

EARLY AVAR CEMETERY IN BABARC. PRELIMINARY REPORT

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Archaeological investigations preceded the construction of a maintenance centre by the M6 motorway near Babarc (Baranya County, South-east Hungary) between August 2021 and January 2022. The works included trial excavations, followed by a full excavation of the area. The first phase was carried out by Zsolt Tóth and his team from the Janus Pannonius Museum in Pécs, while the full-scale excavations were conducted by Zsolt Gallina and Gyöngyi Gulyás from the Ásatárs Ltd. in cooperation with Réka Neményi, who participated in the project as an expert of the Museum. The quadrangular uninterrupted excavation area, of more than three hectares, in the multi-period site, comprised a total of 41 Early Avar burials (Fig. 1). The burials were scattered all over the excavation area, representing only part of a cemetery that is, currently, one of the most important sites of the period not only because of the abundance and richness of grave goods but due also to the complexity of the funerary customs observed and the fact that the graves were very little plundered.

Keywords: Early Avar Period, South-east Transdanubia, elite burials, burial customs

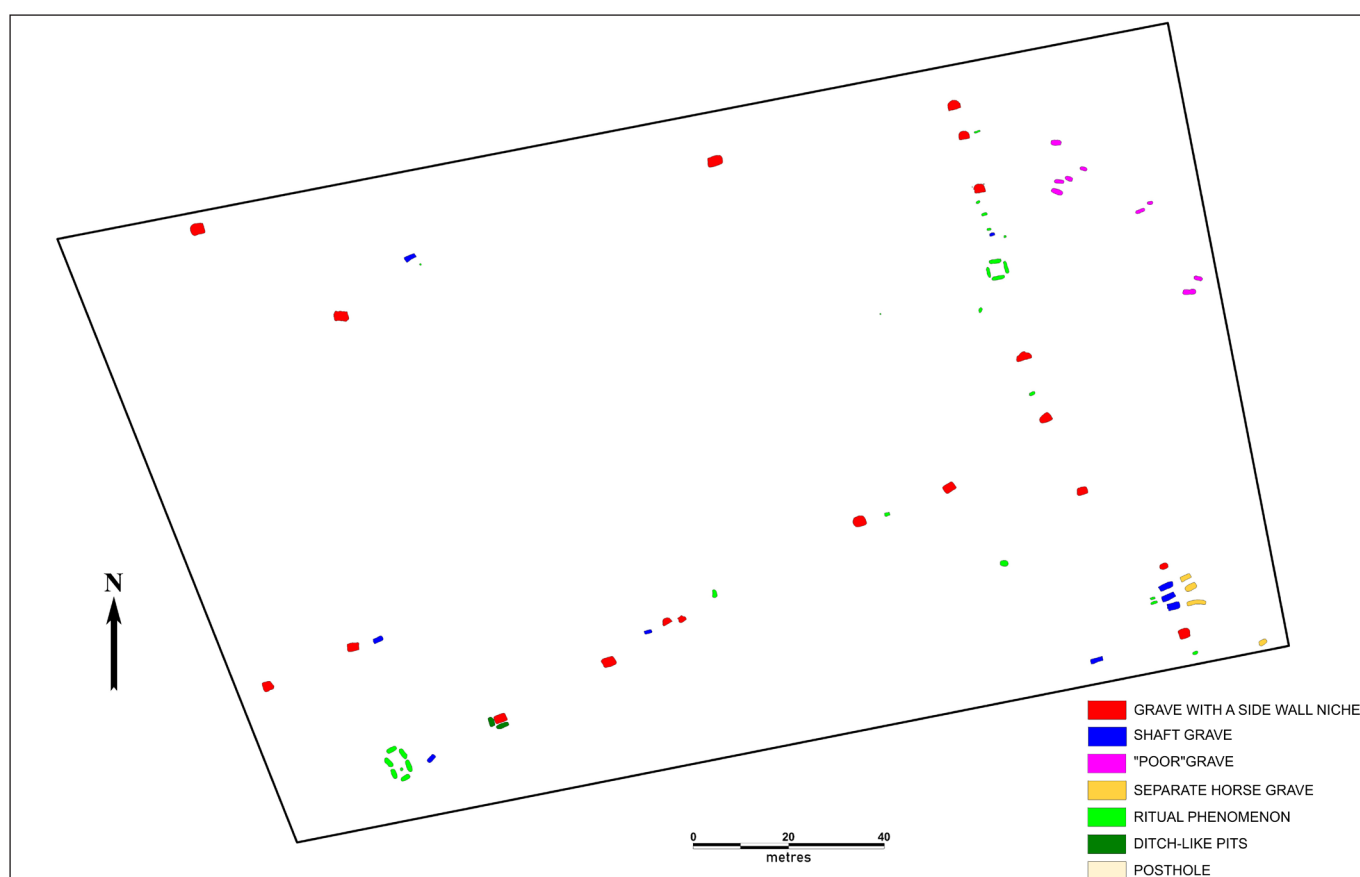


Fig. 1. Survey map of the excavation area with Avar Period features (by Ferenc György, Péter Czukur, and Zsolt Tóth)

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FUNERARY CUSTOMS IN THE CEMETERY OF BABARC

The character of the cemetery

The cemetery part discovered in the surroundings of Babarc is unlike most Early Avar Period row cemeteries in Eastern Transdanubia. The graves are positioned separately or cluster in small groups, the members of which are occasionally more than ten metres apart. For example, S-100, a solitary grave, had its nearest neighbours fifty metres to the east and 65 metres to the west, respectively. Péter Tomka mentions similar “funerary districts” in Börös-Nagydomb, a coeval cemetery with a similar arrangement in the Little Hungarian Plain (TOMKA 2005, 160–161). Since its discovery, cemeteries with a similar structure have also been discovered in the Danube-Tisza Interfluvium (BALOGH 2016, 36–39) and the Trans-Tisza region (LÖRINCZY & RÁCZ 2014, 166–167; CSEH & VARGA 2017, 448–449). The number of excavated graves in Babarc, however, is significantly higher compared to these sites, mainly due to the extent of the excavation area. According to the observations of Attila Kiss, cemetery B of Kölked-Feketekapu also comprised groupings of graves, but those were always arranged around buildings (HAJNAL 2012, 639–640).

