Neolithic history of Budapest.

The exhibition presents the remains of the Linear Pottery Culture uncovered in Budapest and the life of these communities between 5450/5400 and 5000/4950 BC in four major thematic sections. Among the exhibited finds, we can see older, famous pieces from the collections of the BHM,



*Fig. 1. The exhibition catalogue (M. VIRÁG 2020)
(Cover design by K. Kolozsvári, Photo by N. Szilágyi)*

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² A coincidence or perhaps another sign of the interest is the organisation of an [exhibition](#) with a partly similar theme in Pécs also in 2019 by the Janus Pannonius Museum and the Institute of Archaeology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Research Centre for the Humanities entitled 'The First Villages – The Lost Neolithic World of Southern Transdanubia'.

such as the Bükk-style bowl found in Békásmegyer in the 1930s (M. VIRÁG 2020, 99–100), or the vessel with two faces also from Békásmegyer (M. VIRÁG 2020, 158). Predominantly, however, the exhibition builds on and synthesises the results of more recent excavations (75–77 Nánási Road, District III, Budapest; Növény Street, District XX, Budapest; Törökbalint–Dulácska; Biatorbágy–Hosszúrétek; Biatorbágy–Tyúkberek; etc.).

Every generation re-evaluates its understanding of the past and adds to it the scientific results of its own age. Here, too, we can note a shift in the paradigm. Although in his seminal book Nándor KALICZ (1970), too, studied those who lived in the Neolithic, he found the link to the mortals through the hypothesised world of the (clay) gods. This twenty-first-century exhibition, meanwhile, focuses on understanding the daily lives and thoughts of the people.

At the entrance of the exhibition, visitors are greeted by a selection of excavation photographs and the photograph of an anthropomorphic vessel – the emblematic figure of the exhibition – which prepare visitors for the special experiences ahead.

The first section is for introduction. Its purpose is to help visitors, who are likely wholly unfamiliar with the subject, locate this world in space and time and to tell the story of the ‘Neolithic revolution’, which, in spite of its name, was indeed a rather slow process even from the start (HODDER 2018). We can find out about the beginnings in Anatolia, learn a few key phrases, and arrive in what is now Budapest (M. VIRÁG 2020, 9–22). We can continue our journey without a break to the next section, which presents the remains of everyday life and their interpretation: house building, plant cultivation, animal husbandry, production of stone tools and pottery, spinning and weaving (M. VIRÁG 2020, 23–54) (Figs 3–4). We can see several *chaînes opératoires*: how people turned timber into houses, grain into bread, greenschist into an axe or flint into a sickle, mud into an ornate vessel, and wool into clothes. For these interpretations Zsuzsanna M. Virág boldly uses the results of experimental archaeology and presents the no longer extant details of objects by using analogies from other sites. She also presents tools which – though they did not survive here – were preserved under different environmental conditions and which we thus may reasonably assume were used in this region as well.



Fig. 2. Pál Raczky at the opening ceremony on 9 December 2019, holding a copy of the Hungarian version of N. Kalicz's book, 'Clay Gods' (Photo by N. Szilágyi)



Fig. 3. Exhibition interior (Photo by N. Szilágyi)



Fig. 4. Exhibition interior (Photo by N. Szilágyi)



Fig. 5. Exhibition interior (Photo by N. Szilágyi)



Fig. 6. Exhibition interior (Photo by N. Szilágyi)

The third section of the exhibition (M. VIRÁG 2020, 55–86) presents the world of human imagination: how thoughts were preserved in and on objects and the limits to our understanding. We can see various anthropomorphic figures and can read about the possible interpretation of their ornaments and execution, intentional destruction and burial, and the rituals in which they may have played a (leading) role. I was enthralled to see how the most significant anthropomorphic vessels of the period (Törökbálint–Dulácska, Biatorbágy–Tyúkberek, Budapest–Királyok útja) were at the centre, dominating the stage, allowing us to marvel at and study the artefacts, their fine execution and enigmatic faces (Fig. 5).

