

HUN PERIOD CAULDRONS IN HUNGARY

Current Research in the Light of a New Find

ZSÓFIA MASEK

The relevance of this topic is provided by a fragment of a Hun Period cauldron that was recently discovered in Pest County with the use of a metal detector from a previously unknown archaeological site. This is altogether the sixth Hun Period cauldron that is known from the territory of Hungary. The investigations into these finds stretches back a long time and even international archaeological research into the period has shown continuous interest in Hun cauldrons. The new find offers a good opportunity to present the cauldrons from Hungary and to introduce the present status of research into them.¹

THE NEW CAULDRON FRAGMENT FROM ÓCSA

In December of 2014, 145 years after the discovery of the first Hun Period cauldron in Hungary, the second cauldron fragment from the Great Hungarian Plain was uncovered on the outskirts of Ócsa in Pest County. The find was discovered by an amateur using a metal detector, who fortunately for the study of archaeology quickly brought it in to the local museum.² The piece is so characteristic that there is no doubt that we are looking at a fragment of the shoulder of a Hun Period cauldron (*Fig. 1*). Its identification is without doubt even though no precise parallel is known. Its decoration is made up of motifs well known from Hun cauldrons, but they are combined in a unique, heretofore unfamiliar manner. Three raised ribs run along the shoulder fragment, and under these there is a row of triangular motifs made up of similarly sharply raised bands. The tips of the downward facing triangles are each terminated by a semiglobular relief decoration (*Fig. 2*).

The three raised bands on the shoulder is an element that is commonly found on Hun cauldrons. These can also be found on the mouths of cauldrons, but in this case on the upper edge of this piece there is a clear fracture above the bands that could not have been the rim of the vessel. In addition to this, a new row of motifs are not usually found directly below ribbed rim sections, while decorations similar to



Fig. 1: Cauldron fragment from Ócsa (photo: Péter Hámori)

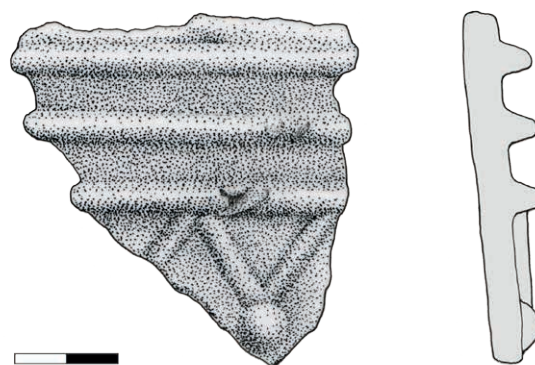


Fig. 2: Cauldron fragment from Ócsa (drawing: Péter Posztobányi)

¹ This paper was written with the support of the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (NKFI/OTKA NK-111-853).

² József Fojta from Dabas deserves thanks for discovering and bringing in the find. I was made aware of the cauldron fragment thanks to Dr. Gábor Lassányi, and I would hereby also like to express my gratitude for his assistance.

those of the Ócsa fragment often run below the bands on the shoulder – and this is without exception on the Hungarian examples. This decoration is in general made up of straight lines that terminate in relief hemispheres or relief circles. These are called “fringe motifs” in the research (Fig. 3). Up to this point no examples of a “fringe” comprised of triangular decorations were known. However, triangular decorations have appeared on earlier finds, albeit on different parts of the cauldron. Of these, the most characteristic is the Balatonlelle-Rádpusztá cauldron, where there is a line of triangular “cell decorations” on the rim section of the vessel (Fig. 4).

The shoulder decoration of the Ócsa cauldron is therefore unique, but was clearly made using a previously known type of motif. During its evaluation it was also necessary to keep in mind that every Hun Period cauldron has unique ornamentation and that no two examples are exactly alike. Exact copies cannot exist since the original model of the cauldron is destroyed during the casting process, and therefore a new model had to be sculpted in every case. Also in addition to this, on the basis of the finds so far it seems that the manufacturers of the cauldrons strove to make every example unique.

The significance of this small cauldron fragment is provided in part by its unique system of decoration, and also by the fact that we know precisely where it was found. The knowledge of the Ócsa site can go a long way in contributing to the research into the Hun Period on the Great Hungarian Plain. This opportunity would have been completely lost had the person who discovered it tried to sell it on the black market as is generally done, let us have no doubt.