It was not possible to determine the perimeters of the cemetery anywhere; it most probably extends over the excavated area in all directions. In the excavation area, lesser grave clusters were observed in an L-shaped zone, suggesting a relatively short, only two- to three-decade-long use period for the cemetery. Perhaps each grave cluster represents a micro-community (i.e., a family). The observed cemetery structure might also be the result of short-time use, as in the north- and south-eastern parts, where graves were more in number and closer to each other, rows appear in some funerary districts. Besides, the excavated area contained a grave group distinct from the rest of the cemetery, with characteristics that raise a question about the social position of the ones interred in them. These graves formed a separate cluster in the north-eastern zone of the excavation area; they contained no or little grave goods, were oriented opposite to most Early Avar burials, and the grave pits were also shallower. These graves were conditionally assigned to the Avar Period based on a single silver spherical pendant earring found in a secondary position amongst some human bones in one of them.⁶

Shaft graves

More than half of the graves (22) were simple shaft graves, with a grave pit with vertical walls and a flat horizontal bottom. In one case (S-73), the southern side wall had a narrow shelf. Just like in the cemetery of Babarc, Early Avar Period burials in the Trans-Tisza region usually have narrow, long grave pits with a length-width ratio often over 3:1 (LÖRINCZY & RÁCZ 2014, 172). In two cases (S-4 and 25), a horizontal, circular groove was observed in the grave pit's walls, marking the attaching of the one-time plank cover.

Graves with a side wall niche

About 19, 46% of the excavated burials in Babarc had grave pits with a side wall niche. These are so-called “complex burials”, where the deceased and the offered animals were spatially separated (Figs. 2–3). These burials comprised a grave pit with a niche dug into either side wall; the body of the deceased was placed into those niches. Most Early Avar Period graves with a side wall niche are known from the Trans-Tisza region, but such burials also occur in the Danube-Tisza Interfluvium. Their design shows minor territorial differences: while east of the Danube, the niches were usually dug into the right side wall, west of it, into the left one; while the main shaft of the graves in the territory of Bács-Kiskun County was empty, in the Trans-Tisza region, animal offerings were placed there in almost all cases (LÖRINCZY & STRAUB 2006, 277–279; BALOGH 2016, 43–44). Recently, research has outlined a distinct group of graves with a side wall niche that appeared already in the Early Avar Period in Southeast Transdanubia (e.g., Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út, graves no. 268, 269, 314, 335, and 351; Kölked-Feketekapu cemetery B, Grave no. 88, and Mohács-Téglagyár Grave no. 3; GULYÁS *in press*; KISS 1974, 138–142). All burials of this group contained a partial animal offering in the main shaft, and the niche was always cut into the right side wall; based on these characteristics, they may

⁶ The results of the currently ongoing radiocarbon analyses may confirm or refuse this dating.



Fig. 2. S-100, a grave with a side wall niche
(photo by Ferenc György)

be linked with the burials of the Trans-Tisza region. The cemetery unearthed at Babarc also belongs to this group.

Most graves with a side wall niche were the final resting places of men, most of who were interred with their weapons. In graves S-5 and 88 the niche did not collapse entirely, allowing us to record its arched top. The grooves that held the planks closing off the niche were visible along the entrance of the niche in almost all cases and sometimes also in the two end walls of the grave. In the Babarc cemetery, the niches were always dug into the northern side wall of the grave pit. Unlike customary in the Trans-Tisza region, women in Babarc were usually interred without animal offerings (S-17, 32, 62, 64); only the main shaft of grave S-28 contained the partial remains of a sheep. The arrangement in grave S-96 was peculiar: while the mourners have dug a niche into the grave pit's wall, they placed the deceased into the main shaft instead, leaving it empty, and stretched the flayed hide of a cattle, with the skull and lower leg bones still in place, over the body.



Fig. 3. S-104, a grave with a side wall niche
(photo by Ferenc György)

Animal offerings

Partial horses

Graves S-1, 24, 43, and 91 contained no complete horses but only cranial and lower leg bones, probably indicating flayed hides. Such partial horses occurred in both shaft graves and those with a side wall niche. Partial horse remains were always placed left of the body: in one case, the hide was positioned away from the body, while in three cases, next to it and on the same level, suggesting that the horse remains at Babarc were not separated from humans, unlike customary in coeval burials in the Trans-Tisza region. Similar arrangements were recorded in Biharkeresztes-Lencsés-hát in the Trans-Tisza region, where the horse remains were found next to the deceased on its right side (LÖRINCZY 2015, 159). Like in Biharkeresztes, the horsehide in Babarc Grave S-25 was placed between the coffin and the grave pit's wall. The orientation of the partial horses always matched the humans' in the graves.

