

**BECOMING ADULTS:****The state of children in the Middle Bronze Age of Western Hungary**ESZTER MELIS<sup>1</sup>Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 12. (2023) Issue 3, pp. 14–26. <https://doi.org/10.36338/ha.2023.3.2>

*The last few decades witnessed increasing attention to the study of the state and role of children in different historical and prehistoric periods. The graves of those who unfortunately died in their childhood are one of the most informative and important sources for this topic in prehistoric research, which, thanks to modern scientific methods, can provide information not only about the diseases or sex of the young deceased, but also about their lifestyle (e.g., their diet). However, we should not forget that the way children are buried and their grave goods reveal primarily the relationship of the adult community to the youngest generation and their loss and mourning. The period between 2200/2100 and 1600/1500 BC is the end of the Early Bronze Age and the whole Middle Bronze Age in Hungary. The territory of Western Hungary was then the borderland between the Central European Únětice and related cultures (e.g., Gáta–Wieselburg) adopting inhumation mortuary practice and the groups of the Carpathian Basin with cremation rites (Kisapostag and the Transdanubian Encrusted Pottery Culture). Children were buried in 30–40% of the excavated burials, and while archaeological analysis of these graves can provide limited insights into what it was like to be a child in the Bronze Age, it can also shed light on key aspects of social organisation between 3500 and 4000 years ago.*

**THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD**

As in the historical field, archaeological research has traditionally focused its analyses on the adult members of societies. The last few decades have witnessed increasing attention to the study of the state and role of children in different historical periods; this field is going back to more than three decades (LILLEHAMMER 1989; SSCIP). Its main goal is to focus on past children and raise the research of the source they represent on a level equal to that of adults. This approach developed partly together with gender research, growing out of the ‘discovery’ of women’s and maternal roles. In a broad sense, research on the child as an identity defined by biological development is part of the archaeology of identity (BAXTER 2008, 162–163; KONCZ & SZILÁGYI 2017). In Hungarian research on prehistory the study of gender roles (SIKLÓSI 2013; ANDERS & NAGY 2019; MELIS 2020; SZEVERÉNYI *et al.* 2020a) and past children with a modern approach started only recently. Very promising are case studies in which prehistoric children appear as creators of objects, i.e., as agents of prehistory (KIRÁLY & KOÓS 2013; FÜLÖP 2016; GUCSI & SZABÓ 2018).