This archaeological site was unknown up to a few years previously, when finds discovered with metal detectors were brought in to the Ferenczy Museum in Szentendre.³ Following the discovery of the cauldron fragment we performed an archaeological field walk on the site in March of 2015.⁴ We determined that the site had several phases of use: the remains of prehistoric, Roman Period Sarmatian and medieval (probably inhabited from the Árpád Period to the late Middle Ages) settlements were found. However, finds clearly related to the Hun Period could not be identified. Further research is necessary to resolve the question of whether the cauldron can be connected to the Roman Period Sarmatian settlement.

HUN CAULDRONS

Similar to the Ócsa find, Hun cauldrons are not usually accompanied by other Hun Period find materials. The majority of them have been discovered as stray finds in Roman context such as in the area of Roman Period forts. Another problem in their evaluation is that the

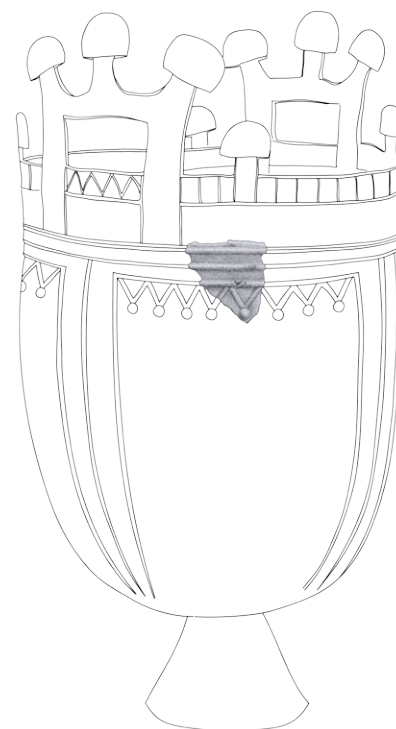


Fig. 3: Reconstruction of the Ócsa cauldron (drawing: Zsófia Masek)



Fig. 4: Cauldron from Balatonlelle-Rádpusztá (photo: Krisztián Balla)

³ Tibor Ákos Rácz informed me of this personally. I thank him for his unselfish cooperation in taking possession of the find and researching the site.

⁴ Participating in the field walk were Tibor Ákos Rácz, Anikó Bózsza and Róbert Patay (Ferenczy Museum), Rozália Bajkai, Katalin Gergely, Anett Mihácz-Pálfi and Zsófia Masek (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute of Archaeology), as well as the amateur metal detector József Fojta. I hereby thank them for their assistance.

