

A SABRETASHE PLATE FROM THE CONQUEST PERIOD FOUND IN COUNTY PEST

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The 10th century history and archaeology of Hungary understandably commands widespread interest. One of the period's emblematic artefacts is represented by the plates crafted from gold and silver adorning leather purses worn by the period's high-ranking warriors. No more than a dozen such sabretashe plates uncovered during professional excavations are known from the Carpathian Basin. The corpus of delicately wrought silver gilt sabretashe plates, works of art in their own right, has been enriched by a recent find from County Pest.

The century preceding the foundation of the medieval Hungarian state is traditionally known as the Conquest period in Hungarian archaeological research. During the 10th century, the ancient Hungarians migrated to and settled in the Carpathian Basin. This period saw the flourishing of a distinctive, colourful and rich material and spiritual culture. Owing to the scarcity of written sources, much of our knowledge about the ancient Hungarians' society and culture comes from the period's archaeological assemblages.

The southwesterly areas of County Pest were for a long time blank spots on the archaeological maps of the Conquest period, despite the fact that this region lay in the heartland of the ancient Hungarians' settlement territory.¹ More recently, however, a series of finds have been brought to the attention of the archaeologists working in the area, which suggest that the region had occupied a more central position than previously assumed.² The discovery of these finds and their availability to the archaeological community represents a good example of cooperation between professionals and local commitment to heritage preservation.³

The first finds on the outskirts of Bugyi were discovered by amateur metal detectorists, who immediately notified the archaeologists



Metal detectorist in the field – the finds discovered in the upper soil layer disturbed by ploughing offer a wealth of information



The harness set, including the bit with antler sidebars, was placed on the legs of the deceased

¹ For an excellent overview of the area's history during the Conquest period, cp. Sarolta Tettamanti, "A honfoglalás kora és kora Árpád-kor" (The Conquest period and the early Árpadian Age), in *Pest megye monográfiája I. 2. A honfoglalástól 1686-ig*, ed. Attila Zsoldos. (Budapest: Pest Megye Monográfiája Közalapítvány, 2001), 9–30.

² The family graveyard uncovered at Soroksár by the archaeologists of the Budapest History Museum is another more recently discovered site in the region. One of the female burials in this Conquest period graveyard yielded the remains of a costume lavishly adorned with silver gilt pendent mounts. The site lies at a distance of roughly 20 km from Bugyi. Cp. Zoltán Bencze and Judit Szigeti, "Honfoglalás kori temető Soroksár határában (M0 BP 09)" (Cemetery from the Hungarian Conquest period on the M0 Ring Road), *Budapest Régiségei* XLII–XLIII (2009–2010), 54–79.

³ The Conquest period cemetery at Dabas–Felsőbesnyő, similarly disturbed by ploughing, was also rescued through the collaboration of enthusiastic locals and professional archaeologists. Cp. http://sirasok.blog.hu/2011/02/14/dabas_2

working in the Directorate of the County Pest Museums about the site disturbed and endangered by agricultural cultivation. They had collected dozens of silver gilt dress mounts and other jewellery articles from the disturbed humus layer, reflecting the presence of richly furnished burials of the Conquest period. Committed to the preservation of their local heritage, the metal detectorists presented the finds to the museum and enthusiastically supported the excavation of the site. Initially, we were only able to conduct a few days' long investigation of the site, which yielded unexpected, exciting results. We found the remains of the assumed 10th century burial ground in one of the trial trenches opened in the area. One of the excavated burials lacked any grave goods, the other grave, a warrior's burial, was richly furnished, yielding remains of the quiver for the arrows and a horse harness set complete with the stirrups and the metal bit with sidebars carved from antler.

The most remarkable finds came to light from Grave 3: the high status of the man buried in the grave was indicated by the silver gilt mounts of his belt and the ornate plate adorning his purse, worn suspended from the belt. Men usually kept an iron strike-a-light and flints in the purse. The small number of metal sabretashe plates, each adorned with a unique decorative design, their distribution and the find circumstances of the professionally excavated graves all suggest that these decorative pieces signalled their owner's rank in their community. The elaborate design of palmette scrolls adorning the newly-found piece was made by a goldsmith well versed in the period's ornamental vocabulary. This sabretashe plate echoes the sophisticated scrollwork patterns on the plates from the Upper Tisza region, whose owners are believed to have been the élite of the Conquest period.⁴

It was quite obvious that the further archaeological exploration of the area would be necessary to prevent the destruction of the site by agricultural work and treasure hunters. In the lack of institutional funding, the funds for the excavation were provided by the enthusiastic local community and thus a four-week campaign could be conducted in Summer 2011 with the contribution of the Department of Archaeology of Szeged University.

Most of the graves uncovered during the excavation lacked grave goods and their orientation was the only indication of their date. Some burials contained a few simple trinkets. In many cases, we were able to observe and document the remains of coffins, usually indicated by soil marks. The deceased were laid to rest in narrow coffins assembled from planks or in tree trunk coffins. The many jewellery pieces and dress mounts found in the area suggests that several more richly



The grave of the high-ranking warrior contained a sabretashe plate, a mount-ornamented belt, a harness set and horse bones. The belt mounts on the right side were disturbed by an animal burrow



Tree trunk coffin in one of the graves uncovered during the excavation

⁴ László Révész, *A karosi honfoglalás kori temető. Adatok a Felső-Tisza-vidék X. századi történetéhez* (Die Gräberfelder von Karos aus der Landnahmezeit. Archäologische Angaben zur Geschichte des Oberen Theissgebietes im 10. Jahrhundert). *Magyarország honfoglalás kori és kora Árpád-kori sírleletei 1* (Miskolc, Budapest: Hermann Ottó Múzeum, Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, 1996), 144–153.

provisioned burials had fallen prey to ploughing and natural erosion.

Although the assessment of the site and its finds is currently in progress, the field observations indicate that the burial ground was used during the later 10th century and that the finely crafted sabretashe plate showing signs of wear from its prolonged use had no doubt belonged to one of the community's high-ranking leaders.

The finds from the excavation and other assemblages from earlier archaeological excavations will be exhibited as part of a travelling exhibition, "Not vanished without a trace – Conquest period finds from County Pest", organised by the Directorate of County Pest Museums.



The sabretashe plate, together with the mounts and strap end of the suspension strap

Venues and dates:

Cegléd, Kossuth Museum, March 30–April 29, 2012

Vác, Greek Church Exhibition Hall, May 11–July 15, 2012

Visegrád, Autumn 2012

FURTHER READING

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