Partial horse remains in numbers appear in the Trans-Tisza region (NÉMETHI & KLIMA 1992, 177) in the Early Avar Period. As for Transdanubia, the cemetery at Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út contained the remains of ten animals in eight burials, while grave no. 87 in cemetery B at Kölked-Feketekapu, a single one (GULYÁS *in press*). Each grave with a horse offering in Babarc contained the remains of a single animal.

Horse offerings can also be classified based on occurring elements of horse harnesses and their position within the grave – although they are not always discovered in a use position (LÖRINCZY & RÁCZ 2014,

174–175). Based on this characteristic, the burials from Babarc form distinct groups: the horse in grave S-43 had no harness, while those in graves S-1, 25, 91, 94, and 98 had both bits, stirrups, a bridle, and a breaching. The saddle in grave S-1 must have been placed on top of the lower limbs of the deceased, as the stirrups were found next to the outer sides of the leg bones.

Partial cattles

A flayed hide, containing the head and the lower legs, was placed into the shaft of grave S-96 (Fig. 4). This funerary custom was common in the Trans-Tisza region at the time,⁷ and also appeared in Transdanubia: graves no. 314 and 742 in the cemetery at Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út contained the partial remains of one cattle each. The distribution of partial animal offerings in that cemetery reflects a gender-based distinction: while men's burials contained partial horses, women's graves were fitted with partial cattle or sheep. Although a statistical evaluation of the phenomenon's occurrence in the Trans-Tisza region is yet to be carried out, minor sites in the area seem to reflect similar tendencies (GULYÁS *in press*).



Fig. 4. S-96, burial with remains of a flayed cattlehide in the main shaft (photo by Ferenc György)

Partial sheep and goats

Several graves comprised leg bones and skulls of small ruminants. Just like with partial cattle and horse remains, these could be considered simple animal offerings. The phenomenon was widespread in the Trans-Tisza region: about six hundred sheep offerings are known from Szegvár-Oromdűlő (Гуяш, Лёринци & Строчков 2019, 118). Besides, analogies also appear in South-east Transdanubia (e.g., Kölked-Feketekapu cemetery B, Grave no. 88 and Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út Grave no. 269; GULYÁS *in press*).

Sheep skulls and leg bones were positioned at several places in the graves. In grave S-28, the sheep remains were put into the main shaft. This arrangement is typical in the Trans-Tisza region and occurs in the grave of Kölked mentioned above. In some cases, however, the flayed skin was rolled up and placed at the feet or head of the deceased (S-1, 30, 93). This particular phenomenon has only been noticed by research recently but, based on its occurrence at Szegvár-Oromdűlő, seems significant. It is worth having in sight when evaluating the findings related to the custom that partial sheep remains in burials in the Eastern European steppe region are – with only two known exceptions – always placed right next to the deceased (GULYÁS & LÖRINCZY 2020).

The flaying method

All animals were bone-cut flayed: the radial and shinbones (*radius* and *tibia*) were separated at their distal ends with an oblique cut. This flaying technique was known in the Early Avar Period in the Trans-Tisza

⁷ About four hundred partial cattle offerings are known from Szegvár-Oromdűlő and 249 from Makó-Mikócsa (Гуяш, Лёринци & Строчков 2019, 118; BALOGH 2020, 133).

region (LÖRINCZY 1991, 132; 1998, 344) and the northern coastal region of the Black Sea. In Babarc, not only horses but also cattle and small ruminants were flayed this way.

Food offerings

Sheep rump

Several burials contained the rump bones and some vertebrae of sheep. These bones belong to the rump of the animal, comprising the rump bone, the lumbar, and the lower thoracic vertebrae. Sheep's tail contains large amounts of tail fat, a kind of suet, and counted among the most precious meats often offered to the most significant guest. Sheep rumps as grave goods first appeared in Central and Eastern Europe during the Hun Period (see, e.g., a grave near Árpás; ТОМКА 2001, 164). This kind of food offering was common in the Trans-Tisza region in the Early Avar Period, even if early excavations failed to record its presence (Гуяш, Лёринци & СТРОКОВ 2019, 119). Sheep rump remains were recovered from 76 graves in Szegvár-Oromdűlő, and further analogies are known from Early Avar Period graves in Biharkeresztes-Lencsésbát, Tiszavasvári-Kashalomdűlő, Apátfalva-Nagyút-dűlő, Kövegy-Nagy-földek, and Makó-Mikócsa-halom. Of the 5–7th-century AD burials in Eastern Europe, eight contained sheep rump remains (Гуяш, Лёринци & СТРОКОВ 2019, 119–120). The position of this food offering inside the grave seems to have been strictly regulated: it was mainly placed beside the head. Some graves unearthed in Babarc (S-25, 91) also followed this arrangement.

Non-small ruminant food offerings

Food offerings were placed in almost all graves. Besides small ruminant parts, a grave (S-104) contained cattle bones, while the remains of the back of some kind of poultry were recovered from graves S-1 and 32.

