

## THE CENTURIES OF TRANSFORMATION Presentation of an Early Medieval Settlement Research Project<sup>1</sup>

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*Our settlement archeology research team was formed on 1 January 2013. It is made up of ten members, eight archeologists and two geochemists.<sup>2</sup> Our research team was formed to process twenty 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century settlements that had been excavated in the previous two decades during large scale digs. The processing work does not only involve a most thorough analysis of the structures and finds from the excavations included in the program, but also investigations into the way of life and former surroundings of the given communities.*

The formation of our research team was motivated by the specific Hungarian conditions for settlement archeology of the Avar and the early Árpád Dynasty periods. One of the negative legacies of archeology on the Migration Period is the view that settlement excavations are of secondary importance and can only rarely be documented in written form. A backdrop to the formation of this approach may have been the fact that usually less spectacular finds come to light from settlement excavations than from the unearthing of more lavish graves. However, it is beyond dispute that the structures of the settlements and the “simple” finds regularly discovered in great masses from the fill of these structures have a fundamental and indispensable documentary value. It is primarily on the basis of these data that it is possible to reconstruct the homes, communities, nearby natural environment, method of settlement, and through all of these the lifestyles of people in the Middle Ages. The significance of these issues is even greater in the case of the 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries, when a series of changes took place in the Carpathian Basin. These events, from the decline and fall of the Avar Khaganate through the Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian Basin to the foundation of the Hungarian state, define the History of Hungary and the Hungarian people to the present day.

The analysis of settlement excavations has become urgent due to the rescue excavations performed in the last two and a half decades, during which numerous large-scale medieval settlements were able to be excavated and documented in a rush of work. Huge quantities of finds and information were amassed that exceeded the amount of data from previous decades by several orders of magnitude, but these can only genuinely add to our stock of knowledge through appropriately systematic analysis and evaluation. There are numerous difficulties encountered during the course of processing archeological sites characterized by many hectares of excavated area, hundreds of structures and thousands of small finds uncovered. This is particularly true in the first phase of the work, during the surveying and systematization of the data. At the same time it is without question that it is precisely this amount of data that provides the opportunity for the attention of the research to go beyond the narrow analysis of single structures and extend to larger units, to sections of settlements or to their entirety. In addition to the traditional methods of archeological

