

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MODERN ERA AND CONTEMPORARY ARCHAEOLOGY IN HUNGARY?

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In memoriam Orsolya Lajkó and Tibor Sabján

According to the current legislation in Hungary, finds and relics buried before CE 1711, representing material remains of historical periods dating before that, are considered archaeological heritage. In other words, the Middle Ages and a large part of the Early Modern Period are still classified as being of archaeological interest in the legislative environment in Hungary, whereas the end of the Early Modern Period and the Late Modern Period are not. This boundary, which is linked to a specific historical date, is quite different from the legal framework in many European countries, where the time limit for studying, processing and, above all, the protection of archaeological heritage is defined flexibly, always preceding the current date by a hundred years. The archaeology of the Modern Period or even contemporary archaeology has become recognised as a discipline in many countries, and many other fields and heritage management conceptions do not limit archaeology and the exploration of the past to particular historical periods. This article attempts to summarise all the research directions in Hungary where the traditional chronological boundary is no longer taken into consideration in daily practice or even the legislative framework of the particular field. Due to limited space, this summary cannot be comprehensive; nonetheless, it makes a point that, based on the current state of research, +it is problematic to stick to the current chronological framework in legislation.

The history of archaeology can be described as a process where the methods and approach of archaeology serve as the basis of gleaning knowledge about historical periods has become accepted in more and more fields of historical research with time. While the application of archaeological methods was commonly accepted to study prehistory and antiquity centuries ago, it only became a basic scientific concept for the Middle Ages (including the Early Middle Ages and the Migration Period) much later, in the 20th century. Over the past



Fig. 1. *The programme of the EAC 2023 conference about the challenges of Modern Era archaeology*

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decades, it has become generally accepted by international research that the Early and Late Modern Era or even the recent past (contemporary history) can be studied using the methods of archaeology and that this approach brings significant improvement in the understanding of these periods (GRAVES-BROWN, HARRISON & PICCINI 2013). The current approach of academia worldwide is well illustrated by the fact that the 2023 heritage management conference² by the European Archaeological Council (EAC), one of Europe's most important archaeological organisations, was dedicated to archaeological research and its challenges of the Modern Period and the recent past. The overview of international research presented there – including that of Hungary – has clearly demonstrated that the study of the 18th–20th centuries and recent times by means of archaeology, even if with different foci, methods, and within diverse legal frameworks, is now widespread (*Fig. 1*).

However, the development of archaeological research in Hungary has, in many respects, diverged from this tendency. Medieval archaeology was present in Hungary from the birth of archaeology in the scientific sense, and there have been examples of archaeological approaches to the Early Modern Period, too. The increased demand for studying the material culture of the Ottoman Period (Early Modern Period) resulted in the Hungarian scientific institutions and their approach accepting the role of archaeology in the research of that period surprisingly early even in international comparison (LASZLOVSZKY & RASSON 2003). However, the chronological limit in the current legislation (mentioned in the introduction) seems to prevent archaeology and archaeological heritage from playing an essential role in the research of the period between the 18th century and the present. The law in force since 2001 has applied this concept (KÁLNOKY-GYÖNGYÖSSY 2016, 72–73)³ even though the first version of the act on the protection of cultural goods after the fall of the Communist regime used the shifting 100-year limit.⁴ The chronological boundary CE 1711 stems from a historical concept. It follows the narrative of Hungarian national historiography and links the end of the period of archaeological interest and the formulation of archaeological heritage to an important event in political history, namely the end of Rákóczi's War of Independence. One reason for that may have been that for a long time, cultural monument research of castles – which always had a prominent place in built cultural heritage management – concluded, in chronological terms, with the wave of castle destructions carried out by the Habsburgs before Rákóczi's War of Independence. However, more recent studies have shown that the Habsburg actions were hardly comprehensive, and the destruction of castles and fortifications can be attributed to a variety of causes (OROSS 2005, 257). Thus, this argument brought about a plummeting in the significance of the boundary linked to the end of Rákóczi's War of Independence (1711). As a result, some Hungarian museums extended their area of interest to later periods.⁵

As a result of these processes, there are several areas today where significant investigations have been carried out by Hungarian researchers and the application of archaeological methods has become almost generally accepted to study the post-1711 period. In a recent study about military archaeology, the fields of landscape archaeology, settlement archaeology, building archaeology, industrial archaeology, ethnographic archaeology, and military archaeology were named as ones espousing such trends (BÁLINT, POLGÁR & PÓRSZÁSZ 2020, 125). As this study demonstrates, the range of the change is much wider, indicating that Hungarian archaeology has already abandoned the artificial time boundary, which has led to the emergence of new fields within the discipline.

