

ONE PEOPLE, TWO REGIONS?

Thoughts on the Early Avar Period System of Relationships in Eastern Europe beyond the Tisza River

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Numerous ethnic groups have been identified in the Early Avar Period Carpathian Basin. The areas to the east of the Tisza river were settled by an ethnic group that had burial customs sharply differentiated from those of the Avars, and that clearly had connections with the nomadic groups of the 6th–7th centuries in the southern Russian steppe.

Several groups originating from the east settled in the Carpathian Basin in the Early Middle Ages, and one of the most important of these was the Avars. Research traditionally divides the archaeological evidence of their dominion starting in 567 into three major periods:

- 567–568–ca. 650/670: Early Avar Period
- ca. 650/670–ca. 700: Middle Avar Period
- ca. 700–after 850 (?): Late Avar Period.¹

Of these, the finds dated to the Early Avar Period between 567 and the middle third of the 7th century have special circumstances. With the aid of Byzantine coins and imported goods that can be clearly dated, the internal chronology of this period lasting about 100 years is far better elaborated than that of the later periods. The Byzantine sources on the Avars from this period represent a particular aid to experts dealing with this era. On the basis of these, the Avar Khagante cannot be considered ethnically homogenous. Alongside the avars, con-

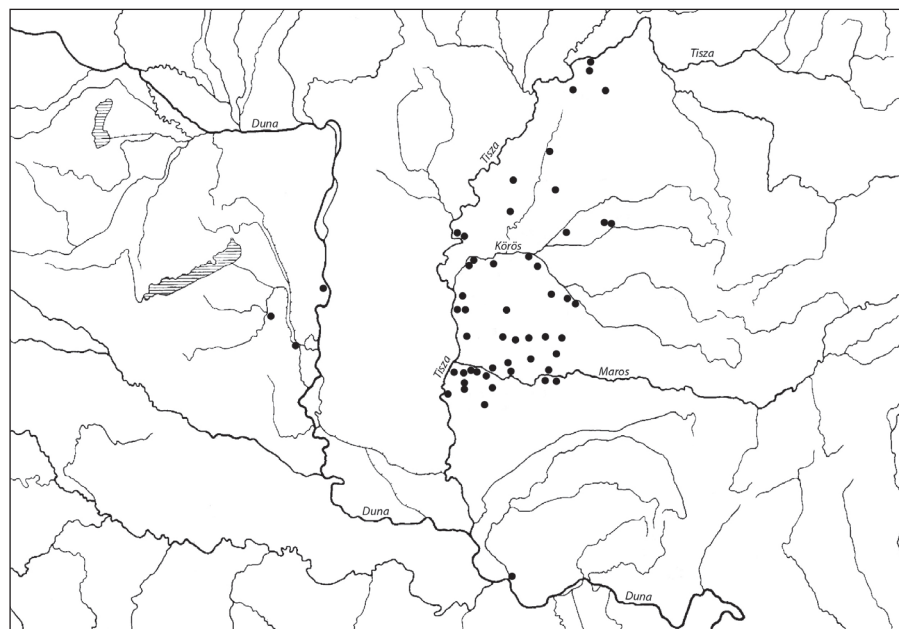


Figure 1: The distribution of archaeological sites of the population east of the Tisza river

temporary sources mention Gepids, Slavs, vassals deported from the Byzantine Empire, and lastly, eastern auxiliary forces (e. g. the Kutrigurs).² Researchers dealing with this period have considered the differentiation of the archaeological legacy of these various communities to be one of their main objectives. In the case of the area west of the Danube, these efforts have been met with ever more spectacular success, with the characteristic material cultures of the Romanized inhabitants, the Germanic peoples and the Avars from the east having been clearly differentiated in cemeteries from this region³ (Fig. 1).

¹ For a summary of the issues of chronology, see: Eric Breuer: Bemerkungen zur absoluten Chronologie im Frühmittelalter an der mittleren Donau. *Ungarn-Jahrbuch* 28 (2005–2007), 1–16.

² Pohl, Walter: *Die Awaren. Ein Steppenvolk in Mitteleuropa 567–822 n. Chr.* (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1988), 225–236.

³ Tivadar, Vida: Conflict and Coexistence: The Local Population of the Carpathian Basin under Avar Rule (Sixth to Seventh Century). In: *The Other Europe in the Middle Ages. Avars, Bulgars, Khazars, and Cumans*, ed. Florin, Curta (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2008), 13–46.