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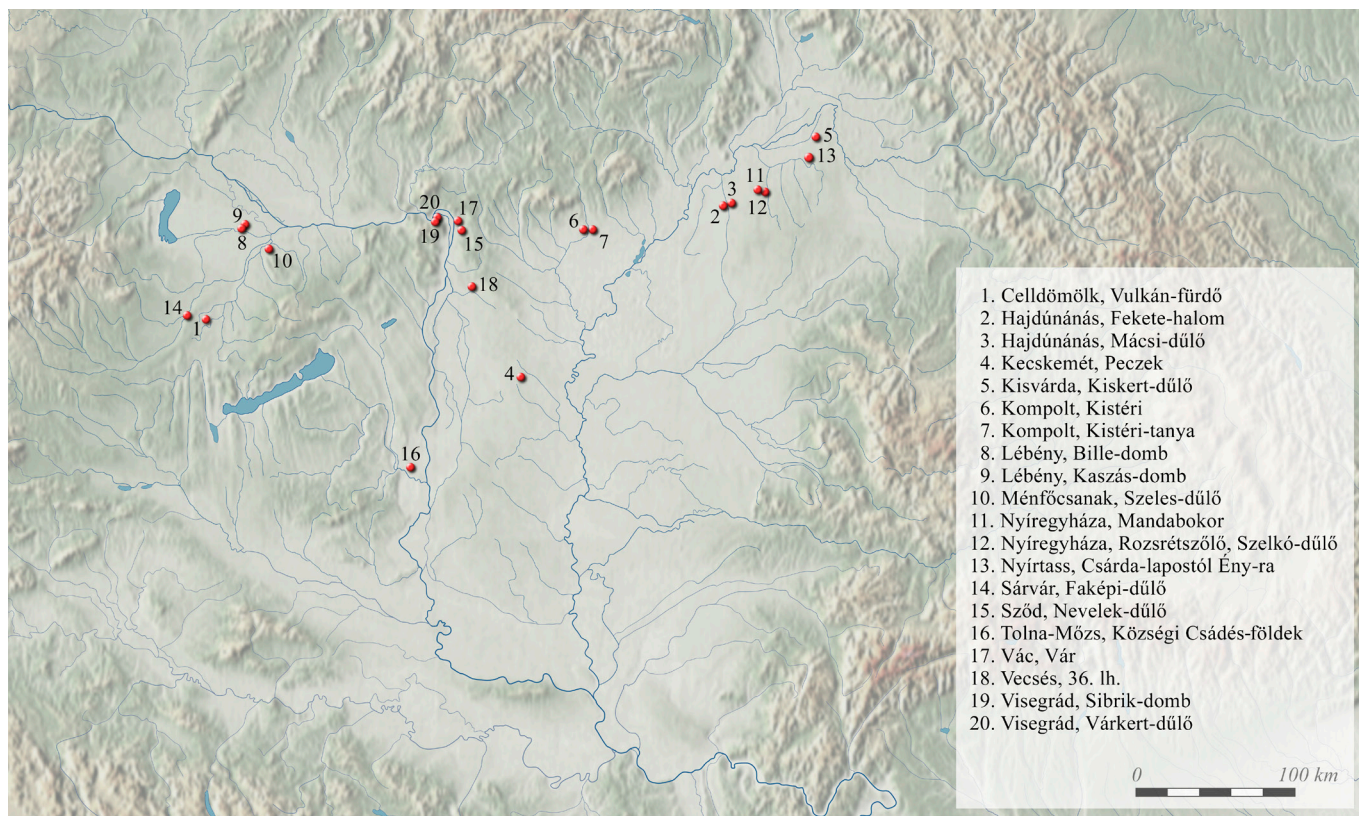


Fig. 1: Map of the Carpathian Basin indicating the sites studied during the project (illustration by Sándor Ősi)

analysis, various scientific investigations were performed for the more precise reconstruction of the lifestyles and natural surroundings.

In the interest of answering questions of this scope it is worthwhile to shape a far-reaching research project that aims not only at cataloguing a portion of the large mass of data, but also at a deeper understanding of the way of life for the inhabitants living here in the 8<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the centuries of transformation in the Middle Ages (for the specific names and locations of the archeological sites included in the research program see the map – Fig. 1).

An analysis of the interrelationship between the settlement and its surrounding landscape, as well as a survey of the paleoecological conditions of each given micro-region, plays an important role in our research. To be able to analyze the early medieval settlements in their genuine complexity we also consider the collection of geomorphological, paleoclimatological, geohydrological, pedological and paleovegetational data to be essential. With the aid of all of these, we are striving to gauge the settlement history potential of the sites studied through investigations into both the sites and into their surrounding landscapes.

The clarification of the chronology of the settlement excavations selected for study is also a central issue for the



Fig. 2: The Nyíregyháza-Rozsrétszőlő-Szelkő-dűlő site in an aerial photograph (by Attila Balázs)