Separate horse burials

The separate grave group in the south-eastern zone of the excavation area comprised four individual horse burials (S-86, 87, 117, 145). The horses were interred in a prone position in the narrow grave pits. Their owners probably lay west of them in the three men's burials not containing a horse, discovered in the area. Separate horse burials in the Early Avar Period were characteristic of Transdanubia in the first place (NÉMETHI & KLIMA 1992, 177), with only a few known occurrences in the Trans-Tisza region (Szőreg, cemetery B, Grave no. 116⁸ and Kiszombor-Tanyahalmi dűlő, graves no. 7 and 38; BALOGH 2016, 55). Based on the Transdanubian focus of its distribution and the Gepidic and Longobard antecedents of the custom, Csilla Balogh raised the possibility of its Merovingian origin (BALOGH 2016, 54–55). All four horses buried in the Babarc cemetery were harnessed. The animal in S-145 only had a loose-ring bit, while the harnesses of the others comprised iron strap buckles and silver mounts. Besides, S-86 and 87 contained a spearhead each.



Fig. 5. S-145, a separate horse burial (photo by Gábor Barta)

⁸ This burial was linked with the Gepid cemetery part by Attila Kiss (Kiss 2015, 234).

Linking horses and spears is a funerary custom appearing in several cemeteries in South-east Transdanubia (Kölked-Feketekapu cemetery A, Grave no. 474 and Zamárdi-Rétiföldek Graves no. 73, 130, 515, 580 and 635; KISS 1996, 113, Abb. 20; vö. GARAM 2018, 257–258, Abb. 149–150). Conclusively, the separate horse burials in the cemetery of Babarc may be interpreted as representing an influence of nearby Germanic communities in the area.

Traces of other ritual activities

We have identified the traces of various ritual activities – pits and specific ritual places – at various points of the cemetery in Babarc (GALLINA ET AL. 2022). Seven high-quality “Asian-type” arrowheads with traces of red paint, interred in a wooden box fastened with flat-headed nails (*Fig. 6*) were discovered in a shallow pit in the north-western zone of the excavation area (GALLINA ET AL. 2022, 310, 4. kép).

Shallow pits, their infill comprising small ruminant bones and pottery sherds, were also unearthed around the grave cluster in the south-eastern zone. Another ritual place was identified in the south-western zone: one of the graves was engirded by a pair of shallow trenches (GALLINA ET AL. 2022, 313); west of that, six trench-like long pits fenced off a quadrangular space with a posthole at its southernmost third (*Fig. 7*). Two arrowheads and a gold rosette-shaped horse harness mount were recovered from one of the features, while the infill of another contained the fragments of a spouted pottery jug with stamped decoration (GALLINA ET AL. 2022, 312, 7. kép 1).



*Fig. 6. Finds from S-44, a ritual feature
(photo by Gyögyi Gulyás)*



*Fig. 7. Ritual area in the south-western zone
(photo by Ferenc György)*

The largest ritual place was identified in the north-eastern excavation zone. It also comprised a space delimited by four elongated pits (GALLINA ET AL. 2022, 312–313, 7. kép 2), the infills of two of which comprised pottery sherds, while the others, fragmented bronze and gilded bronze mounts. One of the pits (S-67) also contained a triangular gold plate mount with punched decoration that once ornated the rim of a wooden vessel. Its analogies may be found on a wooden drinking cup in the burial of a supposed Avar khagan interred near Kunbábony (H. TÓTH & HORVÁTH 1992, Taf. 6. 40–41) and amongst the goods recovered from Grave no. 19 at Andocs-Újhalastó (GARAM 2002, 92, Abb. 19). Shallow pits containing pottery fragments, glass beads and small ruminant bones were discovered in the immediate vicinity of three burials with a side wall niche (GALLINA ET AL. 2022, 311–312), while a bronze mirror and sheep bones were interred west-southwest of the quadrangular ritual area in the north-eastern zone (GALLINA ET AL. 2022, 310, 5. kép).

Similar, separately interred (deposited) find assemblages have not been previously known from the Early Avar Period. The only exception is a cemetery at Kövegy-Nagy-földek, where two pits containing pottery sherds and animal bones were unearthed between the graves, while in four cases, round or quadrangular ditches engirded the graves (BENEDEK & MARCSIK 2017, 383–386) – a unique phenomenon in the period,

with analogies, currently, only in Babarc. An elongated, NE-SW oriented pit, comprising the skulls and mandibles of horses, cattle, and sheep, a Martinovka-type strap end, and the fragments of a hand-formed jug, was discovered near Csanádpalota. The phenomenon was interpreted as a sacrificial place, but this hypothesis currently lacks evidence as the excavated area did not contain any other Early Avar Period feature (GULYÁS 2018). As a result of manual (instead of mechanical) soil removal, such phenomena are more frequently discovered in the steppe region. For example, a burnt soil stain was observed near a solitary burial in Ilovatka (Volga Region, Russia). It marked a pit, the infill of which contained the fragments of two or three vessels and silver belt mounts (СМИРНОВ 1959, 219–220). The remains of at least thirteen horses, cattle remains, sherds of hand-formed pottery vessels, and the fragments of two cauldrons were recovered from around Grave no. 12 in Kurgan 1 in Vostochny Malai, partially from the infill of the trench engirding the burial mound (ЛИМБЕРИС & МАРЧЕНКО 2011, 420–421).