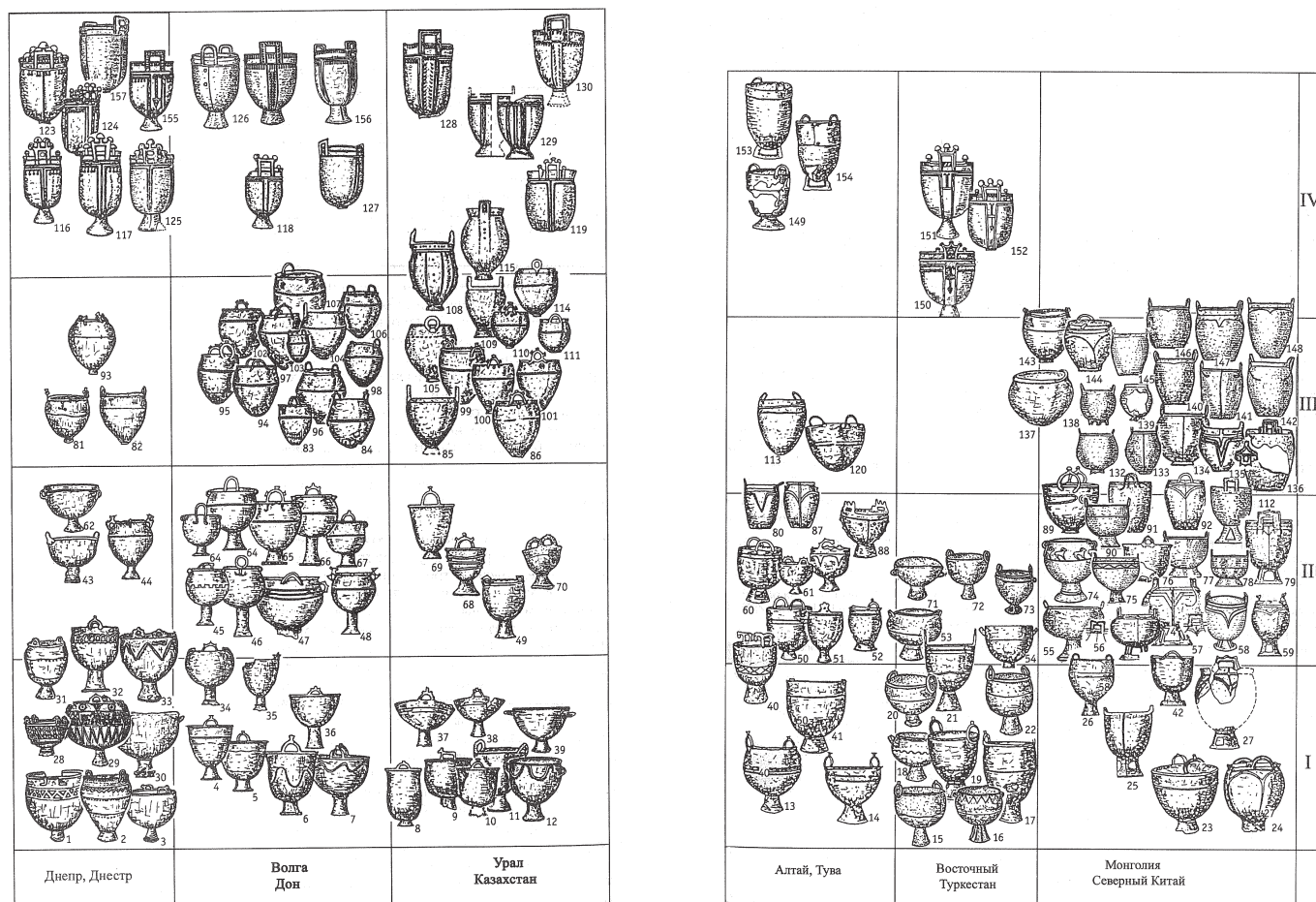


Рис. 58. Развитие форм котлов в древности и раннем средневековье. Fig. 58. The development of cauldron shapes during the Antiquity and early Middle Ages

Fig. 5: The development of the forms of cauldrons in Eurasia according to Botalov. Source: С. Г. Боталов: Гунны и Тюрки (историко-археологическая реконструкция). (Челябинск: Российская академия наук Уральское отделение Южно-Уральский филиал Института истории и археологии Южно-Уральский государственный университет, 2009). – S. G. Botalov: Huns and Turks (The Historical-Archaeological Reconstruction). (Chelyabinsk: Russian Academy of Sciences The Ural Branch South Ural Institute of History and Archaeology South Ural State University, 2009).

division of Hun Period archaeological finds in the narrow, historical sense from the material legacy of the end of the Roman Period represents a problem both within the territory of Pannonia as well as on the Great Hungarian Plain.

Despite this, cauldrons are considered rare objects, which are not only clearly connected with the spread of the Empire of the Huns, but also with the Hun people in general as well. This is due to the fact that they preserve a clearly eastern metalworking tradition that originated in Asia. Scythian-Sarmatian Period antecedents and contemporary parallels are scattered over an enormous area: the easternmost known Hun Period cauldron that shows a close relationship with the Hungarian finds is from Inner Asia. Eastern antecedents and contemporary parallels of the cauldrons are constantly being found, opening up the opportunity for ever newer scientific conclusions (Fig. 5).

Scientific examinations have been performed on several European vessels as well, so the composition of the metal material is known in part. In contrast to popular opinion they were made not of bronze, but of copper. Thanks to the investigations we also have data in connection with the question of workshops. On the basis of the differing composition of the metals between the examples from the Carpathian Basin and the Lower Danube, they were probably manufactured in different workshops.⁵

⁵ L. Kovrig, Ilona: Hunnischer Kessel aus der Umgebung von Várpalota. *Folia Archaeologica* 33 (1972), 95–122; Harhoiu, Radu – Diaconescu, Petre: Hunnischer Kessel aus Muntenien. *Dacia* 28 (1984), 99–116.



