

REPORT ON THE RESULTS OF THE PROJECT "FROM DOLÁNY TO ARANYGOMB: INVESTIGATION OF EMBLEMATIC SITES NEAR SZÉCSÉNY" IN 2020–2022

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The systematic field survey of the Szécsény Basin continued in and around Benczúrfalva-Majorhegy. The Late Bronze Age site, researched for over a century, has been the subject of comprehensive data collection. We attempted to reconstruct previously discovered find assemblages and identify the trenches and circumstances of earlier excavations. Remote sensing methods were used to investigate the shape of the settlement and traces of a presumed fortification. A metal detector survey carried out as part of a community archaeology programme has provided new data on the characteristics, extent, and periods of the site. The professional excavation of diverse hoards and the scientific analysis of the finds enabled us to improve our knowledge of the Late Bronze Age of the region.

Keywords: field survey, metal detector survey, Late Bronze Age, bronze depot, community archaeology

The Forgách-Lipthay Castle Museum in Szécsény has been carrying out topographical research in its collection area, the district of Szécsény, since 2015 through a grant from the National Cultural Fund.³ The small-budget projects (*ISzAP* 2016–2017, 2018–2019; *In the footsteps of Nyárys – authentication of emblematic sites around Piliny* 2019–2020; *Authentication of hillforts around Szécsény* 2021–2022; *Micro-regional research in the area of Hollókő* from 2021) build up to a continuous research programme (FÁBIÁN *et al.* 2016; GUBA & TANKÓ 2020). By the non-destructive detecting methods developed and systematically applied so far, these projects have been aimed at identifying artefacts and sites in the Szécsény Basin, authenticating known sites, with a long-term goal of preparing an archaeological topography of Szécsény district.

The focus area of the current research project, entitled *From Dolány to Aranygomb*, is wedged between the administrative areas of Piliny and Szécsény. Our primary objective was to explore the lower hills and stream valleys that flank the valley of the Ipoly River from the east. The project started with the systematic investigation of Dolány (today: Benczúrfalva)–Majorhegy, a known Bronze Age settlement and cemetery and its immediate surroundings, on the eastern outskirts of Szécsény; the areas to be surveyed with a metal detector in the micro-region were pinpointed based on telling toponyms indicating a site (e.g., Aranygomb-dűlő [“Gold Button Field”] and Órhegy [“Guard’s Hill”]).

This study presents the preliminary results of the research carried out on the hill of Majorhegy, arising at the fringes of Benczúrfalva in the administrative area of the town of Szécsény. Majorhegy (site ID in the national register: 30699) has been known mainly for the large number of high-quality bronze objects found there (*Fig. 1*). Several comprehensive studies provide information on the history of previous research on the site, the finds recovered, and the structures observed (KEMENCZEI 1984; D. MATÚZ & NOVÁKI 2002;

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³ The project was launched with the professional and infrastructural background provided by the Kubinyi Ferenc Museum in Szécsény, within the frame of the Szécsény Public Cultural Nonprofit Ltd. Due to reorganisation, the museum became a member institution of the Hungarian National Museum (HNM) under the name HNM Forgách-Lipthay Castle Museum in the autumn of 2021; thus, the project was continued and concluded under the aegis of that. Fieldwork was carried out in cooperation between the Institute of Archaeological Sciences of the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), the ELKH-ELTE Interdisciplinary Archaeological Research Group, and the National Institute for Archaeology of HNM (HNM NAI, and its predecessor, the Directorate of Archaeological Heritage Protection of HNM), with the participation of volunteers from Nógrád County and students from ELTE.

