

## FROM GRAVE TO TUMULUS. BRONZE AND IRON AGE BURIALS FROM THE LITTLE HUNGARIAN PLAIN IN A TEMPORARY ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXHIBITION IN THE RÓMER FLÓRIS MUSEUM IN GYŐR

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*The temporary archaeological exhibition by the Rómer Flóris Art and History Museum in Győr was open to visitors from the end of May 2022 until late August. The exhibition aimed to present to the general public an overview of Bronze and Iron Age burial customs, attires, and culture in general in the light of the sites discovered in the past decade. “In situ” burials and reconstruction drawings as well as typical artefacts of the period were presented in three rooms. This was the first archaeological exhibition in the Museum since the permanent one has been dismantled in 2014, and perhaps the first exhibition focusing on prehistory in the entire history of the museum.*

**Keywords:** exhibition, Little Hungarian Plain, Bronze Age, Iron Age, burial, Rómer Flóris Museum

Death and afterlife have been in the focus of human imagination for millennia. Different cultures in different periods offered different explanations, and burial customs and the way people bid farewell to the deceased have always reflected the actual beliefs. Archaeology with its own specific methodology strives to shed light on these customs as they often hold key information about the social structures and beliefs typical of a people or a period. Dynamically evolving natural scientific methods, such as archaeogenetics and anthropology, also contribute to this exploration.

The spectacle consisted of an entrance hall, three thematic rooms and a poster exhibition. The entrance hall put the visitors in the mood for a historical journey: a rich burial from the Iron Age cemetery of Nagycenk–Farkasverem was put on display there, next to a welcoming message.

The first feature in each room was a summary of the most essential information – including the world historical context – about the period presented to help visitors understand the chronological setting. The first hall thus featured a brief outline of the Bronze Age (2800/2700–900/800 BC) and a description of the related cultural units in a chronological order, starting with the Gáta–Wieselburg Culture (2100–1700/1600 BC) at the end of the early Bronze Age, represented there by the two richest burials of the Nagycenk–Farkasverem cemetery. Grave no. 153 contained the remains of a man between 20 and 50 years of age at death. He was a high-status individual buried with food and drink offerings, three (*sic!*) bronze torcs, bracelets, and a bronze sceptre. The grave goods suggest that he may have been a local, or perhaps even regional, leader of his community. The burial was also presented in reconstruction on a drawing. The other reconstruction exhibited in the room was of grave no. 156, which contained the remains of a 19–22 year-old man,<sup>2</sup> also buried with a bronze bracelet, a bronze dagger, and three bronze torcs (*Fig. 1*).

Chronologically, the next unit in the room was the Tumulus culture (1500–1250/1100 BC), illustrated there by artefacts from two recently excavated cemeteries at Nagylózs–Baglyaszeg and Tét–Gyömörei Road. Beside the information boards on the cultural complex and the cemeteries, a selection of bronze objects (pins, dagger, pendants, bracelets) and ceramic vessels was put on display in showcases, along with a reconstructed grave from the Tét cemetery. The grave contained the remains of a wealthy woman who died at an age of over 20 years and was interred with disc-headed, sickle-shaped pins and a necklace strung of tutuli and small coiled wire tubes (grave no. 214; *Fig. 2*).

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<sup>2</sup> The anthropological analysis of the human remains was undertaken by Kata Gyenesei, Tamás Szeniczey and Tamás Hajdu (ELTE Department of Biological Anthropology), to whom we are grateful for their contribution.



Fig. 1. The Bronze Age room: graves from Nagycenk–Farkasverem, a cemetery of the Gáta–Wieselburg culture (photo by Zsuzsanna Szabadvári-Farkas)



Fig. 2. Reconstruction of a wealthy woman's grave excavated at Tét-Gyömörei Road, a cemetery of the Tumulus culture (photo by Zsuzsanna Szabadvári-Farkas)

The last unit in the Bronze Age room was the Urnfield culture (13th–8th centuries BC), presented there through its biggest Transdanubian cemetery of 387 graves, excavated in the vicinity of Farád in 2014 and 2016. Along with the information boards presenting the culture and burial customs in the Farád–Dámföld cemetery, a selection of objects recovered from the graves (bronze pins, knives, razors, bracelets, spear, ring, different types of vessels) was put on display there, together with an *in situ* cremation burial (grave no. 460) that yielded six ceramic vessels, a bronze pin, and a bronze knife. The last items in the room were a reconstruction drawing of a funeral pyre, a citation from the *Iliad* recounting the cremation of Patroclus (verse 23, Hungarian translation by Gábor Devecseri), and a video on reconstructing cremation using a pyre.<sup>3</sup>

In the next hall, visitors got a glimpse into the Iron Age of the region, starting with a board with information on the period and the Hallstatt culture (8th–5th centuries BC) in general, then with another presenting the Nagycenk–Farkasverem cemetery from the path of the M85 motorway and the associated Kalenderberg culture (950/850–550/450 BC) of the “Hallstatt Cultural Circle”, which flourished around Lake Fertő, present-day Sopron, and the feet of the Alps (Fig. 3).