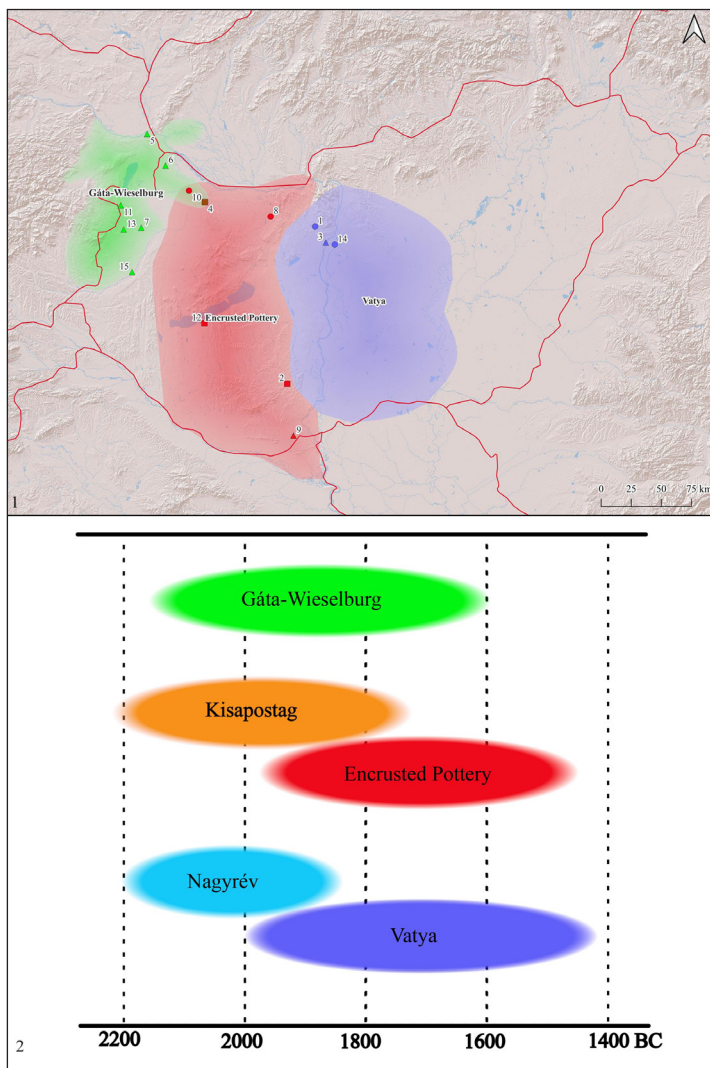
It is essential that the archaeology of childhood is not, and cannot be, limited to the study of graves, since the way in which children were buried and their grave goods reveal primarily the nature of the relationship of the adult community to the youngest generation and allows a glimpse into their loss and mourning (SOFAER DERVENSKI 2000, XV; MURPHY & LE ROY 2017). Nevertheless, children’s graves are amongst the most informative and important sources for research, which, thanks to multidisciplinary studies, can provide information not only about the diseases or sex of the young deceased but also about their lifestyle (e.g., diet) (CAVAZZUTI *et al.* 2021; KISS *et al.* 2021). In addition, however, the inclusion of artefacts and, where available, written and iconographic sources are crucial to the research of childhood. Occasionally, tiny objects found in Bronze Age burials and settlements in Hungary, fitting into children’s hands, shed light on their former users. Whether miniature pots, animal statuettes, and clay wagon models all were used as toys or some had a ritual function, frequently cannot be determined thousands of years later. A significant part of the one-time toys – those made from organic material – could not survive in the soil conditions of the Carpathian Basin (TÁRNOKI 2017).

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## CHILD BURIALS IN TRANSDANUBIA BETWEEN 2200 AND 1500 BC

Thus, one of the primary sources for research on Bronze Age children are still the burials of those who unfortunately died in childhood. The period between 2200/2100 and 1600/1500 BC is the end of the Early Bronze Age and the whole Middle Bronze Age in Hungary (SØRENSEN & REBAY 2009; P. FISCHL *et al.* 2015, Fig. 1). The territory of Western Hungary was then the borderland between the Central European Únětice and the related cultures (e.g., Gáta–Wieselburg), adopting inhumation mortuary practice, and groups of Carpathian Basin origin with cremation rites (Kisapostag and Transdanubian Encrusted Pottery Culture) (SØRENSEN & REBAY 2009; KRENN-LEEB 2011). Urn cemeteries of the Vátya, developed from the Nagyrév Culture, spotted Central Hungary in the Middle Bronze Age; two cemeteries from the eastern part of Transdanubia have been analysed (KALICZ-SCHREIBER 1995; ZOFFMANN 1995; MALI 2014). Based on the continuous use of the cemetery at Bonyhád, Central Transdanubia in the Middle Bronze Age was inhabited by the groups of the Transdanubian Encrusted Pottery Culture, developing from the former Kisapostag Culture (or earliest Encrusted Pottery); this process was accompanied by a transition from the inhumation to the cremated burial rite (KISS 2012, 225–247, 264; SZABÓ 2012; KISS 2020). In addition, a relatively large number of cremation burials of the Transdanubian Encrusted Pottery were unearthed at Mosonszentmiklós (UZSOKI 1963; ZOFFMANN 1971); the anthropological and archaeological evaluation of their record has been completed. Radiocarbon data have set the inhumation graves of the Gáta–Wieselburg cemeteries in Western Transdanubia to around 1700/1600 BC (NAGY 2013; GÖMÖRI, MELIS & KISS 2018) (*Fig. 1*).

