

AMONG THE OAK TREE'S ROOTS, UNDER THE POCKET WATCH. Hunnic-period assemblage from the outskirts of Nyergesújfalu

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The current report was born as a response to widespread professional interest. It provides an account of a site discovered during a field survey trip organised within the Community Archaeology Programme. As we found exceptional golden artefacts, we have decided to conduct an excavation on the site. That resulted in the identification of a new Hunnic-period sacrificial assemblage. The processing of the obtained data and collecting additional information for interpretation, started in the past three months between the end of the fieldwork and the submission of the manuscript, is by no means complete as scientific analyses are still in progress.

Keywords: community archaeology, Hunnic Period, sacrificial assemblage, Nyergesújfalu

THE DISCOVERY OF THE ASSEMBLAGE AND THE COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY PROGRAMME

At the end of July 2021, volunteers of the Hungarian National Museum's (HNM) Community Archaeology Programme and the HNM Balassa Bálint Museum organised a trip into the Gerecse Mountains to discover new sites in the area (*Fig. 1*). The choice was not random: based on reports of earlier findings, the forest-covered mountains have been a preferred hunting ground of metal detector-equipped treasure hunters for decades for a reason.



Fig. 1. The participants of the field survey trip on 29 July 2021. Left to right: Kázmér Pásztor, Nelli Pásztor, Petru Adochiti, Richárd Pintér, Attila Juhász, Norbert Kladek, Csaba Nilgesz, István Vida, Szilárd Tóth, Márton Torda, Tamás Szabadváry, András Kern, Keve Jámor, Sven-Markus Lörsch (photo by Emma Horváth Szulamit)

As we are planning a comprehensive investigation of the findspot's broader context in the near future, we do not wish to reveal the exact location yet as it seems necessary for its protection based on an informal

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Fig. 2. The “dollar watch” found above the first Hunnic-period item (photo by Eszter Duong Li)



Fig. 3. Hunnic-period items from under and around the pocket watch (photo by Emma Horváth Szulamit)

comment.² Thus, for the time being, it can only be described as being similar to Telki Anna-lak, another site discovered in 2016: positioned on a forest-covered northern high plateau with a 10% slope.

The item that proved pivotal in detecting the Hunnic-period assemblage had already been discovered in the morning. We have found a pocket watch with its fob chain and ornamental piece by the roots of an oak tree, an artefact of no archaeological interest itself (Fig. 2). Although the clock's glass and hands were missing and the clock face had been rendered unreadable by corrosion, the engravings on the backplate allowed for an identification: based on the inscription, “The New Haven Clock Co./U.S.A./Pat. Pend.,” it was produced by a clock factory at New Haven, Connecticut, that was in business between 1866 and 1957 (<https://www.antiqueclockspriceguide.com/newhavenclockco.php>). The piece was a so-called “dollar watch,” a simple and affordable pocket watch produced in quantities in the first half of the 20th century (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dollar_watch).

The first Hunnic-period item was discovered upon removing the pocket watch and its accessories; we can say that it was practically found under the watch (Fig. 3). Next, our volunteers, Csaba Nilgesz and Norbert Kladek, and colleague, Tamás Szabadváry carried out an intensive metal detector survey of the findspot's immediate surroundings and collected more artefacts of the assemblage.

COMPLEX INVESTIGATION OF THE SITE

Having considered the exceptional value of the finds recovered from the new site, our colleagues from the Castle Headquarters Integrated Regional Development Centre Nonprofit PLC (CH PLC) carried out magnetometer and georadar surveys in the area in August using state-of-the-art equipment (Figs. 4–5). However, due to the site's character, it was not possible to determine its extent by geophysical investigation. Therefore, during the autumn of the same year, we returned to the “traditional” toolkit of archaeology and conducted an excavation led by Anita Kocsis (HNM Balassa Bálint Museum) and participated by our volunteers again. Another intensive metal detector survey campaign accompanied the excavation, and the efforts yielded several more finds dating from prehistoric times to the Middle Ages.

A LiDAR survey concluded the series of investigations on the site, by which we have mapped the terrain's configuration in the area (Fig. 6). LiDAR has provided us in a short time with a high-resolution map that could

² After having revealed the exact location of another findspot earlier, the Pilis Park Forestry Company PLC rangers informed us that “at that time we have seen a metal detectorist behind every tree.” That danger cannot be eliminated, but we learned a lesson and try to minimise it.