² The [concept](#) and the programme of the conference are [available](#) online.

³ LXIV Act of 2001 on the Protection of Cultural Heritage Article 7. 37. “*Archaeological heritage*: detectable trace of human existence on the surface of or underground or underwater, in natural or artificial cavities dated before 1711 that helps to explore the universal culture and the history of mankind and its relation with nature; contributes to tracing back the history of peoples and the nation inhabiting the country; proves, presents and supports the origin and evolution of our people, relating to which the main sources of information are surveys and other research methods.” Article 7. 32. of the same act: “*Object of archaeological age*: object created before 1711 falling within the category of cultural goods proven to have survived as part of a collection.

⁴ Act CXL of 1997 on museums, public libraries and cultural community services. In Appendix 1.: “(zs) *Elements of the archaeological heritage*: traces of human existence from any past periods that are older than 100 years and that can help to reconstruct the history of mankind and its relation to nature. Archaeological heritage includes every site, building, structure, object or other relics, phenomenon and detectable context on the surface of or underground, underwater or in caves.”

⁵ For example, [Herman Ottó Museum](#), Miskolc.

ETHNOGRAPHIC ARCHAEOLOGY

Summaries of the history of science in Hungary often emphasise the prominent role of ethnography both within humanities and in understanding the past. Due to the relatively late industrialisation of the country, traditional folk culture was preserved longer in Hungary and many other Central and Eastern European countries than in Western Europe. Thus, ethnography and especially historical ethnography played an important role in the formation of the research foci of archaeology (LASZLOVSZKY & SIKLÓDI 1991; 2022, 62–64). Archaeology and ethnography have been entangled in the research into the Early Modern Period since the beginning of the 20th century, bringing about shortly the emergence of ethnographical-archaeological excavations focusing on 18th- and 19th-century material remains. One of the key elements of these was the study of pottery-making in the period in question, serving as an excellent example for this and other periods, including the Early Modern Period of the shifting of the boundaries of fields of interest. As ethnographers have noticed that the distinct vernacular pottery centres only developed and spread their characteristic form- and decoration systems mainly in the 19th century, ethnographic (in fact, archaeological) excavations became necessary – especially in the research of these centres – to investigate this part of the material culture of the preceding era (VIDA 1993; 1996). Although this kind of “ethnographic archaeology” mainly contributed to the investigation of pottery production, it also crossed the traditional boundaries of archaeological periods and engaged in the evaluation of find material from not only the Early but also the Late Modern Period (LAJKÓ 2015). The contributions of Orsolya Lajkó have also shown the significance of the various sources and the link between archaeology and ethnography (*Fig. 2*).

The same applies to the study of vernacular architecture. While historical-ethnographic studies following the tradition of 19th-century research tended to use modern ethnographic data as analogies to earlier periods (K. CSILLÉRY 1982), there have been more and more examples of the exploration of the remains of modern vernacular architecture from the second half of the 20th century onwards. Open-air ethnographic museums (including the Hungarian Open Air Museum in Szentendre) have played a key role in that, as document-