NOVÁKI *et al.* 2017), but a summary of all available data has not yet been presented. This paper does not give a detailed overview of all previous work but only highlights a few points that have raised scientific questions that have yet to be answered and has set the direction of research for the current project. Elek Fényes, in 1851, was amongst the first to mention the site: “some old rampart can be seen on the hill” (NOVÁKI *et al.* 2017, 84). Early on, the mountain became a focus of interest because of the antiquities collected there. It is certain that the local landowners, especially Frigyes Pulszky, Baron Jenő Nyáry and Tivadar Szontágh, also collected artefacts, but little is known about the fate of these antiquities. The largest collection was undoubtedly that of Sándor Pintér, a lawyer from Szécsény. He often used his own funds to finance his research activity, buying archaeological finds and preserving them in his private collection for posterity. The most impressive pieces of his collection were presented at the exhibition in Graz in 1875 (RÓMER 1875, 25) and the Congress of Prehistory in Budapest in 1876 (HAMPEL 1876; RÓMER 1878). However, not every object made it into a public collection later; some finds are now only known from his notes and archives. Moreover, the number of artefacts collected by the residents of the village can only be guessed at but not precisely estimated; as Sándor Pintér wrote, “After a downpour, old and young from the village cover the southern side of the Majorhegy, eroded by heavy rains, to collect in the gullies the most precious bronze objects, of which I have a valuable collection; besides, many precious pieces in the antiquities department of the museum in Vienna came from there” (PINTÉR 1899, 31). Pintér’s activity has been pivotal for the research of Szécsény district; he was also the first to professionally describe and publish a bronze depot (PINTÉR 1891). Most of the finds he collected later became part of the collection of the Hungarian National Museum, while some got to the collections of the museums in Balassagyarmat and Szécsény. Based on Pintér’s report, mentioning earthworks (cited above), Ferenc Tompa, and later Amália Mozsolics and Pál Patay Pál believed the Bronze Age settlement to be fortified. Prompted by the discovery of some bronze and gold hoards in the previous year, Ferenc Tompa excavated the “tumulus” on the southern ridge of the hill in 1934 (TOMPA 1936, 106). Pál Patay unearthed Late Bronze Age settlement features at the north-western foot of the hill in the early 1950s (PATAY 1954, 1956). Next, Ilona Stanczik identified the findspot of a gold treasure in 1977 (STANCIK 1978). The following year, Virág Soós carried out a rescue excavation in the modern cemetery (SOÓS 1980). While Ildikó Szatmári has published the gold finds in the collection of the Hungarian National Museum in 2010 (SZATMÁRI 2010), most of the objects in the Szécsény museum are still unpublished.

Our project launched in 2020 aimed to clarify the sometimes contradictory information about the fortifications, identify the supposed internal structures, and make an accurate survey of the site using modern remote sensing tools. During the first survey, Gyula Nováki and György Sándorfi found some remains of fortifications only on the southern part of the hill, which, in their opinion, fell out of the area of the Late Bronze Age settlement. As the area today is densely covered by forest and shrubs, LiDAR survey seemed to be the only effective method for mapping the exact position and extent of the known and presumed earthworks. The work was carried out by a team of the Geodetic Department of the National Institute for Archaeology of the Hungarian National Museum (*Fig. 2*).⁴ The evaluation of the images has revealed no discernible evidence anymore of ramparts or fortifications in the northern part of Majorhegy. The formations resembling earthen ramparts on the LiDAR image at the western and eastern edges of the ridge may be the result of terracing. Based on the present survey, the Late Bronze Age settlement of Majorhegy does not seem to have any significant fortification. It must be stressed, however, that since the earliest descriptions,



Fig. 1. Aerial photo of Benczúrfalva-Majorhegy

⁴ The measurement was carried out by Tamás Látos, Zsolt Zsiga and Árpád Balogh. We are grateful for their work.

