CULTURAL AND LANDSCAPE CHANGES IN SOUTH-EAST HUNGARY

II

Prehistoric, Roman Barbarian and Late Avar Settlement at Gyoma 133 (Békés County Microregion)

by

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Cover Photograph shows:
a selection of Sarmatian vessels recovered at Gyoma 133
(Photo by Tibor Kádas)

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Editor's Preface

The excavation at the site of Gyoma 133 (Gyoma Ailer téglagyár) has been one of the largest excavations carried out under the aegis of the Microregion Research Project of the Archaeological Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The aim of this project has been – as it was already pointed out in the first volume where the results of some of the excavations were published – in essence the reconstruction of environmental history and settlement development in a selected region, rich in archaeological sites, in East Hungary. The research work and the evaluation of the results were carried out in interdisciplinary cooperation with the natural sciences in order to acquire information about all available aspects of the environment which could be directly or indirectly connected to the human populations. The site of Gyoma 133 fits well within the expectations of the project. It was a large, multi-period site whose phases could be easily separated from one another, and later, disturbances were rather slight. (This is particularly vital fot the natural scientists who took part in this project. The relatively fine dating sequence available from other in the assemblage, allowed them to present a detailed picture of change over time). As a good size settlement it yielded a large number of features – something that could not be taken for granted in advance – as well as artefact, bone tool and animal bone samples that certainly had been expected.

The excavation of the site Gyoma 133 started as a planned archaeological field work in 1986 but had to be re-organized as a rescue excavation in 1987 because the owner had opened a sand-pit in the area in order to supply building material to the Hungarian State Railways. Because the sand removal was going ahead at full speed, the excavations had to be accelerated considerably, and there were times when three to four archaeologists, three foreign students, as well as a surveyor and a photographer and four conservators from the Archaeological Institute were working on the site. The excavation came to an end in 1988 when the activity in the sand-pit also ended. As a result of the rescue excavation a great part of the site was unearthed. During the course of the excavation, not only some sporadical remains from the Neolithic and the Bronze Age, but also parts of a large Sarmatian settlement, those of a Late Avar settlement, as well as parts of a Sarmatian and Late Avar cemetery came to light.

The great importance of the excavations at the site of Gyoma 133 is that it produced a large Sarmatian site with three occupation periods. In the three periods, an economic development can be clearly observed. Its essence is that at the beginning of its life, the activities of the inhabitants had an agricultural character, then their activities turned in an industrial-commercial direction, and in the final period the agricultural character of the settlement seemingly returned again.

Another important characteristic of the site is that the Sarmatian settlement was very rich in features. Altogether 383 features (houses, pits, wells, ditches, fireplaces, ovens, workshops and workshop pits) came to light. Many were dwelling places but most were somehow connected with the industrial activities conducted in the settlement. This was clearly evidenced by the occurrence of iron slag and raw iron fragments found in them.

The importance of the pottery studies has to be stressed too. In fact, 99 per cent of the artefact material consists of potsherds, mainly locally manufactured, although imported wares also occur among them. Other artefacts such as bone tools, metal and clay objects, stone tools and glassware are represented in small numbers.

As regards the animal husbandry, a large animal bone sample (in fact, the most numerous animal bone assemblage ever found at a Sarmatian site in Hungary) provides detailed information. The two most frequently occurring domestic species are cattle and horse; sheep, goat, pig, dog, cat and hen were also kept. Nevertheless, only the meat of the first five species plus that of the hen was eaten. Horse meat eating was probably an old heathen custom as was the keeping horses in large numbers. As a matter of fact, a cavalry with horses clad in scale armour was a formidable part of the Sarmatian army as witnessed by Roman authors and by artistic representations.

Interestingly enough, the results of the study carried out on Sarmatian animal husbandry at Gyoma 133 were in direct consonance with those reached through the studies of the artefact material of the settlement. This is especially true of the fact that the changes in the economic life of the settlement were immediately reflected in the animal husbandry as a first-class food, raw material and physical power producing activity of the inhabitants.

Another important matter is the association of animal bones in features. The analysis was carried out on the pooled material, i.e. regardless of potential chronological subdivisions, and the chief purpose of this calculation was to pinpoint associations between various species as well as their contribution to the assemblage in articulated skeletons and skulls.

One more observation is of interest: articulated remains of dogs and horses may have been deposited under ritual circumstances; this hypothesis is difficult to test by purely zoological means, but the distribution as well as the position of these latter skeletons in the features may be indicative of special circumstances. One can easily suppose that they represent some kind of sacrifice connected with certain industrial activities, e.g. metallurgy.

Although the quantity of the pollen collected during the course of the excavation did not allow statistical evaluation, it can be seen that the area was heavily cultivated when the site was occupied. The lack of tree pollens and particularly the occurrence of grain pollens in association with weed pollens point to agricultural activities. The relatively high frequency of Chenopodium and Plantago pollens may be an indirect proof of the intensity of animal husbandry.

The bulky volume of the excavations at the site of Gyoma 133 is a detailed account of the interdisciplinary studies carried out on the artefact and non-artefact materials unearthed between 1986 and 1988 within the framework of the Microregion Research Project of the Archaeological Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The chief importance of the studies on the finds and features of the site is that the basic results of the cooperating scientific branches mutually corroborate each other's results, thus building up a body of evidence wich will provide a long-lasting basis for further investigations on Sarmatian sites.

Sándor Bökönyi