FIND MATERIAL

Jewellery items

The most frequent jewellery type in the cemetery at Babarc was earrings. Fourteen graves contained gold and two silver earrings (Fig. 8), which seem to have been worn with no regard to gender or age, mostly in pairs but sometimes as single items. Gold sheet pyramid pendant earrings have been recovered from several graves. Those found in graves S-32 and 93 belong to the Szentendre type, a large earring variant widespread in the Carpathian Basin but only known in Transdanubia from Inota and Rábapordány (BALOGH 2014, 121–122). Grave S-64 contained a Velika Kladuša-type plate earring. This variant mainly appears in sites along the Danube; stray finds of the type are known from Dávod, Fadd, and Rácalmás (BALOGH 2014, 109–110). Several large spherical pendant earrings represent the Páhi-puszta sub-type of the Szentendre type. According to a survey by János Ormándy, this variant was widespread mainly in the Danube-Tisza Interfluvium and the Trans-Tisza region but sometimes also occurred in South-east Transdanubia in graves of both women and men. It must be noted that – just like in Babarc – the occurrence of the variant seems to be linked, amongst men's graves, with rich ones containing weapons as well (ORMÁNDY 1995, 157–158). Graves S-2, 25, and 30 contained gold bead pendant earrings representing a variant with a composite connecting part. One features a large bead connecting to four gold granules; its close analogy has been recovered from Grave no. 152 at Nagypall (BALOGH & PÁSZTOR 2015, 643, 10. kép 5–6).

Mainly women and children wore pendants, pierced coins, coins with a suspension handle (S-2, 32, 72), and beads on their necks. In Grave S-28, several silver sheet beads were recovered from amongst the vertebrae of the neck. Such beads are characteristic of the mid-7th century AD (630s–670s), occurring mainly in graves of the period in the Trans-Tisza region (LŐRINCZY & RÁCZ 2014, 155–156). While Attila Kiss interpreted a collared ribbed sphere as part of a spherical pendant earring (KISS 1974, 137, Fig. 15), it is more probable that the object was actually a metal sheet bead. The boy in grave S-30 wore a string of multiple pendants and two glass beads with eye-shaped inlays (*“szemesgyöngy”* in Hungarian). One of the pendants was a gold sheet *bullā* (small barrel-shaped container pendant) decorated with pseudo-granules arranged in a triangle around the root of the suspension handle; the second pendant an elongated, narrow,



Fig. 8. A selection of gold finds from the cemetery (photo by Zsolt Tóth)

and axe-shaped, while the third, a cast silver cross with a suspension handle. The fourth object strung on the necklace was a bronze pinsel. The appearance of cylindrical bullas in Avar territories from the Middle Avar Period reflects Byzantine influence in the area; one of the earliest – Early Avar Period – examples is known from Grave no. 8 in Keszthely-Fenékpuszta-Horreum (VIDA 2011, 407). The woman in grave S-32 in Babarc had a necklace consisting of several glass and amethyst beads with two gold coins with suspension handles, half of a golden agraffe, and two gold-framed medallions with green stone inlays.

The deceased in grave S-28 wore a pair of closed silver bracelets with a hinged and lavishly filigreed round head on their arms. These artefacts are unique; their only analogy is known from a hoard discovered near Čađavica in North-east Croatia (GARAM 2001, 385, Taf. 134). The boy interred in grave S-30 wore an open silver bracelet with funnel-shaped ends on the right arm and an iron bracelet on the left. Such silver bracelets in Avar sites are usually interpreted as imports from Byzantine territory. Most of the few known analogies have been discovered in the territory of Baranya County (e.g., Bóly-Sziebert puszta, Cserkút, Pécs-Gyárvaros, Pécs-Kertváros, Pécs-Köztető), that is, near Babarc (GARAM 2001, 67–69; VIDA 2018). The woman in grave S-32 wore a pair of hinged closed silver bracelets, the analogy to which may be found in the find assemblage of the so-called khagan's grave at Kunbábony (H. TÓTH & HORVÁTH 1992, 37, Taf. 13). The deceased in grave S-107 also wore a silver jewellery item around their left wrist. It was in extremely poor condition and could only be reconstructed as possibly a band bracelet.

Weapons

Eight burials contained swords with a total length between 92 and 118 centimetres. The scabbards were decorated with silver mounts; five of them were also fitted with P-shaped suspension handles (those in graves S-1, 3, 98, 100, and 107). P-shaped suspension handles in the Carpathian Basin were usually attached to sword scabbards but sometimes also to those of daggers, as is the case with the dagger in grave S-104, the analogy to which is known from Grave no. 815 of the Szegvár-Oromdűlő cemetery (LŐRINCZY 2020, 718, 354. kép 8). Daggers with P-shaped suspension handles also occur in Langobard find assemblages in Italia; those finds have usually been interpreted as representing Byzantine influence (CSIKY 2015, 313–314). The dagger in grave S-104 – just like an iron knife in grave S-100 – was lying crosswise over the hip bones. As several coeval wall paintings and statues in Inner and Central Asia depict daggers worn in a similar position (КУБАРЕВ 2015, 34, рис. 5, 35, рис. 6; КУБАРЕВ & КУБАРЕВ 2013, 40, 44, 59, 72), it may be rightfully assumed that the dagger and the knife in Babarc were found in a wearing position.

Several men's graves and two separate horse burials contained reed-shaped iron spearheads. The spearhead in grave S-100 featured an extremely long socket, the lower part of which had disintegrated into bands by the time of discovery, while the upper part had been fitted with a pair of horizontal projections (Fig. 9). The German term for the type is "*Hakenlanze*" meaning "hooked spear". Such spears first appeared in the western provinces of the Roman Empire during the 4th century AD, and the type remained in use throughout the following centuries, although only became widespread in the 8th century AD (CSIKY 2015, 339–340). Only three examples are known from the Carpathian Basin: the spear from Early Avar context in Babarc and two Late Avar finds from Devinská Nová Ves in Slovakia and Söjtör in Hungary (CSIKY 2015, 136).