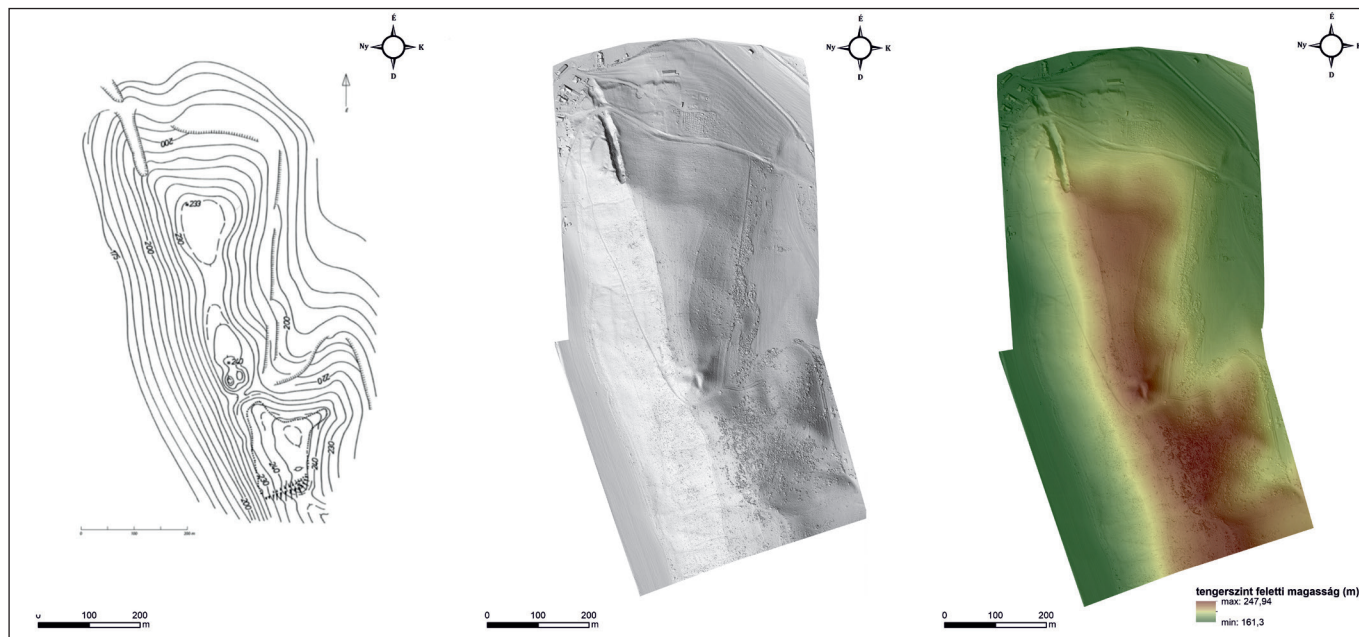


Fig. 2. Benczúrfalva-Majorhegy. Contour line map by Gy. Nováki and Gy. Sándorfi, LiDAR and DEM images by T. Látos, Zs. Zsiga and Á. Balogh, HNM NIA

the area was subject to large-scale transformation due to human activity (mining, forestry, construction, etc.) and the massive erosion it caused. The effect of the latter was also documented in a trench opened on the bank of the stream at the western foot of Majorhegy in 2000, where the first archaeological features were found under a 1.5–2m thick erosion layer abounding with archaeological finds in a secondary position. Therefore, one cannot exclude the possibility that the Majorhegy settlement had ramparts which were still visible at the end of the 19th century.

Another research aims were authenticating the findspots of previous discoveries and determining the scatter of metal finds on the site. At least eight bronze depots and four or five gold treasures are known from Major Hill. Based on the 1891 description by Sándor Pintér, “bronzes are often found in masses in pits. To my knowledge, five such treasures have been found” (PINTÉR 1891, 253). In addition to the depots mentioned here, Sándor Pintér saved and published at least a bronze and a gold treasure (PINTÉR 1897, 287). Assemblages of bronze items were also found later: two deposits came to light in 1933 (MOZSOLICS 1985; KEMENCZEI 1984) and another in 1935. In 1939, HNM acquired bronze artefacts from presumably one or more bronze hoards. The first authentication excavation was conducted in 1951 to identify the findspot of a sickle depot in a stone quarry on the north-western slope of the hill.

The findspot of only one of the hoards listed in *Table 1* is known: it was found behind the house under 2 Orgona Street, where the owner, Lajos Paulusz, came across gold objects during gardening in 1977.⁵ The land known as Veszelovszki szőlője [Veszelovszki’s vineyard], where Pál Patay conducted excavations in the 1950s, lies next to the plot. Ilona Stanczik from HNM conducted an authentication excavation in the garden in June 1977,⁶ unearthing two pits with finds of the Pilinyi culture (STANCIK 1978; SZATMÁRI 2010). One of the pits also contained two human skulls covered with stones.⁷ Several metal detector surveys were carried out during the project in the garden and the adjacent plot, yielding no more than some bronze slugs and a bronze needle.

⁵ The gold objects were purchased by HNM.

⁶ The later history and current location of the finds and human remains recovered during the excavation are unknown. They the new entries log and inventory book of the museum in Szécsény. only includes the finds obtained in excavation by Virág Soós a year later.

⁷ Gyula Paulusz, the current plot owner, mentioned that the HNM team surveyed the area with a large metal detector at the time of the excavation but did not find more gold objects.



Fig. 3. Bronze metal detector finds from Benczúrfalva-Majorhegy

The metal detector surveys focused mainly on the northern and north-western parts of Majorhegy, the area around the modern cemetery, the ridge, and the plateau. The target areas were selected based on previous observations. It has become clear at the start of the project that probably these parts of the site suffered the least negative impact, which was confirmed by the features popping out from the terrain on the LiDAR image. However, in contrast to our expectations raised by the abundance of stray bronze finds (mentioned above) and (presumed or actual) depots comprising large quantities of bronze items discovered there earlier, the site was particularly poor in metal findings. Unfortunately, the locals have been using the quarry (the findspot of the sickle depot) as an illegal landfill for decades, which prevented us from doing any work there or in its immediate vicinity. The metal detector survey campaigns in the target area yielded mainly small finds, including bronze flitters, bronze blade and socketed axe fragments and a few, mostly small and unidentifiable bronze fragments and slugs. The most spectacular finds were the handles of a bronze dagger, a knife, a socketed chisel, and a socketed axe (Fig. 3). While small stray bronze finds were scattered over the village-side slopes of Majorhegy, no archaeological finds or modern metal objects could be found in the parts far from the currently inhabited area, especially on the plateau. The sad conclusion to be drawn from all that is that the site, once known for its impressive finds, has been systematically ransacked by illegal treasure hunters, and most metal artefacts had been taken away by today. However, an unexpected result of the current research was the