According to the evidence from the sources, several ethnic groups belonging to the steppe culture settled in the Great Hungarian Plain alongside the remaining Gepids. The archaeological finds of these steppe groups are difficult to differentiate due to their similar ways of life. The greatest progress in this respect has occurred in the area of differentiating the remains of tribes that joined from Eastern Europe. One group appearing east of the Tisza river, and to a lesser extent in the frontier region just west of the Danube, can be outlined not on the basis of their material legacy, but by their dissimilar burial customs.⁴ This is summarized in the following table⁵:

Table 1: Comparison of Early Avar Period burial customs in the Carpathian Basin

Burial custom	Group east of the Tisza	Other eastern communities (Avars)
Orientation	Northeast–southwest and east–west	Northwest–southeast
Grave forms	Compound graves also found in addition to pit graves ⁶	Pit graves
Animal sacrifices in the grave	Partial equestrian, cattle, sheep, and goat skeletons, ⁷ sometimes entire horses	Sometimes entire horses
Grave goods – foodstuffs	Sheep rump-bone, sometimes shoulder blades or skulls	Poultry and pork bones
Grave goods – vessels	Next to the head	Next to the feet

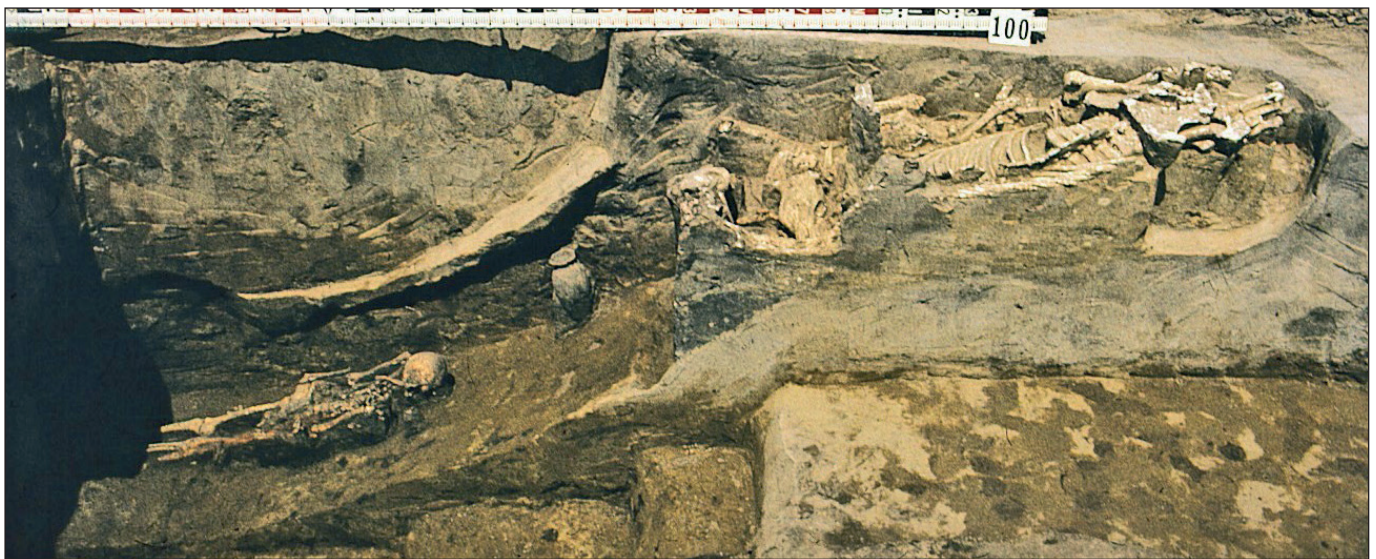


Figure 2: Section of a grave with niche dug from the end of the pit at the Szegvár-Oromdűlő site (photograph: Gábor Lőrinczy)

⁴ Since the overwhelming majority of the sites that can be linked to this population are found east of the Tisza river, hereinafter I will use the designation of the population from east of the Tisza.

⁵ Csallány, Dezső: *Kora-avarkori sírleletek* (Early Avar Period Graves – Grabfunde der Frühawarenzeit). *Folia Archaeologica* I–II (1939), 121–180; Lőrinczy, Gábor: *Kelet-európai steppei népesség a 6–7. századi Kárpát-medencében. Régészeti adatok a Tiszántúl kora avar kori betelepüléséhez* (Eastern European Steppe Populations in the 6th–7th Century Carpathian Basin. Archaeological Data on Early Avar Period Settlement of the Area East of the Tisza River). *A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve – Studia Archaeologica* IV (1998), 344.

⁶ In compound graves, the grave was divided spatially. The animal sacrifices were placed in the pit, while the deceased was placed in a separated section. On the basis of the relationship between the cavity and the pit, it is possible to differentiate between graves with sidewall niches, grave pits with ledges on the long sides, and graves with niches dug from the end of the pit.

⁷ When not the entire animal, but instead just the skull and ends of the legs left in the flayed skin are placed in the grave, this is designated a partial animal burial.

Attention was drawn to the Eastern European connections of the population east of the Tisza already in the publications reporting on the discovery of the first finds, but more detailed examinations had to wait until the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s.⁸ However, before the more detailed charting of the system of relationships could begin, a gradual shift in emphasis occurred within the research into the Early Avar Period. The change in political orientation after 1990 also appeared in the direction of research. The previous focus on the east was replaced by an emphasis on the system of links with the Mediterranean area. Due to this, Hungarian researchers had less of an insight into the more recent results of Russian and Ukrainian research (Fig. 2).