Fig. 9. Hooked spear from Grave S-100 (photo by Gábor Barta)

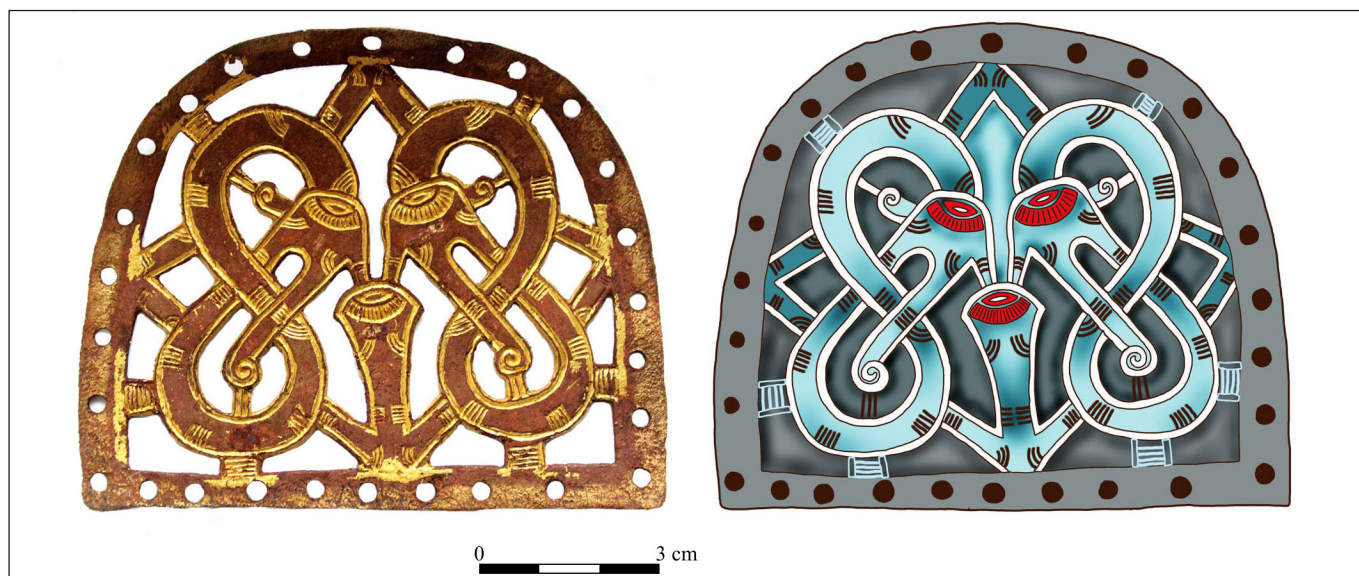


Fig. 10. Quiver mount from Grave S-100 and its interpretation (photo by Gábor Barta, digital drawing by Edit Ambrus)

Antler bow plates were recovered from eight burials (S-1, 2, 3, 94, 98, 100, 104, and 107). Based on their position in the grave, the bows were placed into the graves undrawn and could be about 140–150 cm long. Traces of quivers were recorded in five graves (S-1, 2, 94, 100, and 104). The quivers in graves S-2 and S-104 were fitted with antler plates featuring carved floral ornaments, and the pair of bronze mounts (a decorated openwork piece on the front and a “plain” one on the back) in grave S-100 probably also belonged to a quiver (Fig. 10). The openwork mount plate features an interlace pattern with *Zahnschnitt* (small line bundles) decoration and traces of gilding; the central motif resembles the second Germanic animal style. The artefact has a close analogy in the region: a golden disc brooch from Grave no. 119 in Kölked-Feketekapu, cemetery B (VIDA 2018, 63–64).

Horse harness parts

All horses – both complete and partial ones – were interred harnessed in Babarc. All shanks were simple loose-ring bits save for a full-cheek bit in grave S-86. Full-cheek bits are relatively rare in the Early Avar Period; they are entirely absent from sites in the Trans-Tisza region, appearing only in large cemeteries in Transdanubia (e.g., Zamárdi-Rétföldek Grave no. 350 and Kölked-Feketekapu cemetery A, Grave no. 474; GARAM 2018, 257, Abb. 149; KISS 1996, 500, Taf. 86). The record of the Babarc cemetery comprised both loop- and long-eyed stirrups, both widespread types in the period.

Horse harness straps – not only those of the headpiece but also the ones belonging to the breaching – were often decorated with mounts. These mounts were mainly pressed hemispherical silver pieces, sometimes gilded, but rosette-, drop-shaped and quadrangular specimens have also been recovered. Shamrock-shaped mounts were found in grave S-89 and four-part articulated mounts in grave S-107. Due to favourable taphonomic conditions, including the soil’s character and the conserving effect of the large amount of corroding metal mounts, we could observe the traces of horse harness straps in several cases, allowing us to reconstruct the width of the straps used in harnesses in this period.

A less-researched find group of Avar Period horse harnesses is fittings made of antler. A carved antler strap buckle was discovered by the horse’s skeleton in S-89; according to Péter Tomka, who recently collected antler buckles from the period’s sites, the related finds show such a large formal variety that cannot be classified into types. Antler strap buckles are characteristic of the 6–7th-century record, appearing in assemblages throughout the Carpathian Basin; from Southern Transdanubia, however, only two specimens are known (Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út and -Tószegi-dűlő; TOMKA 2018). The same burial also contained a bone cylinder with a punched ring-dot pattern. The function of these objects has only been identified

recently: they were used to adjust the height of the stirrup (GULYÁS & LŐRINCZY 2018a, 98–99). The type is more frequent in Avar Period assemblages than one would think but seems completely missing from sites in the Danube-Tisza Interfluve. The geographically closest analogies to the specimen from Babarc are known from Transdanubia, Grave no. 474 in cemetery A, and B 135 in cemetery B at Kölked-Feketekapu. The ring-dot decoration is also a characteristic of Pannonian specimens. S-87, a separate horse burial, contained a pair of flat strap fasteners that once belonged to the strapping of the stirrups.