Fig. 4. In situ bronze depot found during the survey of Benczúrfalva-Majorhegy

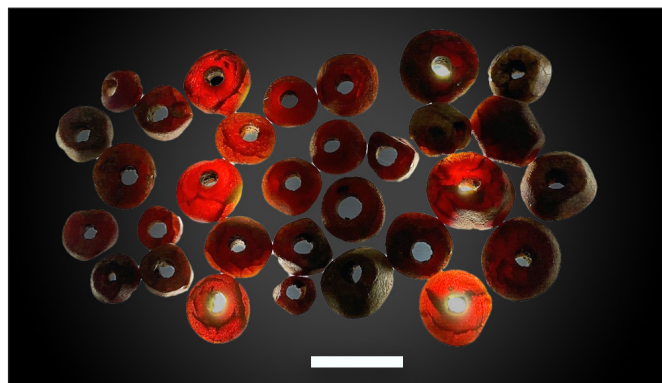


Fig. 5. Amber beads from Benczúrfalva-Majorhegy



Fig. 6. A pair of bronze bird-ship pendants (resembling a ship with posts with bird head-shaped endings)



Fig. 7. Bird-head-shaped handle of bronze vessel

discovery of four disturbed and *in situ* bronze depots. It is important to highlight that these are the first professionally excavated and documented depots from Majorhegy. Three comprised jewellery items and costume fittings, while the fourth farming tools and weapon fragments (Fig. 4). The processing of the depots is in progress; the preliminary results of the measurements and material analyses carried out so far have been presented at domestic and international conferences (GUBA, TANKÓ & ANDERKÓ 2023; GUBA *et al.* 2023; GUBA & TANKÓ 2023). While the frames of this paper are unsuitable for the presentation of the content and significance of all bronze depots, some preliminary conclusions may be summarised. With the newly found ones, the number of depots known from Majorhegy increased to at least fifteen. Most are jewellery depots, containing elements of attire mainly in bronze and, to a lesser extent, gold and amber (Fig. 5). So far, only one weapon depot is known, containing three different bronze swords; two previous hoards also contained various bronze weapons and fragments. There is also a tool depot, while two others also contain a tool, typically a bronze sickle. The overall picture is interesting: the site is characterised by a strong prevalence of jewellery depots (Fig. 6), while weapons, tools, and personal utensils (Fig. 7) are considerably rarer. The reason behind the phenomenon has yet to be discovered, but a future comparative study of the assemblages may provide an answer. The conservation of the objects has recently been completed, and various material analyses are currently in progress.

We look forward to presenting the evaluation of the preliminary results soon.



Fig. 8. Volunteers and participants of the field survey

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Table 1. Benczúrfalva–Majorhegy. Data on treasure troves previously found at the site

Depot type	Year of discovery	Composition	Current place	Publication	ID by Mozsolics
Jewellery	1891	bronze pendants, rings, torques	Szécsény	PINTÉR 1891	
Jewellery	1895	Gold items	HNM Budapest	SZATMÁRI 2010	
Jewellery	1897	3 gold rings, 2 bronze rings	HNM Budapest	PINTÉR 1897, 287	
Jewellery	1901	31 bronze objects	HNM Budapest	GALCSIK 1993, 32	
Jewellery	1911	gold torques	HNM Budapest	SZATMÁRI 2010	
Jewellery	1933	bronze button covered with gold foil	Szécsény	MOZSOLICS 1985, 189	Fund II.
Mixed (jewellery, tool, and weapon)	1933	bronze pendants, rings, sickles, spear-heads	Szécsény	MOZSOLICS 1985, 189	Fund II.
Weapon	1935	3 bronze swords	Szécsény	MOZSOLICS 1985, 189	Fund I.
Mixed (jewellery, tool, and weapon)	1939	[Paulinyi collection] 69 bronze objects	HNM Budapest	MOZSOLICS 1985, 190	Fund IV?
Tool	1951	5 sickles	Szécsény	MOZSOLICS 1985, 190	Fund III.
Jewellery	1977	gold jewellery	HNM Budapest	SZATMÁRI 2010	

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