Fig. 6: The Törtel cauldron (photo: Ádám Vágó © Hungarian National Museum)

Various theories about the function of the cauldrons have arisen. It is essentially certain that the concealment (deposit) of the intact or damaged vessels can be considered an intentional act. Presumably they could have been part of the funeral rites, but no burials or clear groups of sacrificial items have been found alongside them. On the basis of all this, today they are generally linked to funeral sacrifices.

HUN PERIOD CAULDRONS IN THE CARPATHIAN BASIN

The first Hungarian find, the Törtel cauldron, was discovered at a time when Hungarian archaeology was still in its infancy. Therefore great credit goes to Flóris Rómer who first reported on it, because with unerring acumen he recognized the age of this find that was entirely unique to him and to European research as well (Fig. 6).⁶ This cauldron was discovered in fragments, and Rómer even emphasized that it seemed it had been deliberately destroyed before being hidden away, “3/5^{ths} of the vessel is intact, while 2/5^{ths} of it was knocked out by powerful blows in such a way that the upper edge was damaged to the extent that not only 7 centimeters of the rim were removed but its handle was also broken off.”⁷ The find was discovered during tilling in the area of a mound. During the later verification excavation no contemporaneous finds

were found there.⁸ Czakó Mound in Törtel was most likely a prehistoric tumulus that even today dominates the surrounding sandy flats (Fig. 7).

The Törtel cauldron has been one of the most important finds from the Hun Period of Eurasia ever since then. This was not only due to it being the first, but also because to this day it is the largest Hun Period cauldron with the most complex system of decorations found in the territory of Eurasia. Every element of its “Baroque” decoration can be found on other Hun Period cauldrons as well.

Research was then simpler for the later finds. By the time the second Hungarian cauldron was discovered in the Kapos Valley, a Hun Period cauldron had become known from the territory of present-day Poland, from the outskirts of Jędrzychowice (Höckricht).⁹ It was discovered alongside other finds: cloisonné gold clasps, gold strap ends with embossed decorations and other



Fig. 7: Czakó Mound in Törtel (photo: Zsófia Masek, 3 May 2015)

⁶ I thank Dr. Gergely Szenthe, who provided me with the photographs of the cauldrons kept at the Hungarian National Museum, as well as the opportunity to personally study the cauldrons and inspiring discussions about the techniques for their manufacture.

⁷ Rómer, Flóris: A czakói bronz-edény (The Bronze Vessel from Czakó). *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 2 (1870), 290–292.

⁸ For the history of the research, see: Bóna, István: *Das Hunnenreich* (Stuttgart: Theiss, 1991), 141, 220, 275.

⁹ The Silesian site was a part of Prussia at the time.



Fig. 8: The Kapos Valley cauldron (photo: Ádám Vágó © Hungarian National Museum)



Fig. 9: The Várpalota cauldron (photo: Ádám Vágó © Hungarian National Museum)

cloisonné gold plates, as well as a small bronze bowl. On the basis of the decoration of the gold accessories it was clear that the bronze vessel could be dated to the Migration Period – however at that time they did not link the cauldrons directly to the Huns.¹⁰

The Hőgyész find, similar to that of Törtel, was uncovered nearly entirely intact during plowing in a peat bog in the Kapos Valley (Fig. 8). As its reviewer Mór Wosinszky stated, “ignoring the damage to the bottom and the three cracks originating from its casting, which run 4, 6 and 12 cm from the rim, the cauldron was taken from the ground intact, however its discoverer knocked off one of its handles, which I had reattached.” Wosinszky recognized the close relationship of this object with the Törtel cauldron, so on the basis of the Törtel and Jędrzychowice cauldrons as well as Russian parallels he classified them as belonging to the Migration Period.¹¹