Anthropological analysis has always been affected by the poor preservation of the skeletal material, especially in cremation burials; thus, the proportion of the graves in Vátya and Nagyrév cemeteries where the age at death of the deceased could not be determined is over 25%. However, a high proportion of children's graves were found in these burial sites, with 59% of the buried at Szigetszentmiklós-Felső-tag being children (ZOFFMANN 1995). The number of children's burials in the sites of the Kisapostag and Encrusted Pottery cultures also exceeds the amount of both adults' and matures' graves. In



*Fig. 1.1. Bronze Age sites and archaeological cultures mentioned in the text (Legend: ▲ – inhumation, ● – cremation, ■ – inhumation and cremation burials). 1. Biatorbágy-Szarvasugrás [MALI 2014], 2. Bonyhád-Biogázüzem [HAJDU 2010; SZABÓ 2012], 3. Érd-Hosszú-földek [SZEVEÉNYI *et al.* 2020b], 4. Győr-Ménfőcsanak-Széles-földek [MELIS 2015; TÓTH, MELIS & ILON 2016], 5. Hainburg-Teichtal [KRENN-LEEB 2011; SPANNAGL-STEINER *et al.* 2011], 6. Hegyeshalom-Újlakótelep [ZOFFMANN 1999], 7. Iván-Szerdata-dűlő [MELIS 2019], 8. Környe-Fácánkert [BÁNDI & NEMESKÉRI 1971], 9. Majs [BÁNDI & KISS 1967], 10. Mosonszentmiklós-Jánosházapuszta [UZSOKI 1963; ZOFFMANN 1971], 11. Nagycenk-Lapos-rét [ZOFFMANN 2008; GÖMÖRI, MELIS & KISS 2018], 12. Ordacsehi-Csereföldek [SOMOGYI 2004; ZOFFMANN 2004], 13. Szakony-Kavicsbánya [MELIS 2019], 14. Szigetszentmiklós-Felső-tag [KALICZ-SCHREIBER 1995], 15. Zsenyke-Kavicsbánya [NAGY 2013]). 2. Chronology of the archaeological cultures under study*