Fig. 4. Mihály Pethe from the CH PLC carries out magnetometry survey on the site (photo by László Schilling)



Fig. 5. Zsombor Klembala from the CH PLC carries out georadar survey on the site (photo by László Schilling)

not be created by traditional geodetic methods. Every standing and fallen tree, moreover, relatively thin trunks and branches were clearly identifiable on the LiDAR map, but there was no difference in the terrain, not even on a micro-scale, that could help determine the site's extent. This lack of information concurred with the negative results of the geophysical surveys and, altogether, conveyed an important lesson about the methodology of investigating similar sites and the applicability of diverse data gathering methods.

The excavation covered 356 m² altogether. Scattered among the hornbeam and beech trees, we have found some thick-walled hand-made sherds identified on the spot as prehistoric. Besides, a patch of findings contained the fragments of one or more light grey wheel-turned ceramic vessels from the Roman Imperial Period,³ a find assemblage dated to the Hunnic Period, and complete and fragmented iron objects of unknown dating. As for archaeological features, we could observe a shallow oval pit with tiny charcoal pieces in its infill and two dark spots, probably fire marks. In the lack of datable finds, the dating of the excavated phenomena has not been determined yet. We hope that a scientific evaluation of the collected charcoal and soil samples will bring us closer to answering that question.

³ We are grateful to Katalin Ottományi for her help identifying the ceramic fragments.

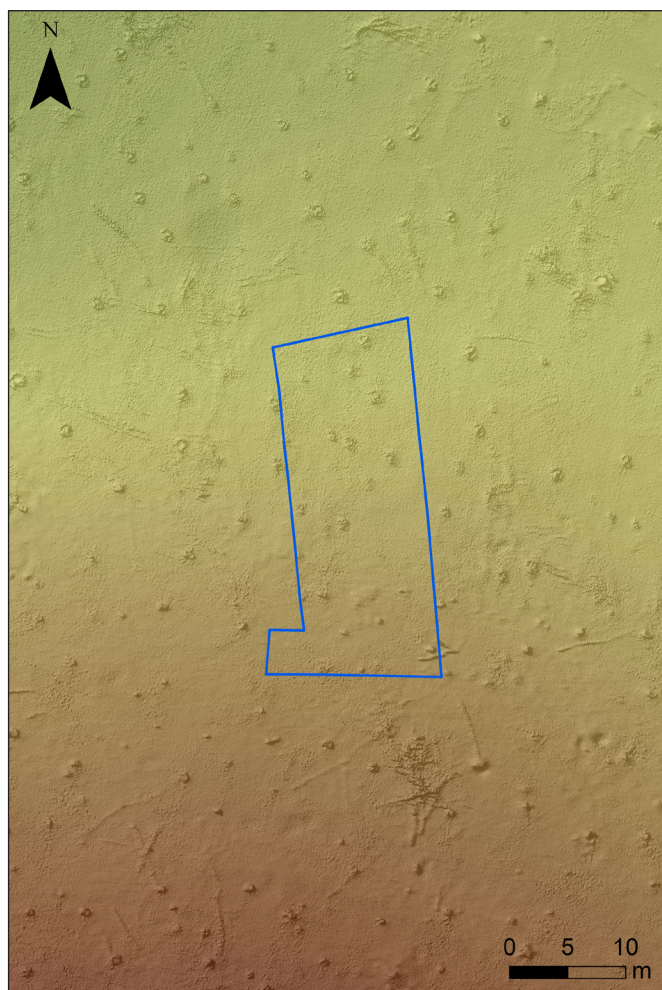


Fig. 6. LiDAR survey map of the site and the excavation (blue polygon). By Tamás Látos (HNM National Archaeological Institute)

The Hunnic-period finds lay at five spots, a few metres away from the others; each but one contained three items, while one five. The scale-patterned gilded silver plate fragments had no accompanying find around them. As mentioned before, the first Hunnic-period find, a golden suspension ring with inlaid cell work decoration, was discovered by accident when we investigated the strong signal of a pocket watch and its accessories. These objects were found at shallow depth, probably moved there by the roots of an oak tree. As for the find circumstances of all Hunnic-period finds, it must be emphasised that we could not observe any soil mark hinting about the objects, and, had we not used metal detectors, we probably went home empty-handed that day, however carefully we observed the area.