The final section (M. VIRÁG 2020, 87–93) introduces visitors to the connection between the worlds of the living and the dead, through the muted yet mysterious presentation of cryptic and important assemblages, such as the double burial unearthed at the former Skála department store and its reconstruction. As we leave the exhibition, by the exit we can meet once again, in a hands-on display, the vessel with a human face from Törökbálint–Dulácska with its enigmatic half-smile (Fig. 1).

As parts of the whole, the aforementioned sections help make sense of the Neolithic world. These frequently present such curatorial/research questions, which intrigue both visitors and specialists: What was the essence of the transformation? How did it happen? What were the houses like? How was pottery made? What can we know about their attire? A seated or standing figurine? Why did they put human faces on vessels? Pedestal vessels with a human face? And perhaps most fascinatingly: What did they have in their mind? How can we learn about their way of thinking? Of course, we do not always get a full answer. As Zsuzsanna M. Virág repeatedly notes, our understanding resembles fragments of a mosaic.

These questions also illustrate well that the exhibition does not follow the earlier practice of archaeological exhibitions, where the main thread was provided by chronology and the various archaeological cultures. Here, for instance, references to the decoration styles only appear in the background; visitors can learn about the Neolithic world more through the aspects of everyday life and the various activities, helping to shorten the distance which separates most visitors from Prehistory. It is therefore very useful that the screen presenting the dynamic changes of the small settlement uncovered at 75–77 Nánási Road, District III, Budapest and the complex process of house building is displayed in the first room. The 3D animation's environment and hard-working characters can also be familiar to visitors from Generation Z (Fig. 6).

THE FORM

The sections of the exhibition presented briefly above are in reality not sharply separated. Erzsébet Csernus, the exhibition's designer, has once again (LASSÁNYI & FÉNYES 2016) brilliantly overcome the difficulties of the venue's layout – the space has neither an axial nor a central plan – and turned them into an advantage. The different thematic sections are seamlessly connected by graphics and well-placed exhibition interiors.

The interpretive tools of the exhibition are exceptionally rich and multi-faceted. In addition to the original artefacts, replicas, visual and physical reconstructions, graphics, photographs, experimental archaeolog-

ical footage, 3D animations and reconstructions, interiors and ‘hands-on’ displays, too, help and enliven the multisensory reception of the message. The various components are combined, even in one space, evoking the diverse nature of life in the Neolithic (Figs 3–4, 6). This, of course, means that many details, objects and images appear at the same time – it however does not seem crowded, as everything has its correct place in this lively exhibition. The artefacts and their interpretation are in an elegant balance.

The exhibition’s colour scheme – muted and perfectly suited to the subject – also does credit to the taste of Erzsébet Csernus. The matt yellow and red of the painted vessels’ ochre and the brownish-grey colour of pottery vessels frame and serve as background to the artefacts and texts. The space itself is dark and confined, but – through well-directed lighting – does not feel overwhelming; with the friendly pastels it provides a safe experience for visitors. The stern space is brightened not only by the colours and the lighting, but also by many other details. Parts of the incised and painted ornaments of the vessels appear on the walls and the floor and a (drawn) flax flower even grew from a corner of one of the panels – thanks to the work of Krisztián Kolozsvári, who was responsible for the graphic design of the exhibition and the book.

Exhibition organisers are faced with two usually unavoidable considerations – nonetheless frequently seen as a necessary evil – for which it is difficult to find a good solution (KÁRPÁTI & VÁSÁRHELYI 2013). For conservation and safety reasons, artefacts have to be placed in vitrines. Fortunately this exhibition is not dominated by the display cases and uses not just one type of vitrine. The designer always chose those of the right size. The exhibition of archaeological finds faces another challenge: that of creating a framework in which not only those beautiful, carefully designed and executed objects, which modern observers could even consider works of art, ‘feel at home’, but also the broken, heavily used and more roughly executed pieces and their fragments. This exhibition also succeeds in this.