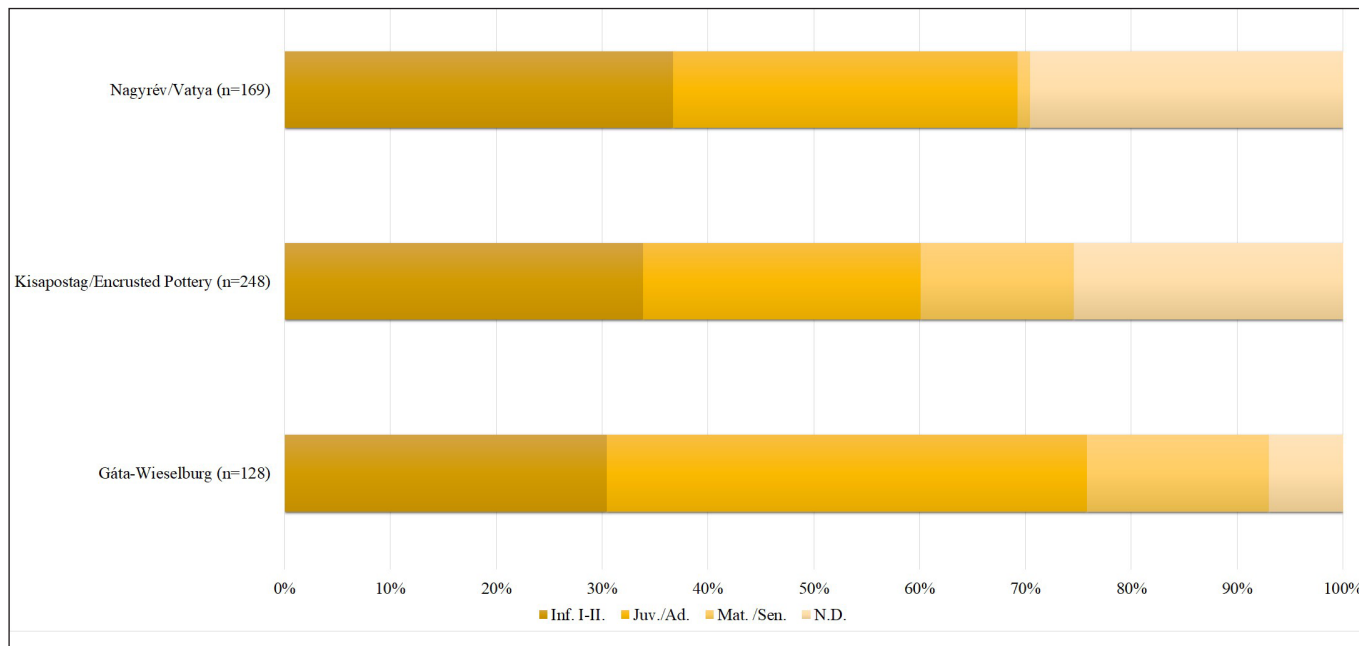


Fig. 2. Age distribution of the deceased in the investigated cemeteries

contrast, only 31% of the deceased were children in the skeletal burials of the Gáta–Wieselburg Culture in Hungary. In the largest cemetery of the Gáta–Wieselburg Culture at Hainburg (Austria) the proportion of deceased under 20 years of age (43.4%) is closer to the estimated average within prehistoric communities (SPANNAGL-STEINER, NOVOTNY & TESCHLER-NICOLA 2011, 27, Abb. 1, Abb. 2). Studies focusing on women’s fertility and population maintenance in the cemeteries of the Únětice Culture in Central Europe suggest that the average proportion of children in the cemeteries of this period was around 40–50% (STROCH 2001, 95–96; REBAY-SALISBURY *et al.* 2018, Fig. 1). In the Austrian Early Bronze Age inhumation cemeteries of the Traisen Valley, infants were so underrepresented that it is assumed that most of them was not laid to rest there (APPLEBY 2019, 53). There are no data on burials outside cemeteries at Gáta–Wieselburg sites in Hungary. The related anthropological materials are poorly preserved due to previous disturbances (reopening of graves, agricultural cultivation) and other taphonomic reasons, which may explain the low number of infants and young children, age groups with otherwise relatively high mortality rates, amongst the graves (cf. HAJDU 2012, 77–79) (Fig. 2).

### TRACES OF PROTECTIVE CARE AND VIOLENCE?

Within the communities of Nagyrév/Vatya, Kisapostag/Encrusted Pottery, and Gáta–Wieselburg cultures, single burial was normative, while more individuals in one grave is considered exceptional. In the case of the Gáta–Wieselburg Culture collective burials are particularly rare (REBAY-SALISBURY 2018, 37; MELIS 2019). Consecutive internment of multiple persons in the same grave are more frequent in Gáta–Wieselburg cemeteries in Hungary (ASPÖCK 2018; MELIS 2019). A grave unearthed at Iván contained the bones of four individuals: the skull of a young child under a pot at the bottom, the remains of an adult buried next to it, and the bones of two women interred later (Fig. 3, 1; MELIS 2019, Fig. 7). Amongst the eighteen individuals in the eight multiple burials collected, only two males could be identified, along with six, mostly under 8–10-year-old children (MELIS *et al.* 2020, Table 2).

The remains of more than one individual, mostly children, were distinguished in six burials of the Nagyrév Culture at Szigetszentmiklós-Felső-tag (KALICZ-SCHREIBER 1995; ZOFFMANN 1995). However, amongst the urn graves of the Vatya Culture multiple burials are exceptional. In the recently excavated cemetery of Szigetszentmiklós-Űrgehegy, the calcined bones of two fetuses were identified in the burial of a woman of non-local origin (CAVAZZUTI *et al.* 2021; KISS *et al.* 2021, 34, Fig. 5). In settlements of the