THE HUNNIC-PERIOD FIND ASSEMBLAGE

The assemblage contains fifteen items altogether: the fragments of a scale-patterned gilded silver plate, golden lunular and cellwork-decorated golden oval mounts, cellwork-decorated golden suspension rings, and a golden buckle (*Fig. 7*).⁴ The scale-patterned gilded silver plate is about 0.25 mm thick; based on available analogies, it could be a part of the decorative cover of a dagger (BÓNA 1991, 96; BÓNA 1993, 89), a scabbard (e.g., Pannonhalma–Szélsőhalom; TOMKA 1986a, 36, 1. kép; TOMKA 1986b 437, Abb. 14, 440, Abb. 17.1–3, 442, Abb. 18), or a saddle (e.g., Göd–Bócsaújtelep; MRÁV, MOZGAI & BÁRÁNY 2021, 459, Fig. 10, with further analogies from the Carpathian Basin: 468, Fig. 15). As we were able to examine and record the find circumstances, we can tell that the plate had been detached from whatever object it decorated and had been folded preceding its internment. We hope that future investigations will reveal precisely how many objects the recovered fragments belonged to. The four lunular golden mounts are especially important as of that type, only gilded silver (e.g., Telki–Anna-lak; SZENTHE ET AL. 2019A, 11, 6. kép; SZENTHE ET AL. 2019B, 11, Fig. 6), silver (e.g., Lengyeltóti; Bakay 1978, 152, Abb. 3.6–8, 153, Abb. 4.6–8), and bronze (e.g., Solva/Esztergom, Bánomi dűlő; H. KELEMEN 2008, 282, 72. t., 303, 7–10) specimens are known. These mounts probably decorated belts or straps of unknown function. The assemblage contained six oval golden mounts decorated with two facing semi-circular translucent red stone inlays in an oval cellwork case engirded by notched golden wire. Originally, they had been fastened by a pair of silver rivets on the backplate and

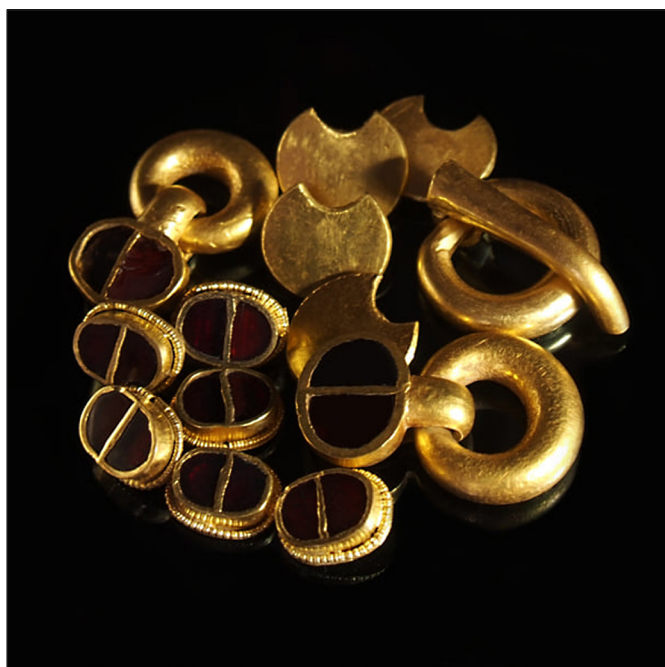


Fig. 7. Hunnic-period find assemblage from the outskirts of Nyergesújfalu (photo by Emma Horváth Szulamit)



Fig. 8. Buckle with cellwork decoration from the outskirts of Nyergesújfalu (photo by József Bicskei)

⁴ The objects were cleaned by Emma Horváth Szulamit, assistant conservator, who carried out the task as a volunteer in the Community Archaeology Programme. We are grateful for her sterling work.

