

FROM THE PAST INTO THE FUTURE

The latest archaeological research and permanent exhibition of the Türr István Museum and Bácska Cultural Centre

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In July 2021, the new permanent exhibition along with an open archaeological storage facility opened its doors to the public at the Türr István Museum and Cultural Centre of Bácska (the name of the institution changed in October, 2021). The exhibition space underwent an extensive renovation, as the last permanent display was installed in 1996, due to the 300th anniversary of Baja's official declaration as a town. However, this old display did not include archaeological collections at all; the archaeological material remained on the shelves of gloomy storage rooms built back in the 1950s. Although, visitor numbers have been significantly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, the archaeological research continued as normal in the last year and a half, and is now made accessible for the wider public. This article is to showcase some of the most recent research carried out by the museum and to briefly introduce the new permanent exhibition.

For four years, museologists at the Türr István Museum worked tirelessly to create a new, extensive permanent display. Between 2018 and 2020 the museum received financial support from altogether six funding bodies,⁶ along with funds provided by the City Council of Baja, making it possible for building work to start on 600 m² of exhibition space, later divided into eight units. The construction work was ongoing while the museum was closed during the coronavirus pandemic.

The exhibition showcases the history of Baja from the prehistory to the present-day. Upon entry, visitors are being led through a short introductory section about the history of the building that houses the museum, followed by archaeological collections displayed in the next two rooms. The assemblages are arranged chronologically, ranging from prehistory to the Late Medieval period, including the latest discoveries. So recent in fact, that the unique Bronze Age burial of Sükösd, excavated in December, 2020, is also included in the display. We are currently working on a time-lapse video footage which will help visitors to imagine the process of a Bronze Age burial ritual. In this particular grave belonging to a young woman – associated with the Tumulus Culture – dress ornaments were documented *in situ*: disc-headed crescent-shaped pins, disc-shaped pendants with a spike in their centres were found around her neck and at her feet. Spectacle spiral rings, along with solid, ribbed bracelets and large bronze legbands were



Fig. 1. Hemispherical amber bead from Sükösd

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Fig. 2. A section of the archaeological display showcasing the reconstruction of the Bronze Age burial of Sükösd (Unit 1. – Unearthly richness)

also discovered in the grave. One of the most spectacular objects of the burial was a hemispherical amber pendant, which was found strung into a necklace along with sea-shells and a tooth-shaped amber bead. The hemispherical bead reveals its true beauty when it is held against the light: the bright red circle of the amber encapsulates a cross pattern created by drilling through the object at a right angle – a Bronze Age symbol of light (Fig. 1.). In addition, a small ceramic cup, two sea-shells and a polished egg-like stone was also deposited at the young woman's feet (Fig. 2.). However, there are archaeological finds in our display collection dating to even earlier periods: in 2019, a 7000 year-old segment of a cemetery associated with the Neolithic community of the Sopot-Bicske culture, was unearthed at Dávod.

In the spring of 2021, another important rescue excavation was carried out by the museum: at Nemesnádudvar a cemetery segment dating to the first half of the 10th century came to light containing the graves of three 'warriors' buried during the Age of the Hungarian Conquest (Fig. 3.). One of these burials was particularly unique as the deceased was accompanied by its sabre, quiver containing seven arrowheads and a bow. At one end of the grave, from under the feet of the inhumation came the four shin bones and a skull of a horse. Horse equipment was also deposited in the grave:

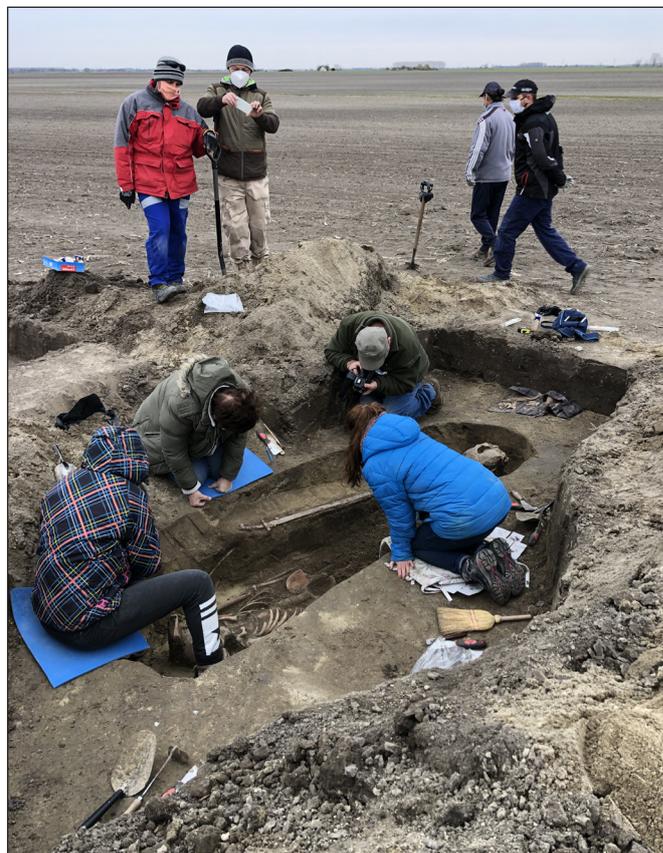


Fig. 3. The rescue excavation at Nemesnádudvar

two stirrups, a snaffle bit and a bridle buckle was documented (Fig. 4.).

However, the new permanent exhibition is arranged based on the key collections held by the museum: among these are the Middle Bronze Age cremation burials of the Kelebia 101 cemetery excavated by Elemér Zalotay in 1953, or the Sarmatian burials of Madaras-Halmok documented by Mihály Kőhegyi between 1963 and 1975. There are many Avar funerary assemblages showcased in the exhibition that are also linked to Mihály Kőhegyi: from the sites of Hajós–Cifrahegy, Sükösd–Ságod, Madaras–Téglavető or Mélykút–Sánc-dűlő. The rich burials excavated at Madaras–Árvai-dűlő represent the wealthier segment of a society during the time of the Hungarian Conquest (Fig. 5.).

From the Baja region, several, relatively large burial grounds (with a church in their focal points) are known from the Medieval period. In the centre of the Medieval exhibition display is the archaeological material discovered at Bátmonostor–Pusztafalu, presenting a selection of assemblages from several thousand burials, the excavated monastery and the manor house. In addition, in October, 2016, a church dating to the 14th-15th century was unearthed at Érsekcsanád – at the location of the Medieval village of Szentgyörgy – with uniquely painted and sculpted wall decoration details, along with ceramic and metal artefacts.



Fig. 4. Burial no. 1 at Nemesnádudvar



Fig. 5. A section of the archaeological display (Unit 2. – From Paganism to Christianity)



Fig. 6. A section of the ethnographic display (Unit 3. – Water and People)

The final archaeological display exhibits the assemblages excavated in the Medieval centre of Baja in 2018 and 2020, ranging from the 16th century to the present-day. Among these were Ottoman coins dating to the Ottoman occupation, representing the first significant finds from this time period. Several unique artefacts, such as a sun-dial carved of bone or a wire ornament with chain attachments originating from the Balkans came to light. The assemblages already on display were supplemented by artefacts collected by volunteer metal detectorists including stray finds from the Bronze Age, the Age of Hungarian Conquest and the Medieval period.

The ethnology section of the new permanent exhibition is organised around three key themes. The Danube and the floodplains around Baja played an important role and determined peoples lifestyles in the region. The section entitled *Water and People* showcases the traditions of fishing and water milling guilds along with the everyday lives and religious observations of people living near the water. The section exhibits a range of Danubian fish species through taxidermy specimens aided by a digital, virtual reality application.

The peaceful co-habitation of many different communities and ethnic groups resulted in the multifaceted society so characteristic of the northern Bácska (Fig. 6.). The section labelled *Ethnographic groups* gives a brief introduction to the ethnography, folklore and craftsmanship of the peoples settled in the region of Baja.

Apart from being an important trading centre in the 18th-19th centuries, Baja had a significant number of craftspeople living and working in the town generating a significant industry until the mid-20th century. The section entitled *Craftmanship and memory* pays tribute to a number of local craftspeople and their descendants by showcasing their family histories. Silver or gold coins that had fallen out of use were often constructed into necklaces and were utilised as characteristic dress ornaments by Hungarian and southern Slavic ethnic groups living in the northern Bácska region.