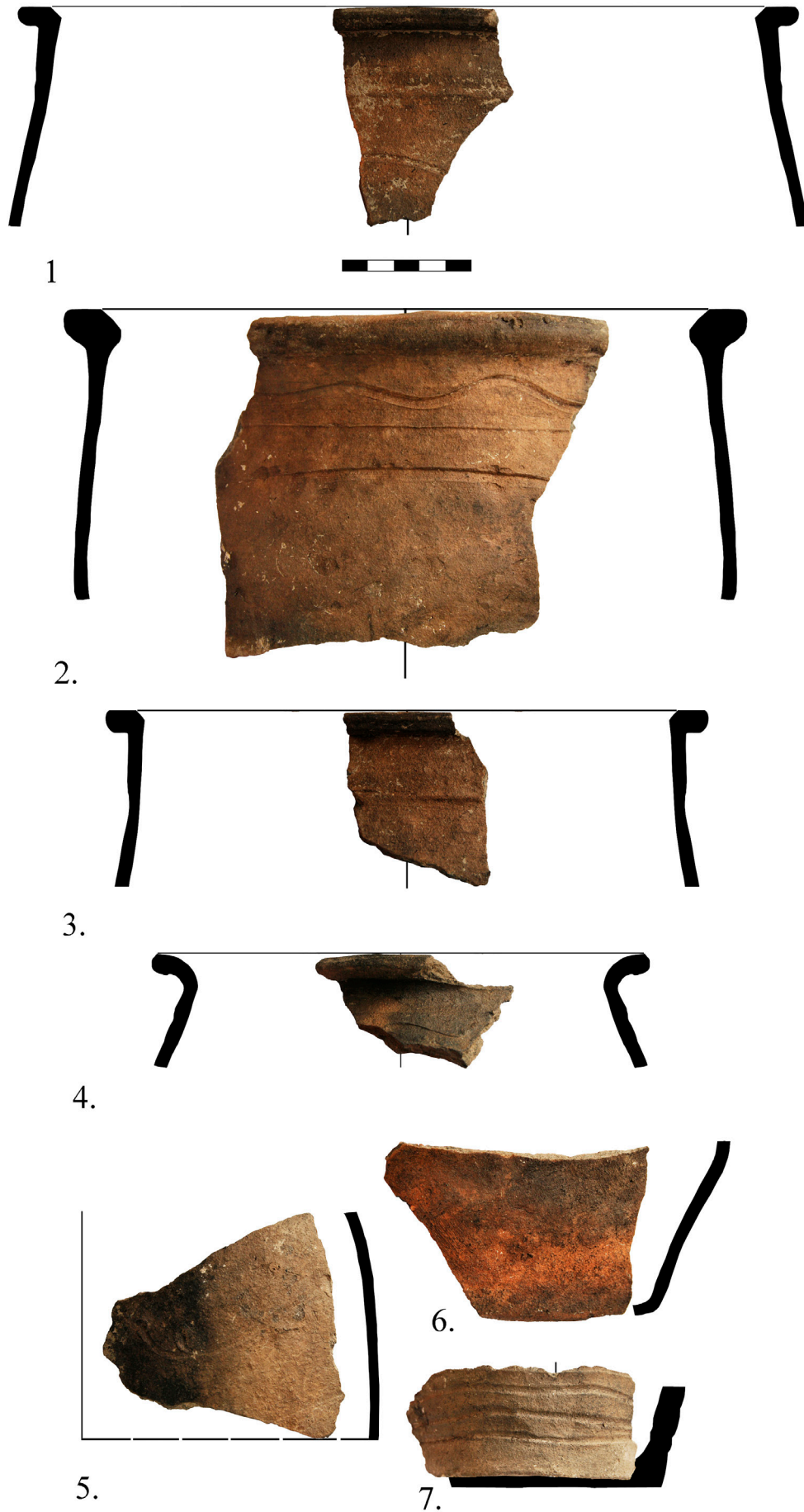


Fig. 3: Cauldron and pot fragments from Ménfőcsanak-Szeles-dűlő (drawing, photograph and compilation of the table by Szabina Merva)

several of the team members, particularly in the first phase of the processing of the sites. Beyond the desire to elaborate the precise framework of settlement history, the complex series of events in the 8<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries mentioned above also provide a reason to analyze the chronology in detail. For two sites at Hajdúnánás and one at Nyíregyháza Rozália Bajkai is examining in detail the ceramics that can be dated to the late Avar period, the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries. Her aim is to work up a regional chronology through a comparative analysis based on the results of this examination, with particular attention to the “chaotic” 9<sup>th</sup> century following the end of the Avar Khaganate. Together with Melinda Takács she will catalogue the Nyíregyháza-Rozsrétszölő-Szelkő-dűlő site where according to evidence from the finds, we