The words of the exhibition panels nearly fill the catalogue, but they do not feel overwhelming at the exhibition thanks to their varied length and dynamic layout. The finely written, easily understandable sentences are highly readable and multilayered – it is up to the visitors to decide how much they wish to read or if they prefer the visual displays.

THE CATALOGUE

Exhibitions are not permanent, but transitory and unique artistic events limited in time, like those of the theatre (VÁSÁROS 2010). Their memory is preserved, if things go well, by the archives and more rarely by catalogues. Fortunately, this is the case here. The Budapest History Museum has published a book of the same title as the exhibition, written and edited by Zsuzsanna M. VIRÁG (2020). Its form is worthy of the exhibition. With 172 pages, clearly edited and laid out, colourful and richly illustrated on every page, the book gives back much of the exhibition experience. The texts, images and graphics can be familiar from the wall panels, and the fold-out inside cover recalls the visual ambiance of the exhibition interiors. The catalogue – with essential details and photographs of the objects – makes the finds, in many cases previously unpublished, available to researchers and renders the book a specialist publication.

The book is fully bilingual. Parallel to the Hungarian text runs an English translation. It follows the good practice used by small languages to make their publications available to international audiences. This was also done in the past for instance by the *Dolgozatok az Erdélyi Nemzeti Múzeum Érem és Régiségtárából* / *Travaux de la Section Numismatique et Archéologique du Musée National de Transylvanie a Kolozsvár* (1911–1920) edited by Béla Posta in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca). Sticking to Prehistory, the English/Serbian monograph on the Lepenski Vir site (BORIĆ 2016), too, follows this practice.

THE MESSAGE

The first step of planning an exhibition is for the organiser to formulate the defining message of the exhibition (WAIDACHER 1999; VÁSÁRHELYI 2013). What is the message of this exhibition? Zsuzsanna M. Virág researches the first farmers of Budapest. The exhibition presents their lives. It reminds us of the world when people were still in touch with nature, did not exploit excessively its resources, and did not cause irrevers-

ible damage. The lifestyle of Neolithic farmers only took as much from the environment as was necessary for subsistence. The picture may appear idyllic, but we have known for a long time that the deforestations and road usages which upset the earlier equilibrium and caused irreparable damage to and changes lasting to this day in the vegetation first appeared from the late Bronze Age – early Iron Age (SÜMEGI 2003, 206–207). Although the word ‘message’ already appears emphatically in the title, it does not become intrusive at the exhibition. We can nevertheless feel constantly the closeness of nature and the environment: e.g. villages were established almost exclusively along the Danube and on flood-free areas along the watercourses (M. VIRÁG 2020, 16). This closeness is also present in the building materials for the houses, in the gathered and grown plants, in the hunted and bred animals, in the clay of the vessels and in the firewood they used for cooking food and firing pottery, in the earth tone of the ochre pigments, in the stones of the various tools. Even the distant world of the seas was brought here by jewellery made using *Spondylus* shells. All these subtly remind visitors that “Looking, however, at the world around us, we must recognise that we are also endangering our future if we forget the Neolithic, when humans and Nature were still close, and its 7000-year-old message” (M. VIRÁG 2020, 95).

And what else does the exhibition tell us? I believe it has another message, which, like the previous one, also appears in a hidden way: the strength of communities. It was the strength and cohesion of the communities which brought the first farmers to what is now Budapest 7000 years ago and helped their survival. It took the co-operation of the community to open the Aquincum Museum in 1894. Each excavation is a teamwork and the results become part of the research. And of course, Zsuzsanna M. Virág, too, is supported by a large community of colleagues, friends, and family, together with whom she was able to create this memorable exhibition and catalogue – the book lists over 40 contributors. This author, too, was a consultant of the exhibition. I have been able to follow its formation from early on and I am glad that I can share with the wider public my biased thoughts about this meticulous, perceptive and informative work.

RECOMMENDED READING

M. Virág, Zs. (2020). *7000 éves üzenet. Az újkőkori világ emlékei Budapest vidékén / A 7000-year-old Message. Remains of the Neolithic World in and around Budapest*. Budapest: Budapesti Történeti Múzeum.

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