The third cauldron from Hungary was a moderate sized side fragment. This was found during the planned excavation of the Roman fort of Intercisa (Dunaújváros) in 1909. While it was discovered during an archaeological excavation its documentation cannot be considered adequate according to modern standards. It is without doubt that the cauldron came from a building standing in the interior of the Roman fort that was burned down in the Late Roman Period, but its stratigraphic context is entirely uncertain.¹² Therefore, we do not know whether the building was in use at this time, or whether the cauldron fragment was buried in it later, perhaps in the context of a sacrificial rite.¹³

¹⁰ The Jędrzychowice find was actually discovered in 1831 and was published in 1838, but its significance was only recognized by Flóris Rómer following the discovery of the Törtel cauldron, see: A czakói bronzedény ügyéhez (In the Matter of the Bronze Vessel from Czakó). *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 3 (1870), 114–115. For the history of the research, see: Bóna, István: *Das Hunnenreich* (Stuttgart: Theiss, 1991), 220, 275.

¹¹ Wosinszky, Mór: A kaposvölgyi népvándorlás kori üst (The Migration Period Cauldron from the Kapos Valley). *Archaeologiai Értesítő* (Archaeological Bulletin) New series 11 (1891), 427–431. At the time Rómer had not mentioned the “jewelry” discovered together with the Jędrzychowice cauldron, but Wosinszky did.

¹² Hekler, Antal: A N. Múzeum dunapentelei ásatásai 1908-ban és 1909-ben (The Dunapentele Excavations of the National Museum in 1908 and 1909). *Archaeologiai Értesítő* (Archaeological Bulletin) New series 30 (1910), 28–38.

¹³ István Bóna hypothesized this, see: Bóna, István: *Das Hunnenreich* (Stuttgart: Theiss, 1991), 144–145; but in reality this is not supported by any on-site observations.

The Intercisa find also contained important new information for the research into Hun Period cauldrons; it was the first time that a cauldron fragment came to light within the territory of a Roman fort. This finally resolved their dating, and thanks to this it was also recognized that the appearance of the cauldrons with Asian analogies could be connected to the Empire of the Huns. The latter was yet again due to a Hungarian researcher, Zoltán Felvinczi Takács.¹⁴

The fourth Hun Period cauldron from Hungary has the most storied modern history. The cauldron, originally from Várpalota, was discovered at the Metallochemia plant in Budapest in 1958 amongst the scrap metal awaiting smelting (*Fig. 9*). Its fate is the result of a peculiar mixture of carelessness, ignorance and a highly responsible commitment to the past. It is a fact that someone considered the cauldron to be worthless trash and used it as scrap – interestingly right during the time when the upstanding discoverer of the Hun Period gold treasure from Szikáncs was given such a high reward by the Hungarian state, that he was able to exchange his farmstead house for an apartment in the city.¹⁵ However, despite this, at the last minute the Hun Period cauldron was rescued from destruction and as a result of more than a year's worth of investigation the site where it came from was clarified for the most part.¹⁶ It was established that the Byproduct and Waste Utilization Company shipment that contained the cauldron came from Várpalota. One of the employees at the collection facility even remembered the object, which a peasant had brought to sell at the premises in a bag along with other “scrap metal” in the spring of 1958. The rest may have contained other archaeological finds, but no traces were found of these in the official materials or amongst the scrap metal. In the end, the scientific examination of the sandy sediment with gravel preserved on the inside of the cauldron reinforced its origin from Várpalota and narrowed its location to a more restricted area. However, the precise site where the cauldron was discovered can never be determined.

The final intact Hun Period cauldron discovered was a “product” of modern times; it was found at the bottom of a seemingly everyday pit at the Balatonlelle-Rádpusztá archaeological site during a preventive excavation related to the construction of an expressway in 2006.¹⁷

Although several archaeological sites in the Transdanubian region had become known, the site of the Törtel cauldron had been the only one on the Great Hungarian Plain. This disproportion is reinforced by the fact that no cauldrons or cauldron fragments are known from the Great Hungarian Plain outside the present-day borders of Hungary, the nearest being from beyond the Iron Gates, in Wallachia (*Fig. 10*). In the Carpathian Basin, only from Slovakia have fragments – presently numbering seven – been discovered and this is from a single site, in the territory of Iža along the Danube River. The so-called Leányvár of Iža is the site of a Roman Period fort (Celamantia), which was across from the Roman legion camp of Brigetio at the mouth of the Váh (Vág) River. This was the most important advanced bastion of the Transdanubian Roman limes defending against the Germanic (Quadi) tribes living in the northern part of the Little Hungarian Plain. The cauldron fragments were discovered in recent decades during the planned excavation and metal detector survey of the Iža fort. They came from the rubble in the destruction layer of the fort or from the upper mixed humus layer.¹⁸