Belts and belt fittings

Men's funerary costumes included, in almost every case, a belt with gilded silver, silver, or, rarely, precious-metal-inlaid iron mounts and fittings. Male children were also given belts: the boy in grave S-30 wore a belt decorated with Fönlak-type pressed silver mounts. According to the current academic view, Fönlak-type mounts, consisting of three hemispheres, were coming from Byzantine territory; their production in the Carpathian Basin, however, seems to be confirmed by the pressing moulds discovered in a fine metalsmith's grave at Fönlak (today: Felnac, Romania; GARAM 2001, 117). Fönlak-type mounts occur mainly in assemblages from areas by the lower course of the Maros River and Southern Transdanubia; the Transdanubian pieces are much higher quality (GARAM 2001, 117–119). The geographically closest analogy to the pieces from Babarc may be found in Grave 647 in cemetery A in Kölked-Feketekapu (GARAM 2001, 115).

Everyday tools

Some women were interred with a knife (S-73, 96) or a spindle whorl (S-17). Furthermore, a bronze mirror (a so-called “nomadic mirror”) was recovered from Grave S-62. Such mirrors first appeared in the Carpathian Basin with the Huns, and the type has become extremely rare by Avar times. Most pieces are known from assemblages from the Danube-Tisza Interfluve, while the type only occurs in other regions occasionally (LŐRINCZY 2015, 166). The few known nomadic mirrors from Transdanubian assemblages include the finds from Grave no. 58 in Csákberény-Orondpuszta and Grave no. 205 in Zamárdi-Rétiföldek (BALOGH 2016, 247). In Babarc, one of the graves (S-73) also contained a bone comb. The occurrence of bone combs in Avar Period assemblages is usually interpreted as reflecting Germanic influence; most such finds from Avar context are known from sites in Southern Transdanubia (KISS 1992, 53) but occasionally also appear in coeval assemblages in the Trans-Tisza region (Kövegy-Nagy-földek Grave no. 9, Szegvár-Oromdűlő Grave no. 1, Tiszavasvári-Koldusdomb Grave no. 5 and Hódmezővásárhely-Kishomok Grave no. 22; GULYÁS & LŐRINCZY 2018, 558).

Men's everyday tools included their purses and their content. A Salona-Histria-type purse buckle and the related strap end have been discovered in Grave S-3. Such fittings were mass products from Byzantine territory, appearing in both the Balkans and the Mediterranean (see ТРАЙКОВА 2017, 91–92 with further literature). According to a survey by Éva Garam, the type in the Carpathian Basin was popular in Transdanubia in the first place; eight of the eleven known specimens have been found there, four of those in the nearby cemetery A in Kölked-Feketekapu (GARAM 2001, 109). Iron fire strikers were found in two graves (S-93, 94); based on their position within the grave, both were stored in a purse or hung from the belt.

Byzantine coins⁹

Coin finds clearly reflect the significance of the site: altogether, thirteen gold coins – nine *solidi*, two *tremissi*, and two *semissi* – have been recovered from eleven of the burials (S-1, 2, 3, 5, 17, 30, 32, 71, 88, 100, 107). With such findings, the cemetery is unique in the Avar Period as Byzantine coins in such quantities have never been found in any coeval site before. Before the discovery of this site, a total of sixty burials containing coins were known from the Avar Period; with the addition of the finds from Babarc, the number increased by almost 20% to 71. Coins were added to the graves for two distinct purposes: the pieces placed

⁹ We are grateful to Péter Somogyi and Balázs Nagy for identifying the coins.

around the head or in the mouth were *oboli* (10 cases), while the pierced ones and those fitted with a suspension handle were worn on necklaces. Two graves (S-2, 32) contained Byzantine gold coins both as *oboli* and pendants. The coins were minted between the reigns of Justin II and Heraclius (between AD 565 and 641); most *solidi* (7 pieces) were issued between AD 602 and 626, four by Phocas and three by Heraclius. The youngest coin was a solidus by Heraclius and Heraclius Constantine, issued around AD 616–625.

Vessels

Different kinds of slow-wheeled cups and pots and wheel-turned spouted jugs are frequent additions to the graves in Babarc. A small glazed jug was placed by the deceased's skull in Grave S-88; the vessel seems to be a reused local Late Roman piece or a Byzantine import.¹⁰

Silver drinking horns were discovered in Graves S-1 and 30 (Fig. 11), and Grave S-1 also contained a silver cup. Both types are extremely rare in Avar Period assemblages: the only analogies are the gold mounts of a *rhyton* made from organic materials (probably wood) from Bócsa, a golden piece from the Kunbábony assemblage (H. TÓTH & HORVÁTH 1992, 36, Taf. 8) and another one from Szeged-Átokháza (GARAM 2002, 98–99). The closest analogy to the drinking horn from Babarc was probably a silver rhyton from Grave no. 3 of the cemetery at Kunpeszér (unpublished) which but decayed completely (BALOGH 2016, 72). The drinking horn discovered at Ozora-Tótipusztá has also perished (PROHÁSZKA 2012, 74–76). A further analogy, a gold sheet drinking horn may be found in the Mala Pereščepina hoard outside the Carpathian Basin (ЛІБОВА 1989, 48).



