

MATERIAL REMAINS OF THE MONGOLIAN INVASION IN HUNGARY AND DEVELOPMENT-LED ARCHAEOLOGY

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One of the most important turning points in Hungarian history was the Mongolian Invasion in 1241–1242, when a considerable part of the country was wholly devastated. Medieval chronicles and eyewitness accounts describe the plunder and the pillage,¹ the torching of villages and the massacre of their inhabitants, leading to the depopulation of several regions of the country. During the past one hundred years, archaeological research in Hungary has repeatedly tried to determine the exact scale of the devastation and to examine the reliability of the testimonies contained in the written sources. Research efforts to identify the traces of the destruction, the remains of battlefields, the unburied dead and the torched settlements remained largely unsuccessful until recently. With the exception of a few isolated finds, very few traces of the invasion could be identified in the archaeological record. In the case of earlier excavations with a less than satisfactory field documentation, there was a well-founded suspicion that the assessment of these sites was unreliable and that their abandonment or destruction in the 13th century could be explained by factors other than the immediate impact of the Mongolian invasion. For example, traces of the devastation caused by the Ottoman invasion in the 16th–17th centuries could be clearly identified during the archaeological investigation of medieval villages in the Kecskemét area conducted during the 1930s, while the destruction in the wake of the 13th century Mongolian invasion could not be unambiguously documented.²



Remains of a family killed during the Mongolian invasion, dated by a coin found near one of the children's body



Remains of a sunken building with the bodies of people fleeing the Mongolian attack

¹ For a selection of the relevant medieval texts and their interpretation, see Balázs Nagy (ed.), *Tatárjárás. Nemzet és emlékezet* (The Mongolian invasion. Nation and remembrance) (Budapest: Osiris, 2003). For a comprehensive overview of the events of the Mongolian invasion, see János B. Szabó, *A tatárjárás. A mongol hódítás és Magyarország* (The Mongolian invasion of Hungary) (Budapest: Corvina, 2007). For a good summary of earlier archaeological research, see József Laszlovszky, “Tatárjárás és régészet” (The archaeology of the Mongolian invasion), in *Tatárjárás. Nemzet és emlékezet*, ed. Balázs Nagy (Budapest: Osiris, 2003), 453–468; József Laszlovszky, “Az ország pusztulása” (The devastation of Hungary), in *A tatárjárás*, eds Ágnes Ritoók and Éva Garam (Budapest: Hungarian National Museum, 2007), 39–43. For an overview of the new finds, see Ágnes Ritoók and Éva Garam (eds), *A tatárjárás* (The Mongolian invasion) (Budapest: Hungarian National Museum, 2007).

² Nándor Fettich, “Ötvösmester hagyatéka Esztergomban a tatárjárás korából” (Goldsmith’s tools from Esztergom from the time of the Mongolian invasion), *Komárom Megyei Múzeumok Közleményei* 1 (1968), 157–196; László Zolnay, *A középkori Esztergom* (Medieval Esztergom) (Budapest: Gondolat, 1983), 169–170.



A mother and her children in the oven of a destroyed house of the Árpadian Age

The single archaeologically documented case comes from Esztergom, where the victims of the town's Mongolian siege could be securely identified. Human remains and a goldsmith's set of tools were found in a pit probably used for storage under a medieval house.³ The written sources record that although the town was destroyed, the castle's stone walls ultimately protected the defenders within.⁴ A series of hoards from the mid-13th century, whose latest coins were minted in 1241 or 1242, indicate the widespread devastation in the wake of the invasion, especially in the country's eastern and central parts. The number of hoards hidden during this period is considerably higher than in the decades preceding and following the Mongolian invasion. These hoards, containing Hungarian and, in many cases, also foreign silver coins (e.g. from Friesach) can certainly be regarded as archaeological evidence for the invasion.⁵

There has been an unexpected increase in the number of archaeological sites on which direct evidence of the Mongo-

³ István Horváth, "Tatárjárás kori leletek Esztergomból" (Finds from the time of the Mongolian invasion from Esztergom), in *A tatárjárás* (The Mongolian invasion), eds Ágnes Ritoók and Éva Garam (Budapest: Hungarian National Museum, 2007), 56–59.