The third major unit of the permanent exhibition is the section on local history. 90% of the material displayed in these three rooms are from museum collections, the rest – mainly religious artefacts – is sourced from Roman Catholic, Calvinist and Lutheran religious communities.

The concept of display in this section traces the historical events of Baja town in chronological order from the first half of the 16th century to the second half of the 20th century. However, our aim was not to showcase all the significant events of the modern era, but to focus on the local relevance of the 1956 Revolution as a crucial event in Hungarian history. In the first room assemblages are presented from the 16th



Fig. 7. A section of the historical display (Unit 7.– Civic culture in Baja in the 19th century and the early 20th century)

until the 19th century: from the Ottoman Empire, to when Baja gained legislated market-town status and when it became a municipality. The second room displays the material culture characteristic to citizens of a 19th-20th century small town (Fig. 7.). The third room is dedicated to the memorabilia of the First World War, the Serbian occupation, the Second World War and the subsequent period, represented by collections of photographs, posters and leaflets.

With the support of the Interreg IPA projects, a unique online guide was developed for the permanent exhibition, through which visitors have the chance to participate in a specially created visitor experience at certain 'stations' or points of the exhibition by using a mobile application. In addition, AR and VR technology is integrated into both the archaeological and the ethnographic display, providing a unique learning experience in a playful, entertaining environment.

Alongside the permanent exhibition, the new open archaeological storage facility also opened its doors to the public, where archaeological collections were and continued to be stored. Thanks to community archaeology projects the number of finds in this section is ever increasing.

Archaeological research and heritage protection activities continued as normal during the pandemic. The most significant artefacts discovered through rescue work last year can now be viewed in the permanent exhibition: for example, a taller-assemblage from Érsekcsanád dating to the reign of Leopold I. is being displayed in the local history section, while the Sarmatian iron-tool assemblage from the vicinity of Sükösd is now curated in the open archaeological storage facility. Rescue excavations unearthing rich Bronze Age burials and graves dating to the Age of Hungarian Conquest were followed by planned and



Fig. 8. The planned excavation of the Nemesnádvar cemetery (dating to the Age of Hungarian Conquest) in collaboration with students from the University of Szeged

budgeted excavation seasons in 2021. The Bronze Age burials were excavated under the supervision of Emília Pásztor, while the unearthing of the Hungarian Conquest remains were led by Réka Cs. Andrási in collaboration with László Révész, the director of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Szeged, and his students (*Fig. 8.*). Furthermore, trial trenching followed by rescue work was carried out in the area of Jankó-dűlő, on the fringes of Baja, where a large Avar Period cemetery and a partial settlement was unearthed. The latter site was later fully-excavated, the digging work finished in November, 2021.

The processing of the finds from the Bronze Age cemetery of Sükösd and their scientific analyses began in collaboration with a number of research institutes, universities and other museums. Among these, the most significant is our collaboration with the Momentum-Mobility Research Group, who provides us with professional advice and opportunities for our material to be scientifically analysed.

Our plan is to continue excavating both the Bronze Age and the 10th century cemeteries, hopefully to their full extent supported by research funds, before the processing and publication of the data (in the form of conference presentations, booklets, exhibitions, museum education activities).

During the pandemic, we attempted to invite and guide our visitors through our virtual museum space. Our aim was to create an interesting, informative, entertaining learning environment and to provide a useful service accessible for a broad audience. Even for us, this was an insightful exercise, as it forced us to approach our collections from different perspectives and arrange them along contrasting themes, partly relying on archival material, and partly on the latest research outcomes. For example, for the online series on our museum objects entitled *Get to know our collections from the comfort of your home* – we selected artefacts from each of our collections (archaeology, local history, ethnography, art history, design history) these objects were then photographed and annotated for the use of the wider public. Funds provided by the City Council (EFOP 3.3.4-17-2017-00003) made it possible for museologists to prepare, record and make available their exhibition tours online. While the building of the museum was closed, visitors were able to take a virtual walk through the rooms of the Bagolyvár, the Bunyevác House, the Éber Memorial House and the István Nagy Gallery.