Fig. 11. S-30, a grave with a side wall niche and the drinking horn it contains (photo by Gyöngyi Gulyás, drawing by Edit Ambrus)

The bronze bands discovered by the skull of the deceased in grave S-30 indicate a wooden vessel, as do the mounts recovered from the sacrificial pit S-67. Glass vessels were found in two graves (S-2 and 3); the glass cup and jug represent a rare and unique type of imported Byzantine artefacts (GARAM 2001, 171–173).

SUMMARY

An exceptionally rich Early Avar Period cemetery part was unearthed at Babarc–Autópálya mérnökségi telep [Babarc–Motorway Maintenance Centre]. The site is significant not only because of the abundance

¹⁰ S-88 was the only grave in the cemetery that contained two vessels.

of gold and silver jewellery items and mounts and weapons but also due to the unusually high number of Byzantine coins in the find material.

The observed funerary customs link the community with communities of Eastern European steppe origin that resided in the Trans-Tisza Region; both the dominant E-W orientation (including its variants), the presence of graves with a side wall niche, the partial animal offerings, the bone-cut flaying method, and the sheep rump as a food offering point to this region (and, indirectly, Eastern Europe). At the same time, the relatively high proportion of separate horse burials and the iron-banded wooden buckets placed in the graves instead of ceramic vessels represent an influence of local communities following Germanic traditions. As it was suggested above, the appearance of material traits characteristic of the Trans-Tisza Region in South-east Transdanubia is not restricted to Babarc; some burials in the cemeteries at Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út and Kölked-Feketekapu cemetery B, as well as the (as far as we know, solitary) burial at Mohács-Téglagyár follow the same rite. The cemetery at Babarc, however, differs from both Szekszárd and Kölked: while in those cases, the newly arrived community of eastern origin continued an already existing cemetery (positioning their graves with no regard to the original cemetery order), the community at Babarc established their graveyard in an entirely new, empty place.¹¹

While funerary customs unanimously point towards the Trans-Tisza Region, the material culture of the community embraces diverse cultural traits. The comb and the banded buckets in the graves may be interpreted as an influence of local Merovingian communities. The hooked spear and the supposed quiver mount in grave S-100 also have Germanic origins, but these items may reflect the extensive Western connections of the local elite instead. A group characterised by a material culture of Italian and Balkan origin resided in the area of Pécs in the Early Avar Period; their attire was in many respects similar to that of the people of the Keszthely Culture by the Lake Balaton (Vida 2018, 230–234). These communities also influenced the fashion appearing in the graves at Babarc, as testified by the *bullae* and the funnel-end pressed silver bracelet, and perhaps the Čadavica-type bracelets and belt fittings as well, as the eponymous site of those types lies only 80 km away from Babarc. Reed-shaped spearheads, big, high-quality arrowheads, and some ritual phenomena may be linked with Avars from Inner Asia, while the popularity of large spherical and pyramid-pendant earrings connects the local community with the Trans-Tisza Region.

Although the richness of findings in the cemetery at Babarc is unparalleled, several significant necropolises that relate to our site in one way or another are known in the microregion. With 1324 graves in total, the cemeteries A and B at Kölked-Feketekapu are amongst the largest in the Avar Period. The evaluation of the funerary customs and the find material has revealed that Cemetery A was a burial place mainly of the local community with Merovingian ties, while Cemetery B also comprised elements of Inner Asian Avar origin (Vida 2018, 199–201). Considering its size and the number of Byzantine artefacts in its record, the necropolis at Bóly-Sziebert-puszta is more similar to the Babarc cemetery. As we have little information on funerary customs, the cultural ties of the local community could not be determined thus far (Vida 2018, 187–189).

The coins and the artefact types date the unearthed cemetery part to the AD 620/30–660/70s. That was an eventful period in the history of the Avar Khaganate. The unsuccessful siege of Constantinople in AD 626 brought about instability within the Khaganate, resulting in considerable inner migration and the emergence of new elites; perhaps the foundation of the cemetery at Babarc may also be linked to these events. The appearance of the warrior elite was definitely related to the accession of Transdanubia. Based on the dating of the recovered coins and its “only just started” character, the use of the cemetery can currently be linked to a single generation. After the community had abandoned the place, the only partially filled burial ground became forgotten, and most graves became unrecognizable – a process furthered by their being scattered all over the area. These fortunate circumstances prevented the graves from being systematically looted: only 15% of the burials (6 of 41) were disturbed by plunder.

¹¹ As the exact chronological position of the grave group poor in findings has not yet been determined, it is possible that they started this cemetery – this question could be answered only after the excavation of the entire cemetery. Nonetheless, it is sure that the rich Early Avar Period community chose a clearly distinct area for their graves.

The ongoing complex evaluation of the record of the cemetery of Babarc includes archaeological, historical, anthropological, archaeogenetical, archaeozoological, archaeometallurgical, and radiocarbon analyses. When completed, the results will improve our current knowledge of the relations in the area in the 7th century AD and, by enabling comparative analyses with other regions, contribute to the research on the Early Avar Period – especially on the chronological and ethnic relations of the era – with a significant body of new data. In summary, the exceptional scientific value of the Early Avar Period cemetery unearthed at Babarc stems not only from the rich find material but also from the complexity of the recorded phenomena.

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