⁴ István Gedai, "Fremde Münzen im Karpatenbecken aus den 11–13. Jahrhunderten," *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungariae* 21 (1969), 105–148; Csaba Tóth, "A tatárjárás korának pénzekkel keltezett kincsleletei" (Coin-dated hoards from the time of the Mongolian invasion), in *A tatárjárás* (The Mongolian invasion), eds Ágnes Ritoók and Éva Garam (Budapest: Hungarian National Museum, 2007), 79–90.

⁵ Mária Wolf, "Hejőkeresztúr-Vizekköze. Árpád-kori település a XI–XII. századból" (Hejőkeresztúr-Vizekköze. Settlement of the Árpád period from the 11th–13th century), in *Utak a múltba. Az M3-as autópálya régészeti leletmentései*, eds Pál Raczky, Tibor Kovács and Alexandra Anders (Budapest:

lian destruction has been identified during the past decade and especially during more recent years. The investigation of Árpadian Age settlements has brought to light the remains of unburied dead and of people who had perished when their house was torched. The destroyed houses still contained the tools and artefacts of daily life, as in one of the houses excavated near the battlefield of Muhi.⁶ The finds from these buildings differed significantly from the poor, scanty material uncovered in the houses and settlements that had for some reason or other been abandoned by their inhabitants during the same period. The latter generally yielded little else than pottery, while the buildings destroyed during the Mongolian invasion usually contained various metal artefacts, jewellery and coins, the latter enabling the precise dating of the destruction. The unburied dead often wore jewellery of the type found in the period's coin-dated hoards.⁷ Finds reflecting personal tragedies in the wake of the invasion have also been brought to light. During the investigation of a settlement near Cegléd, Gyöngyi Gulyás found the corpse of a woman and two children who tried, unsuccessfully, to hide in the oven of their house, but did not survive the attack on their village. Elsewhere, dead bodies thrown into the ditch by the village indicate that life in the village had ceased under tragic circumstances.⁸

The location of these settlements have also shed light on why archaeological evidence for the Mongolian invasion first came to light during the salvage excavations preceding motorway constructions. The motorways lead through areas of the Hungarian Plain where there are few modern settlements. The reconstruction of the medieval settlement network indicates that this region was considerably more densely occupied during the Árpadian Age. Life on many villages came to an end with the Mongolian invasion. The large-scale development-led archaeological research provided a greater chance of discovering villages which had been destroyed to the extent that not even the inhabitants of nearby settlements were able to bury the dead. The Hungarian rulers later repopulated these devastated areas by settling the Cumanians, an eastern population who sought refuge in the country after fleeing the steppe in the face of the Mongolian advance.

Images from the excavation by Gyöngyi Gulyás:

http://sirasok.blog.hu/2010/04/16/halottak_a_kemenceben

RECOMMENDED READING:

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Hungarian National Museum, 1997); Mária Wolf, "Hejőkeresztúr-Vizekköze (Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén M.) Tatárjárás idején elpusztult település" (Hejőkeresztúr-Vizekköze, County Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén. A settlement destroyed during the Mongolian invasion), in *A tatárjárás* (The Mongolian invasion), eds Ágnes Ritoók and Éva Garam (Budapest: Hungarian National Museum, 2007), 44–46.

⁶ http://sirasok.blog.hu/2010/03/26/tatarjaraskori_kincslelet_szank_hatarabol

⁷ Gyöngyi Gulyás, "Egy elpusztult falu Cegléd határában (Pest m.)" (A destroyed village on the outskirts of Cegléd, County Pest) in *A tatárjárás* (The Mongolian invasion), eds Ágnes Ritoók and Éva Garam (Budapest: Hungarian National Museum, 2007), 52–53; http://sirasok.blog.hu/2010/04/16/halottak_a_kemenceben.

⁸ <http://www.regeszet.org.hu/megmentett-orokseg-kincsek-europa-szivebol-5/>
http://book-let.com/books/megmentett_orokseg/#/10/