Burial customs of the elite and the commoners were markedly different in the Hallstatt culture. Tumuli (burial mounds) of various sizes were erected over elite graves, usually placed along roads that led to a



Fig. 3. The Early Iron Age room (photo by Zsuzsanna Szabadvári-Farkas)



Fig. 4. Reconstruction of a burial mound in the Early Iron Age room (photo by Zsuzsanna Szabadvári-Farkas)

<sup>3</sup> The reconstruction video was made by Kristóf Fülöp (Institute of Archaeology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Eötvös Loránd Research Network). The version edited by Péter Sólyom (Móra Ferenc Museum, Szeged) was presented in the exhibition entitled “Talking dead – Historical crime scene investigators” (curators: Dr. Kata Szilágyi and Dr. Zsolt Bereczki, 2018: Szeged, Móra Ferenc Museum, 2019: Targu Mureș, Mureș County Museum). I hereby thank Kata Szilágyi and Kristóf Fülöp for allowing us to use the video.



central hillfort, while burials of the commoners and people of low status were more modest in size and with fewer grave goods given to the deceased for their journey to the afterlife. However, the rite itself was fundamentally the same. We aimed to visualize both types of burial in the exhibition. Elite burials were illustrated by tumulus no. 1 from Nagybarát,<sup>4</sup> while those of the commoners were exemplified by an unurned cremation burial from Bezi–Faluhely (grave no. 8) with nine ceramic vessels and an iron artefact (*Fig. 4*).

Recent results of research were presented in the rest of the second exhibition hall. Several cemeteries were brought to light in the county in the past decades, most in the settlement area of the Hallstatt culture, their record reflecting connections with the Scythian population of the Great Hungarian Plain and suggesting the presence of ethnic groups of eastern origin. These inhumation (from Nagyszentpál–Homokbánya mellett) and cremation burials (at Ménfőcsanak–Széles földék) yielded artefacts typical of the Vekerzug culture. Trilobate (three-edged) arrowheads, mugs with high-swung handles, wheel-thrown bowls, beads, and spiral-shaped pendants came to light in these graveyards. Grave no. 226 from Nagyszentpál, a typical Scythian burial was also put on display in the exhibition; it contained the remains of a 18–25 year-old woman interred with arrowheads, vessels, and jewellery.

Additional showcases in the room featured artefacts linked to the Kalenderberg culture from the commoners' cemetery in Vitnyéd, along with recently unearthed Scythian-type objects.

In the last thematic room, visitors could familiarize themselves with the Late Iron Age (from 450/400 BC until the Roman conquest) record of the region, a period dominated by the Celts (La Tène culture). The county and, therefore, the museum collection has a wide array of Celtic artefacts. The Celts followed the Danube and entered the territory of present-day Hungary in the area of Győr–Moson–Sopron County; thus, it comes as no surprise that Celtic sites have been discovered in the region in large numbers. It was challenging to pick the most informative artefacts to put on display in the showcases here. We followed the basic concept of the exhibition and preferred finds brought to light recently (from, e.g., Bezi–Faluhely dűlő, Markotabödöge–Mohos tó dűlő, Kópháza–Széles földék); however, the long-known cemetery of Ménfőcsanak–Széles földék, a relic of the earliest Celtic presence in the Carpathian Basin that has been used by many generations, was also featured in the exhibition. The cemetery of Győr–Kálvária Road has also been known to research since the discovery of the first graves in the late 19th century, but recent development projects in the area have brought to light previously unexplored parts of this graveyard.

After a general presentation of the period and the history of the Celts in the Carpathian Basin, visitors were offered an insight into the burial customs and belief system of the La Tène culture. The cemeteries mentioned above were presented on one information board each, and another board was dedicated to the anthropological analysis of the human remains unearthed in the cemetery of Győr–Kálvária Road.

In the first half of this last thematic room, elements of the weaponry and the armour (shield bosses, spears, swords in scabbards, chain belts for swords, spearheads) and tools (scissors, knives, belt buckles) were put on display. The most spectacular element in this part of the exhibition was the warrior's grave from Markotabödöge (grave no. 2357). This 30–40-year-old man was buried with his sword, spear, and shield, placed beside (and partly on top of) his body. He wore a bracelet on his upper left arm, and vessels full of food and drink offerings were put in his grave. A reconstruction drawing of this burial was also exhibited. The custom of



*Fig. 5. Entrance to the Late Iron Age room, with weapons and a warrior's grave (no. 2357 of Markotabödöge–Mohos-tóra-dűlő) (photo: Attila Szabadvári)*

<sup>4</sup> Having been excavated in the early 20th century, the tumuli at Nagybarát did not entirely fit into the overall concept of the exhibition, but their prominent place in the research of the period made it necessary to include them.

unurned cremation burial was illustrated here by grave no. 1568 of the same cemetery. Additional show-cases presented the most fascinating pieces of Celtic pottery (*Fig. 5*).

The other half of the room was dedicated to women's burials and their typical grave goods, meaning mainly jewellery. Bracelets, anklets, brooches, rings, buckles, and torcs were presented in separate show-cases, calling the attention of the visitor to the fact that a functional type may have existed in a wide variety of forms in the period, in terms of both material, design and ornamentation. The exhibition presented grave no. 2116 of Markotabödöge, containing the remains of a wealthy woman of about 22–25 years of age at death, buried with a bronze necklace comprising an amber ring, three crooches, an iron belt chain, anklets, vessels and food offerings. Grave no. 1542 of the same cemetery, containing the remains of a child buried with a brooch and a belt ring around the waist, vessels and animal bones, was also displayed.

The last room accommodated a poster exhibition providing detailed information on the methodology of cemetery excavation (soil removal using heavy machinery, geodetic survey, photographing and drawing the finds) and the processing of the recovered record (anthropological analysis and conservation of the ceramic, iron, and bronze objects).

The aim of the exhibition was to present communities that lived in the Little Hungarian Plain in the Bronze and Iron Ages (from the late 3rd millennium BC to the birth of Christ), and to cast a light on the variety of ways they departed from their loved ones. The exhibition ended in late August, but we plan to reopen it in the future in one form or another.