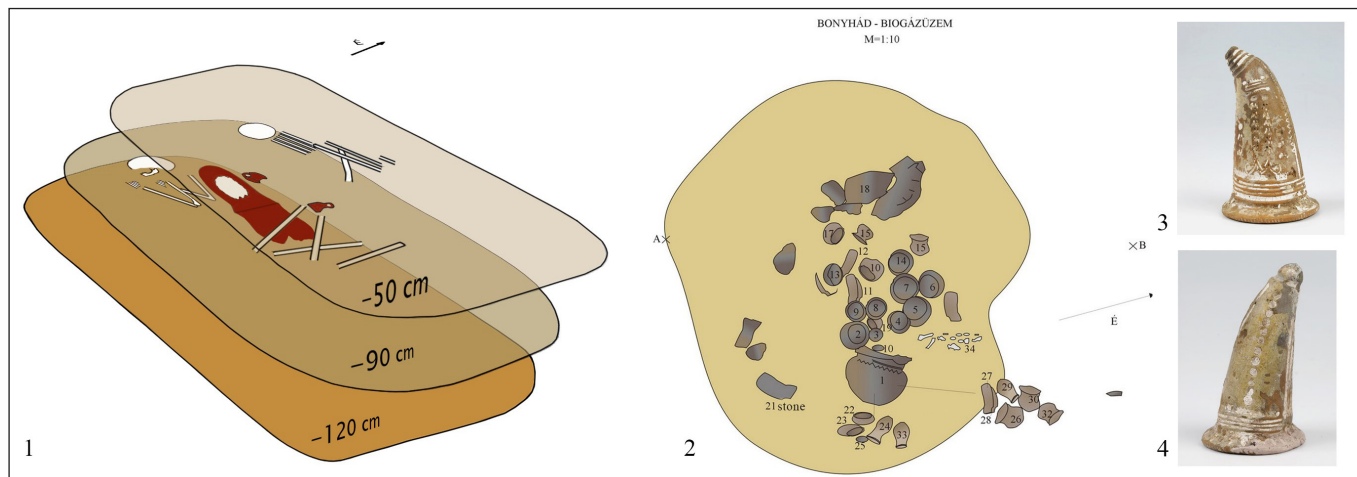


Fig. 3.1. *Iván-Szerdata-dűlő*, Grave No. 2–4, of a child aged 2.5–3.5 and an adult of indeterminable sex, and consecutive burials of two adult women (after MELIS 2019, Fig. 8.). 2. *Bonyhád-Biogázüzem*, Grave No. BBQ075, of a 1–3-year-old-child (after SZABÓ 2012), 3–4. Miniature drinking horns from *Bonyhád-Biogázüzem* (BBQ075J24, BBQ075J27; after HAJDU *et al.* 2016, Fig. 5)

Vatya Culture, bones of several individuals have often been recovered from a single settlement feature (SZEVEŔÉNYI *et al.* 2020b). No obvious selection by sex or age was observed in the anthropological record of the Érd-Hosszú-földek settlement, comprising 36 individuals; children occurred at a rate similar to cemeteries' (40%, PAP *et al.* 2008; SZEVEŔÉNYI *et al.* 2020b).

The largest number of multiple graves occurs in the Transdanubian Encrusted Pottery Culture, with almost half of these burials belonging to children (ZOFFMANN 1971; HAJDU 2010; ZOFFMANN 2015). Data on multiple burials from Transdanubia show that the co-burial of an adult or older adult (*maturus*) and a young child (Inf. I) is more frequent than that of two adults. Children older than 7–8 years (Inf. II) were most often buried with younger children (MELIS *et al.* 2020, Fig. 7. 3). The particular frequency of multiple burials involving children under four suggests that they were not regarded as independent but as infants in need of the special protection of their relatives, closely linked, obviously, to the biological demands of their age. Newborns and young children under Bronze Age conditions may not have had a good chance of survival without parents, especially a mother; in most cases they passed away with family members (REBAY-SALISBURY 2017; 2018). Although the duration of breastfeeding may vary from one community to another, the process of weaning could be completed by the age of three or four in Bronze Age societies (REBAY-SALISBURY 2017).