Fig. 3. Tibor Sabján is presenting at a conference about adobe architecture



Fig. 2. Orsolya Lajkó and her book

ing the demolished, relocated and rebuilt buildings also meant taking “archaeological” observations. The specialists in this field documented still-standing monuments, studied and reconstructed similar building types recovered during excavations, and were experts in historical ethnography. Tibor Sabján (*Fig. 3*) was an outstanding scholar among them. His lifework showed that good analogies could be drawn between village houses and their ovens or stoves from the Árpadian Age, the Late Medieval, or Early Modern Period and those from an ethnographic context, not only documented but often rebuilt (SABJÁN 1998; TAKÁCS 2020). In another case, although the building itself was not relocated, every element of traditional archaeological method-

ology was applied, and the results were compared to all persisting elements of the historical record that could be considered as a source, regardless of their age (RÁCZ 2013). It shall be noted here that the related texts includes only a few specific written sources (plans, building descriptions, surveys) of vernacular architecture, even if the building was constructed in the 19th or 20th century. We can see a similar entanglement of archaeological and ethnographic methodology and approach in the study of K. NÉMETH & MÁTÉ (2020), where the authors discuss the landscape history of a region ignoring the traditional chronological boundaries. From an archaeological point of view, this work is related to landscape archaeology, which will be discussed later in this article in the context of the Early Modern Period. In summary, we can say that the archaeological-ethnographic approach is of great importance in investigating Modern Era heritage.

BUILDING ARCHAEOLOGY

Besides ethnographic archaeology, the archaeological methodology has been applied in another field, also focusing on periods after 1711. Hungary's institutionalised monument protection has been creating strong professional centres since the end of the 19th century, in which archaeology played an important role alongside history and art history, especially after World War 2. Building archaeology became generally acknowledged and applied to Medieval and Early Modern Period buildings to investigate their architectural history as part of their renovation and rebuilding (BARDOLY & HARIS 2020). In this context, any artificial chronological boundary (e.g., 1711) loses its relevance, as buildings have their own construction phases and researching the relevant source materials or architectural remains related to the building periods before and after any chronological boundary requires the same methods. In this sense, there is no difference between a 20th-century building and a Late Medieval or Early Modern Period one in terms of how its remains are surveyed or its antecedents are investigated. Because of the currently prevailing monumental heritage protection approach and the institutional background of built heritage protection in Hungary, building archaeology did not include every type of built heritage amongst its targets in the past, while churches, castles, manors and other types of noble residence are overrepresented compared to other building types (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. The Harruckern-Wenckheim-Almásy castle in Gyula during excavation

GARDEN ARCHAEOLOGY

The study of historical gardens and parks in Hungary follows a model similar to the one discussed above in relation to building archaeology. The study and recreation of gardens of historical monuments have been carried out within the framework of institutional monument protection of Hungary for many decades, combining, akin to building archaeology, the work of specialists of diverse professional backgrounds (architects, landscape architects, historians, art historians, and archaeologists). These people often grouped up into professional teams to study a particular monument, thus creating an evident opportunity to prepare the restoration of a historical garden based not only on available plans or depictions but also by locating and investigating built parts, such as fountains, roads, and other garden structures, by archaeological means (FATSAR 2003; KOPPÁNY 2008; 2019; KOPPÁNY, KUPOVICS & THURY 2010). Just like in the case of historical monuments, an artificial chronological boundary is irrelevant in the landscape history of gardens; there are no methodological differences between the methods of studying a Renaissance, a Baroque, or a modern garden.

LANDSCAPE ARCHAEOLOGY

The approach of landscape archaeology to the periods discussed in the present study is very similar to or even related to garden archaeology. Usually, two important elements of landscape archaeology are distinguished: data and archaeological observations are analysed focusing on landscapes rather than single sites or archaeological phenomena, and the landscape itself is seen as an additional source of information reflecting the interplay in which people and nature affected one another in the past centuries or millennia. It is an ongoing process in which new elements are created, and old ones are eliminated. Thus, mapping, documenting, and understanding or “reading” the landscape does not depend on age. Modern Era and contemporary elements of the landscape are just as important as medieval or prehistoric ones because their relative and absolute chronology outlines the landscape archaeological character of any area and the processes characteristic of that. In this respect, landscape characterisation, a method closely related to landscape archaeology, is important in turning phenomena into a source of information. All the above considered, the concept of a chronological boundary between periods hardly makes any sense because the landscape is constantly changing, and its study cannot be “stopped” at a particular year. The significance of landscape archaeological research in Hungarian archaeology is constantly growing, bringing about an upswing in the number of research projects focusing on the latest centuries and applying the methods of this field (ZATYKÓ, SZILÁGYI & SZABÓ 2017).

ENVIRONMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Similarly to landscape archaeology, environmental archaeology is basically about studying the relationship between people and nature, although does that based on different sources and approaches. In this case, the source material comprises archaeological finds that were not included in the “traditional” understanding of the term: such bone remains, micro- and macro-botanical remains, soil samples, etc. The methods used in the context of environmental archaeology are mostly natural scientific ones – including absolute dating – which themselves make any political historical date irrelevant as, for instance, the stratigraphy of soil samples taken from special environments (e.g., marshland sediments) goes back in time from today and radiocarbon data cover their whole layer sequence. Similarly, dendrochronological sequences go backwards in time, revealing recent or Modern Period environmental changes. In summary, past environmental processes and their investigation starts with the present and goes back in time. Therefore, the analysis of a dataset focuses equally on the last two centuries and older periods.

INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY

(GLASS PRODUCTION, IRON PRODUCTION, LIME AND CHARCOAL KILNS, ETC.)

Industrial archaeology means two separate approaches that are different even in the contexts of the periods in focus. While one deals with the archaeological traces of industrial activities (metallurgy, pottery-making, charcoal and lime burning) from any period, the other focuses on archaeological features and sites, including still-standing monuments, dated to the age of the Industrial Revolution. The first approach served as a base for many archaeological research projects in Hungary, resulting in the excavation of many industrial heritage sites from various periods (IPARRÉGÉSZET 1; 2) and the investigation of the record of diverse crafts. In contrast, as industrialisation began later in Hungary than in Western Europe, the archaeological study of its remnants is limited mainly to the Early Modern Period. While the protection and study of built industrial monuments have been an important part of monument protection in Hungary for long (PETRAVICH 1997), their (building) archaeological investigation has always played a minor role. It is telling that the [cadastre of industrial archaeological sites in Hungary](#) includes no younger sites than the 18th century. Nonetheless, we have recent examples of excavations of Late Modern Period industrial sites (such as glassworks) that followed the methodology of similar sites dated to the Middle Ages or Early Modern Period (GALLINA & GULYÁS 2023).

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF WARFARE – MILITARY ARCHAEOLOGY

One of the most important fields of Early and Late Modern Period archaeology is military archaeology (archaeology of warfare, conflict archaeology), also a good example of institutionalisation. It was the first field of archaeology that dealt with findings from centuries close to the present, not only in Hungary but also worldwide. Battlefields, war zones and relics of the American Civil War, the Napoleonic Wars, World Wars 1 and 2, and even the Cold War have long been the focus of interest because of their importance. Excavating their physical remains and archaeological features contributed to the emergence of the methodology of independent battlefield archaeology, which led to the complex approaches of military archaeology and conflict archaeology. Scholars have investigated sites of important military events in Hungarian history since the end of the 19th century (BÁLINT, POLGÁR & PÓRSZÁSZ 2020, 125–127), such as significant battlefields of the Hungarian War of Independence of 1848–49 or the excavation of the remains of the military leaders of this war at Arad (1849). Military heritage has recently been provided with its particular regulation, which may contribute to the upswing of the field.⁶ Recent investigations were carried out mainly by the Military History Institute and Museum of Hungary, and a methodological summary has also been published (NÉGYESI 2010). No chronological boundary limits the operation of the Collection of Military Archaeology (established in 2013), preceding the Department of Military Archaeology set up in 2022. The research activity of this institution reflects the various aspects of military archaeology its team has to engage in, exploring battlefields, built war structures, shooting ranges, and prison camps (POLGÁR 2019; 2019–20; 2022; HATALA & POLGÁR 2022). The scope of activities of the *War Graves and Heroes' Remembrance Directorate* of the Military History Institute and Museum of Hungary includes the field survey, excavation, and exhumation of war graves in Hungary. The solid institutional background allows the Museum to organise professional forums; for example, the "War, Archaeology and Cultural Heritage" conference was organised for the fifth time in 2022. Compiling the *Register of Historical Battlefields in Hungary* has a similar purpose.