¹⁴ Previously József Hampel had argued for their dating to the Scythian Period. For the further history of the research into the cauldrons, see: Bóna, István: *Das Hunnenreich* (Stuttgart: Theiss, 1991), 220–221.

¹⁵ For the circumstances of the discovery of the Szikáncs treasure, see: Bárány, Krisztián: [Attila király aranyára bukkant, lakást kapott érte \(He Stumbled upon the Gold of King Attila, and Got an Apartment for It\)](#). *Magyar Nemzet Online* 08 April 2014. (visited: 26 May 2015).

¹⁶ L. Kovrig, Ilona: Hunnischer Kessel aus der Umgebung von Várpalota. *Folia Archaeologica* 33 (1972), 95–96.

¹⁷ Honti, Szilvia – Németh, Péter: Hun áldozati üst Balatonlelle-Rádpusztáról (Hun Sacrificial Cauldron from Balatonlelle-Rádpusztá). *Somogyi Múzeumok Közleményei* 17 (2006), 71–78.

¹⁸ Rajtár, Ján – Zábajník, Jozef: Fragmente von hunnischen Kesseln in Iža. In: *Între stepă și imperiu. Studii în onoarea lui Radu Harhoiu* (Between Steppe and Empire. Studies in Honor of Radu Harhoiu), ed. Măgureanu, Andrei – Gáll, Erwin (București: Editura Renaissance, 2010), 119–125. Five fragments were discovered during systematic investigations, while it is only presumed that the other two, which are held in the Komárno (Slovakia) Museum, came from the Iža fort.