In the Late Bronze Age, spouted or so-called feeding vessels were widespread in settlements and burials in Central Europe (REBAY-SALISBURY *et al.* 2021, 103–108, Table 1–2). Recently, lipid analyses have been able to detect ruminant milk marks in the interior of these about 3000-year-old vessels (DUNNE *et al.* 2019; REBAY-SALISBURY *et al.* 2021, 112–118). In other words, the feeding vessels frequently found in children's graves may have been used to supplement the diet of toddlers with sheep or goat's milk and to help with weaning. There seem to be no expressed feeding vessels in the Middle Bronze Age phase under study, but a large number of miniature pottery are known from cremation burials of the Encrusted Pottery Culture (KISS 2012, 83–85). The examples of the graves at Bonyhád and Mosonszentmiklós corroborate the previous observation that tiny vessels were usually placed in children's burials (UZSOKI 1963, 82–83; SZABÓ & HAJDU 2011; HAJDU *et al.* 2016, 362, Fig. 5–6). In the cemetery of Bonyhád, decorated small drinking horns can be associated with the youngest children, less than 3–4 old at death, and may have been used in supplying young children with food (Fig. 3, 2–4).

Families sometimes tried to care for the deceased children not only physically but also by ensuring by certain objects that their remains were shielded from harmful spirits. Although identifying protective amulets in prehistoric burials often leads to uncertain results, ethnographic and historical analogies suggest that pierced animal teeth may have an apotropaic function. Animal teeth could represent the whole and the main characteristics of the beast, some of which may could provide symbolic protection for the owner of the



tooth jewellery (CHOYKE 2010; GÁL & BONDÁR 2022, 50–53). In the Middle Bronze Age of Transdanubian, accessories made from animal teeth were not common but in a few cases, jewellery items made from dog and deer teeth were found in children's graves (SKRIBA *et al.* 2010; SZABÓ 2012; MELIS 2013, Fig. 8).

In addition to signs of care, some Bronze Age children's bones show traces of the injuries they suffered before they died. Among the human remains recovered at the Middle Bronze Age site of Érd, unhealed traces of trauma were found on the skulls of a 14–18-year-old and a 4–5-year-old child, respectively (SZEVERÉNYI *et al.* 2020b, Fig. 18a–b). In the Gáta–Wieselburg burials analysed from Hainburg (Austria), the deliberate perforation of the frontal bone of a 9-year-old child was associated with their death; otherwise, the child suffered from cancer or tuberculosis (SPANNAGL-STEINER, NOVOTNY & TESCHLER-NICOLA 2011, 30–31, Abb. 16, Abb. 17). Healed traces of injuries were found on the skull of a 6–8-year-old child from the cemetery of the Encrusted Pottery Culture at Környe (BÁNDI & NEMESKÉRI 1971, 15, Taf. II, 1).

### HOW LONG COULD CHILDHOOD LAST?

From an anthropological point of view, the answer is slightly more simple: apart from the difficulties of determining age, we can broadly consider individuals under twenty subadults (BICKLE & FIBIGER 2014; REBAY-SALISBURY *et al.* 2018). From a socio-economic point of view, the issue is more complex: on the one hand, the economic role of children in prehistoric communities was not marginal (BAXTER 2008, 164), and on the other hand, complex palaeopathological studies have indicated that girls aged 14–15 in the Bronze Age could already be mothers (REBAY-SALISBURY *et al.* 2018). Small leather hat and axe finds from the Bronze Age salt mines of Hallstatt (Austria) suggest that children around eight years of age were already



Fig. 4. Győr-Ménfőcsanak-Széles-földek Grave No. 10695, of a 4–6-year-old-child (photo by Ferenc Halász)



Fig. 5. Distribution of copper/bronze headdresses, hair rings, neck rings, pins, weapons, and arm spirals/bracelets by age groups in the burials of the examined archaeological cultures (the position of the objects marked in pale green is uncertain) (graphic by Zsóka Varga, based on figures in SOMOGYI 2004, MALI 2014, JANKOVITS 2017, and GÖMÖRI, MELIS & KISS 2018)



involved in work (WAGER 2009, 107–108; RESCHREITER & KOWARIK 2019), while even younger children could take part in activities such as basketry, pottery making, and food collection (BAXTER 2008, 163–165; FÜLÖP 2016).