At the same time, other important investigations related to this field have also been conducted, including two projects in Transylvania, realised in cooperation with Hungarian institutions. One of them was carried out after pilot studies at a site of great importance to Hungarian national history and memory at Sighișoara (Romania, Segesvár in Hungarian), the place where Sándor Petőfi, the famous Hungarian poet died. This project was carried out in the cooperation of numerous Hungarian and Romanian museums and other research institutions. In the other project, the results of aerial archaeolog-



Fig. 5. The excavation of a 20th-century military monument during the exploration of the Citadel

⁶ According to the 2017 amendment to Act LXIV on the Protection of Cultural Heritage (Article 7. 7), military heritage is defined as "war zone, battlefield, defensive structure, other military object or military monument, in particular war aircraft, wheeled or caterpillar war vehicles and other military arms systems, weapons, equipment and uniforms and their combinations (from now on referred to jointly as 'military heritage element') after 1711". It should have been implemented by a government decree but that did not happen so far.

ical surveys of Roman remains and archaeological features from other periods led to the investigation of WW1 fortifications and, as a result, an important [exhibition](#) was organised in Târgu Mureş (Romania, Marosvásárhely in Hungarian). An excavation related to another type of Modern Period institution was also carried out in Romania: even if it does not belong strictly to the realm of military archaeology, the archaeological survey and excavation of a medical quarantine site near the pre-WW1 state border between Hungary and Romania show similarities to the survey of various types of campsites (DEMJÉN 2020).

Modern Era research can also benefit from the results of surveys of archaeological sites that are of great importance for military archaeology. Excavations were also conducted in Early Modern Period military buildings and important historical memorial places in relation to their renovation and touristic utilisation. An excellent example of that is the excavation of the Citadel on the Gellért Hill in Budapest (SZABÓ & FULLÁR 2020), where WW1 and WW2 military findings have also been discovered alongside the remains of an observatory built and demolished in the Early Modern Period preceding the building of the fortress in the mid-19th century (*Fig. 5.*). The above demonstrate well that there is actually considerable interest in the research of monuments or wreckages related to the World Wars in Hungary. At the same time, the research of Holocaust sites, a prominent topic in modern European archaeology, has not appeared among priority fields in Hungary yet (SUSA *et al.* 2015).

FORENSIC ARCHAEOLOGY

Forensic archaeology is one of the most prominent branches of archaeological research into the Modern Era and the recent past. It is basically the methods of archaeological excavation applied at sites related to crimes, executions, and war crimes, to allow researchers to explore the acts committed there in the most precise way possible. Thus, archaeology is involved in the process of site examination and forensics work. At the same time, the analytical methods of forensic archaeology – using the methods of archaeological interpretation – also make it possible to reconstruct the events that took place at a given site. The legal and human rights aspects of this field make it clear why identifying victims and reconstructing past events became a field of utmost importance regardless of chronological boundaries. This research trend relates to “legal archaeology”, which is barely present in Hungary (KOVÁTS 2017). The increasing number of handbooks, periodicals, and university programmes shows that forensic archaeology has become an acknowledged practice and field of science in many countries. The importance of this field is well illustrated by the fact that there is a researcher amongst the winners of the EAA Heritage Prize who got the award for investigating WW2 concentration camps.

The situation in Hungary is controversial. Although there were forensic archaeological investigations and excavations (even crucial ones), there was no institutionalised forensic archaeology until recently. This controversy is more striking, knowing that many of these excavations were conducted long ago, and forensic anthropology has had its traditions and institutions for decades. Similarly to the early examples of military archaeology, the need to involve forensic experts in investigating sites related to landmarks of Hungarian history, especially human remains in their context, arose very early on. One of these excavations, where the executed leaders of the Hungarian Jacobins were excavated and identified, took place in 1914. This was carried out with the most significant contribution by anthropologist Lajos Bartucz, who made critical archaeological observations and studied the recovered anthropological record (BARTUCZ 1965, 79, 84; 1966). Decades later, the reburial of Imre Nagy and other leaders of the 1956 Hungar-