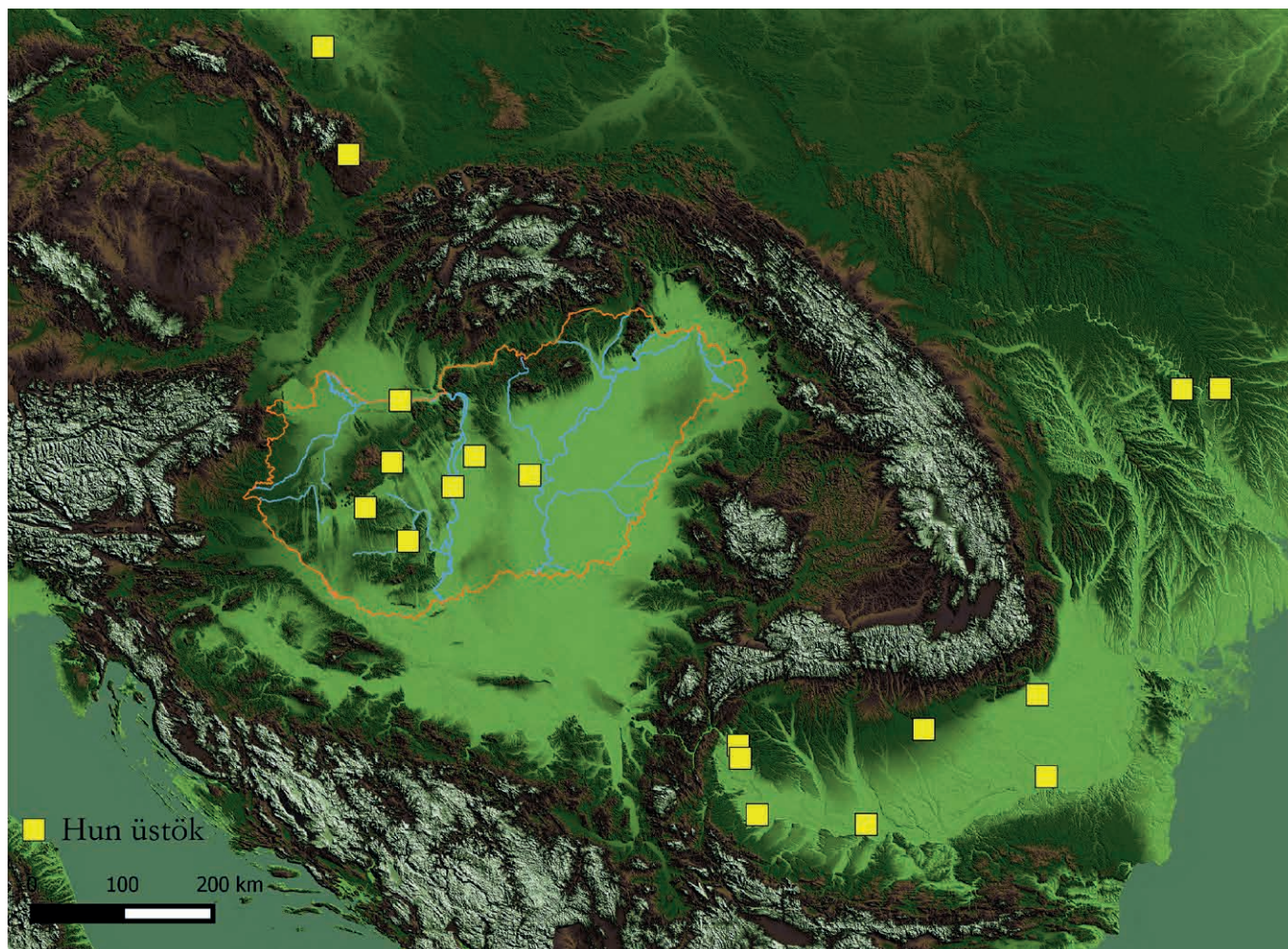


Fig. 10: Cauldrons found in Central-Europe

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

The topic of Hun Period cauldrons is rather well researched in the international literature. Despite this, there are numerous details that this new find also brings up that are still unresolved. The main questions are the following:

- 1) The appearance of the cauldrons is in many aspects uniform, but in addition to this they have numerous unique features, for which precise parallels are rare and are found at enormous distances. How can this be explained? How might the new cauldron fragment fit in with the formal system of relationships between Hungarian and Eurasian Hun Period cauldrons?
- 2) In the description of nearly every cauldron there are burned patches and evidence of fires due to charcoal and ash. How widespread is this, what kinds of organic materials have the burned surfaces preserved, and what activities resulted in these marks?
- 3) In several cases, such as in connection with the Törtel or the Rádpusztá cauldron, it has been shown that before their deposit (concealment) they were damaged and made unusable. How is it possible to differentiate later damage from the casting faults, the stains and cracks arising from use that are later repaired and the surfaces damaged during their deposit? For how long were these objects used before they were buried in the ground? How widespread was the practice of deliberately destroying the cauldrons, and was there a system of rules for this?
- 4) In connection with the customs surrounding their deposit, in the international literature it is strongly emphasized that the cauldrons come from sites near water, on the banks of rivers or in marshy areas. Is this true, and if so does it have any significance? Is it clear that they can be linked to individual

funerary sacrificial rites? How can these hypotheses be reconciled with the traces of use that can be observed on the cauldrons?

- 5) According to the uniform determination of modern research the cauldrons from the Transdanubian region conform to the power centers and infrastructure of the Roman Period. But what is the situation from this aspect on the Great Hungarian Plain? Is there any significance to the fact that both the cauldrons from the plains come from the northern section of the area between the Danube and Tisza rivers, or should we consider this to be a result of chance? What is the explanation for the fact that cauldrons have not been found in the central areas of the Great Hungarian Plain, in other words those areas where the power center of the Empire of the Huns was located in the middle of the 5th century according to the written sources?
- 6) The research links the cauldrons to high social status in the Empire of the Huns, primarily on the basis of the technological and formal system of connections with Asia, as well as the hypothesized relationship with Hun sacrificial finds. But can these actually be linked to the military elite when in reality nearly every example has been a stray find and their function is unknown? Finally, is there evidence that they were only used by the Hun peoples coming from Asia?

Only targeted archaeological investigations into the sites where they were discovered, scientific analyses and possible new finds will be able to cast light on all of these questions.

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