probably decorated artefacts or articles of clothing made of organic material. The two golden suspension rings with cellwork decoration belong to a type that, in a simpler version (BÓNA 1991, 106, 41; BÓNA 1993, 94, 41), had already appeared during the Late Roman Period (that preceded the Hunnic Period). These pieces were probably accessories to a leather belt, and the exact function determined their positions: they could belong to a side-strap slung over the shoulder or were perhaps used to suspend an object, maybe a dagger or a sword, from the belt. The material, size, and elaboration of the golden buckle's frame and pin are akin to the other buckle in the assemblage. Originally, this piece probably also had a cellwork-decorated mount plate that had perhaps already broken off and became lost in Hunnic times or was intentionally not interred with the rest of the items for some reason that is unknown to us. It probably fastened a belt or strap of undetermined function.



Fig. 9. The so-called “Marcelháza buckle.” HNM Inv. no. 62/1889 N 222 (<https://www.museumap.hu/record/-/record/oai-aggregated-bib5860274.jsessionid=DDC25A6E9E9494C4B46D1AF4507DFC57>, accessed 16 February 2022)

The other golden buckle in the assemblage (Fig. 8), a piece with a mount plate decorated with translucent red stone inlays in a golden cellwork case, once probably also fastened a belt or strap of unknown function. This item is of particular interest as its precise analogy, the so-called “Marcelháza buckle” (Fig. 9; BÓNA 1991, Taf. XXVI, 286.6; BÓNA 1993, XXVI. t., 256.6), was bought by the HNM in 1889 and became inventorised in its collection as a find with “site unknown.” The two buckles are exceptionally similar in both elaboration and design but determining their exact relation requires further analysis, just like in the cases of the artefacts with identical cellwork structures from Bátaszék (BÓNA 1991, Taf. XVII; BÓNA 1993, XVII. t.) and Fürst (Germany; FEHR 2003, 210, Abb. 1, 211, Abb. 2).

Only a few days before the manuscript was submitted, Bernadett Bajnóczi and Viktória Mozgai from the Institute for Geological and Geochemical Research of the Research Center for Astronomy and Earth Sciences had carried out non-destructive XRF (X-ray fluorescence spectrometry) and SEM (scanning electron microscope) analyses on the artefacts of the assemblage. The evaluation of these analyses, which are essential for interpreting the finds, is currently in progress.

SUMMARY

Considering the find circumstances, we may safely state that there is absolutely no connection between the Hunnic-period finds and the pocket watch that at some point became placed right above them. We do not have any information on whether any Hunnic-period find had ever been found on the same site before. Therefore, we cannot say with absolute certainty that the assemblage is complete and the entire site has been excavated; however, nothing amongst the geophysical surveys' results or in the excavation indicated that the Hunnic-period site continues in any direction beyond the investigated area. In conclusion, based on the information currently available, we can consider the investigation complete. The Pilis Park Forestry Company PLC informed us that this part of the forest is scheduled to be clearcut in about 25 years. If possible, it would be worth conducting a control survey in the area at that time at the latest.

Currently, we are not able to reconstruct the process in the course of which the items were interred during the first half of the 5th century AD, nor can we tell the reasons behind the act. Several questions remained unanswered: had the rest of the items, just like the scale-patterned gilded silver plate, been detached from the objects they were originally fastened to preceding their interment? Or had they been interred still on the leather belts or straps? Were those objects intact or cut into pieces? The lack of soil stains also raises a question: had the objects not been interred but simply placed on the ground? Why were they put there?

Were all items placed there in the course of a single event? What had determined the pattern in which the items were placed? Were there trees around at that time, or anything else that might have influenced how the objects were positioned? The few similar assemblages are interpreted as “sacrificial depots” (e.g., Pécs–Üszögpusztá, Szeged–Nagyszéksós, Bátaszék–Iskola, Pannonhalma–Szélsőhalom). When evaluated jointly with earlier finds, the lucky discoveries of the recent years (e.g., Telki–Anna-lak, SZENTHE 2021, 563–576) might enable us to reveal some more details of the related custom.

Currently, the assemblage is presented for the first time in the HNM's temporary exhibition “*Kincset érő közösség / A community worth treasure*,” in the Museum's main building, between 17 March and 4 September 2022. According to the current schedule, it will be transferred to the Balassa Bálint Museum in Esztergom next, where it will be on display as part of the permanent exhibition.

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