Cross-cultural studies in archaeology have revealed the presence of a few universal milestones in the development of children, partly determined by biological processes (e.g., the development of the digestive system and sexual maturation) (REBAY-SALISBURY & PANY-KUCERA 2020). These age-related changes are also culturally determined, including the duration of breastfeeding being influenced by the community's subsistence strategy and norms. In farming, settled, and sometimes urbanised societies, the breastfeeding of toddlers ended around the age of three, which often meant the recognition of children as individual members of the community (DANOVÁ 2012; REBAY-SALISBURY 2017).

Graves of young children older than that were also found in a more balanced proportion in the examined inhumation cemeteries. In exceptional cases, the graves of young children were also equipped with status markers; for example, a bronze dagger was placed next to a child of about four or six at death in Győr-Ménfőcsanak (*Fig. 4*; MELIS 2015, 347, Tab. IV; MELIS 2016; TÓTH, MELIS & ILON 2016, 748). Copper and bronze neck-rings, items associated with a high social status, occur occasionally in young children's burials in the investigated territory. These outstanding burials belong to the descendants of the community's ruling elite, who were interred with symbols of political power. The passing on of these symbols can be interpreted as a sign of the institutionalisation of social position (SOSNA 2009, 140–142).

The period of middle childhood, from about 7–8 to 12–14 years of age, is another key phase in children's development (BICKLE & FIBIGER 2014). In funerary context, the representation appearing in the burials of children of this age is often similar to adults'. Although in present-day terms middle childhood precedes sexual maturation, this similarity in death with adults can be observed in diverse archaeological periods from the Neolithic to the Early Middle Ages; it may be related not only to biological maturity but also to rites of passage into adulthood (SOFAER 2004, 166). It also suggests the possibility that children are buried not only with objects that indicate their actual status in life but also with the attributes of gender and social identity available to them; conclusively, their grave find assemblages may represent an age older than both their biological and social ages. Nevertheless, even in societies with literacy, sources attest that girls and boys became full members of the community during adolescence, i.e., the beginning of adulthood in social terms precedes the completion of biological development (REBAY-SALISBURY & PANY-KUCERA 2020, 6–7).

Elements of the adult male and female attire have frequently been found in the Early and Middle Bronze Age inhumation burials of children between 7–8 and 12–14 years of age in western Hungary (MELIS *et al.* 2020). Clothing accessories and participation in daily tasks suggest that youths over the age of 12–14 could be considered full members of the community. In the cremation cemeteries of the Nagyrév/Vatya and the Encrusted Pottery cultures, very similar, often fragmentary, clothing accessories were found in graves of women and children, indicating that these elements of supposedly women's attire can hardly be associated with any age group. In the Nagyrév/Vatya cemeteries, both the quantity and the variety of bronze items in the graves of individuals over forty at death declined drastically (*Fig. 5*). A custom or tendency passing on metal goods seems to be present in the Encrusted Pottery Culture, indicated by the frequent addition of bronze fragments to the graves of under-10-year-olds at Mosonszentmiklós (KISS 2012, Fig. 83). The number of bronzes in the graves of people over forty at death was also significantly low in these communities. On the other hand, in the subadult grave group burials of children in middle childhood at death contained the greatest variety of accessories, indicating that the giving of objects for the afterlife was to some extent linked with a degree of maturity and to the individual having been recognised by the community. The high proportion of young children's graves rich in bronze grave goods in the two cemeteries of Nagyrév/Vatya Culture may indicate a selective funerary practice, where only the youngest members of more prestigious families became interred in the cemetery (MALI 2014).

However, status markers, which could be interpreted as symbols of power, were only exceptionally placed in children's graves. Weapons and headdresses can be found in Bronze Age burials of juvenis subadults to elderly (SOMOGYI 2004; MALI 2014). Although signs of economic prosperity – most frequently in the form of

certain bronze objects such as bracelets and arm spirals – were also present in the graves of infants, these in general contain fewer marks indicating inherited social status. This suggests that power in these communities was primarily linked with individual skills (SOSNA 2009, 4–8). Archaeological analysis of children’s graves can provide limited insights into what it was like to be a child in the Bronze Age (SOFAER DERVENSKI 2000, 5, 12), but can reveal key aspects of social organisation in the period from 4000 to 3500 years ago.

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