Fig. 6. Alán Kralovánszky during the [excavation](#) of Imre Nagy's grave

ian Revolution was a symbolic event marking the end of Communism in Hungary. This act included a need for forensic identification of the remains – after their unmarked graves had been identified and excavated – to make it possible to rebury them. Anthropologist János Nemeskéri supervised the investigation, and archaeologist Alán Kralovánszky carried out the excavation. Kralovánszky was appointed director general of the Hungarian National Museum shortly afterwards. One of the reasons for his participating in the excavation was that he himself had been imprisoned during the retaliations after the revolution (*Fig. 6.*). Despite all that, forensic archaeology has never been institutionalised in Hungary, and despite the excavations of outstanding importance mentioned above, there has been no significant development in this field of science since (SUSA *et al.* 2015). This is even more striking when we consider the strong relationship between Hungarian archaeology and museums and the legal framework, law enforcement, and military institutions and their operation (HUDÁK 2013) and also the many links connecting war grave research and forensic archaeology (POLGÁR 2017). Recently, however, there has been a change in the institutionalisation of forensic archaeology in Hungary, as a [university programme](#) to train specialists in this field has been launched in Pécs.

UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGY, AERIAL ARCHAEOLOGY, COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY

In addition to the directions of archaeological research in Hungary presented in this study so far, many others provide examples of research of Modern Period heritage or that of the recent past. Once again, the methodology of the investigations is the same regardless of the temporal boundaries of a historical period, thus depriving any artificial chronological boundary set for archaeological heritage of its relevance. In the case of underwater heritage, even the legal situation is partly different as the UNESCO 2001 [Convention](#) on the Protection of the Underwater Heritage uses the 100-year minimum age limit.⁷ As this law was ratified in Hungary in 2014, the same rule applies to underwater heritage in the country. Underwater research in Hungary has provided numerous investigations of shipwrecks, ship mills and various water structures dating from the 18th to the 20th centuries (TÓTH 2018; 2020). Aerial archaeological research, especially in relation to military archaeological sites and fortifications, also often documents and analyses phenomena from the Modern Period, including the 20th century. In the field of community archaeology in Hungary, the work of museum-friendly metal detectorists plays a particularly important role, and these volunteers are, in general, particularly interested in battlefield and military archaeology. Thus, militaria, the relics of war events, which may be remains of modern or recent wars, play a particularly important role in these investigations. Historical boundaries are less relevant in such community events, as participants generally take part in them driven by their general interest in the past (LASZLOVSZKY & RÁCZ 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

The examples presented above clearly demonstrate that the archaeological research into the period from the 18th century to the present must be considered in Hungarian research. Some of these excavations and investigations fit in with similar international trends. While the research of the material remains of the 18th century can be interpreted as an extension of Early Modern Period archaeological investigations to later periods, the excavations aiming to explore remains from the 19th and 20th centuries – within the fields of ethnographical archaeology, garden archaeology, buildings archaeology, etc. – provide other disciplines with answers to their particular questions and problems instead. In this respect, cooperation between the experts in these different fields is essential, as that is the only way to make sure that the study of material culture – i.e. the archaeological approach – yields relevant results in these periods rich in written and visual sources. However, Hungarian research has not yet followed international trends in some areas, like the study of the authoritarian regimes of recent times and the buildings, institutions, and sites associated with them, even though complex military archaeological research and elements of forensic archaeology have already provided a solid methodological basis for that. This situation resembles theoretical archaeology in

⁷ In Hungary: Act IX of 2014 on the Proclamation of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, 2014, paragraph 1 (a).

Hungary in the early 1990s (LASZLOVSZKY & SIKLÓDI 1991). We can reformulate those statements and say that although there has been some archaeological research into the Modern Era and the recent past in Hungary, no institutional background has developed. To achieve this development and step further, however, would require abandoning the 1711 chronological boundary in the legal framework, which is, in many respects, anachronistic today, and replacing it with a new heritage conception that is more consistent with contemporary approaches.

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