can count on settlement layers from the late Avar period and the Árpád Dynasty period. The analysis of the chronology is also one of the central issues for Melinda Takács in her processing of the Kisvárdá and Nyírtass sites. Szabina Merva is studying the early medieval phase for the settlements at Ménfőcsanak-Szeles-dűlő and Lébény-Bille-domb. In addition to this, she is also working out the details for the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century and 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century, so in all the 8<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century, portions of the settlement excavation at Visegrád-Várkert-dűlő where investigations have been ongoing for several decades.<sup>3</sup> She will also participate in new excavation at Visegrád-Sibrik-domb, which will similarly provide significant data on the area in the period prior to the establishment of the Hungarian state. It will be primarily on the basis of this latter site that she will deal with the issue of continuity and the problem of identifying the 9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> century settlements. Ildikó Katalin Pap will examine the chronology in Vas County, using the ceramic material from several large-scale excavations from the 9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries and the time preceding the early Árpád Dynasty period. She is attempting to separate out the characteristics of the region’s 10<sup>th</sup> century pottery based upon the material finds from the Sárvár-Faképi-dűlő site that was continuously inhabited between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Tibor Ákos Rácz will study the 9<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century finds from Vác Castle, including not only the ceramics but also the abundant metal and stone materials. Finally, the sites excavated on the border of the village of Kompolt will be particularly suited to analyzing the extent to which the Avar population survived the fall of the Khaganate at the turn of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Andrea Vaday and the present author will study this issue on the basis of the abundant pottery finds.

The other issue of focus in the present phase of our research is the structure of the selected settlements and sections of settlements. Rozália Bajkai is examining the internal structural divisions of Avar period settlements from the point of view of the process of settlement and the so-called households. Together with Melinda Takács she is interpreting the structure of the aforementioned Nyíregyháza settlement through the isolation of the two chronological strata. Ildikó Katalin Pap is examining the characteristics of the settlements of the new peoples colonizing the given area at the middle to the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century on the basis of the early Árpád Dynasty period settlement in Celldömölk. Tibor Ákos Rácz is analyzing the characteristics of Árpád Dynasty period settlement structures on the basis of one site each at Sződ and Vecsés, with particular attention to the aspects of small settlements for short-term accommodation. Zsolt Petkes is approaching the structural characteristics of 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century settlements based on one excavation in Kecskemét and one in Tolna-Mözcs. The present author is examining the impact of livestock pens on settlement structure on the basis of the Avar period section of the Lébény-Kaszás-domb excavation.



Fig. 4: Feature No. 83 from Celldömölk-Vulkán-fürdő, an outdoor oven (photograph by Ildikó Katalin Pap)

<sup>3</sup> Júlia Kovalovszki and Péter Gróf deserve thanks for the opportunity to study the Visegrád-Várkert excavations.

During the first year of the project interdisciplinary studies will also be commenced. Katalin Gherdán, Gabriella Kiss, István Dódon, György Szakmány and Mária Tóth will perform material testing on ceramic, stone and slag finds from several sites. Under the direction of Pál Sümegi, the first geological cores for paleoecological analysis have been taken. In addition to this, within the framework of the grant funding, geophysical surveying of Visegrád-Várkert-dűlő has been performed under the direction of Sándor Pusztai and we are attempting to confirm the dating of the early medieval settlement phases recently excavated at Visegrád-Sibrik through radiocarbon methods in collaboration with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Nuclear Research laboratory.

Several of our team members have already reported on the preliminary results of their research to the broader professional public. Of the domestic conferences, we need to highlight the conference entitled "*The Sherd Tells the Truth...*" organized at the Hungarian National Museum, and of the international forums, we can mention the Ruralia conference held for the tenth occasion at Smolenice in Slovakia.