Nomads on the Eastern European Steppe in the 6th–7th Century

R. S. Orlov named the 6th–7th century burials found along the Black Sea the Sivašovka culture after their most significant site.⁹ The relics belonging to this culture are located in the enormous area between the Dniester and Volga rivers. The burials classified in this group are determined on the basis of three criteria. These are as follows:

- burial in previous kurgans;
- a northeast–southwest orientation;
- the presence of shield-shaped studs on belts and boots¹⁰ (Fig. 3).

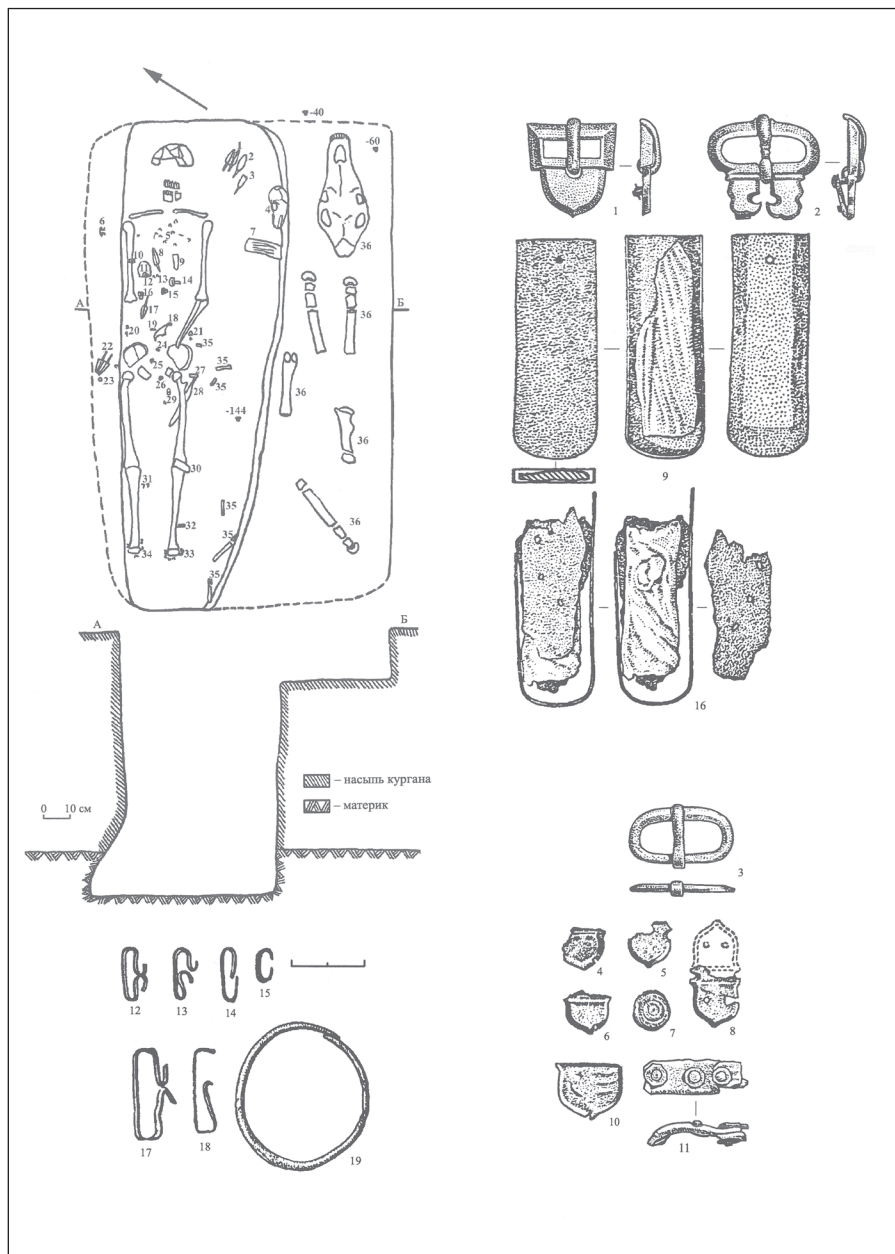


Figure 3: Grave with a sidewall niche at the Kostogryzovo (Ukraine) site (Комар, А. В. – Кубышев, А. И. – Орлов, Р. С.: Погребения кочевников VI–VII вв. из Северо-Западного Приазовья. Степи Европы в эпоху средневековья 5 (2006), 324, after ris. 36 and 329, ris. 37.)

⁸ Csallány, Dezső: A Szentes-lapistói népvándorlaskori sírlelet (The Great Migration Period Grave from Szentes-Lapistó). *Dolgozatok IX–X* (1933–1934) [1934], 210–212; Somogyi, Péter: Typologie, Chronologie und Herkunft der Maskenbeschläge zu den archäologischen Hinterlassenschaften osteuropäischer Reiterhirten aus der pontischen Steppe im 6. Jahrhundert. *Archaeologia Austriaca* 71 (1987), 121–154.

⁹ Орлов, Р. С.: Культура кочевников IV–VIII вв. In: *Этнокультурная карта территории Украинской ССР в I тыс. н.э.* отв. ред. Баран В. Д. (Kiev: Naukova Dumka, 1985), 98–105.

¹⁰ Рашев, Р.: *Прабългарите през V–VII век* (Sofia: Orbel, 2005), 69.

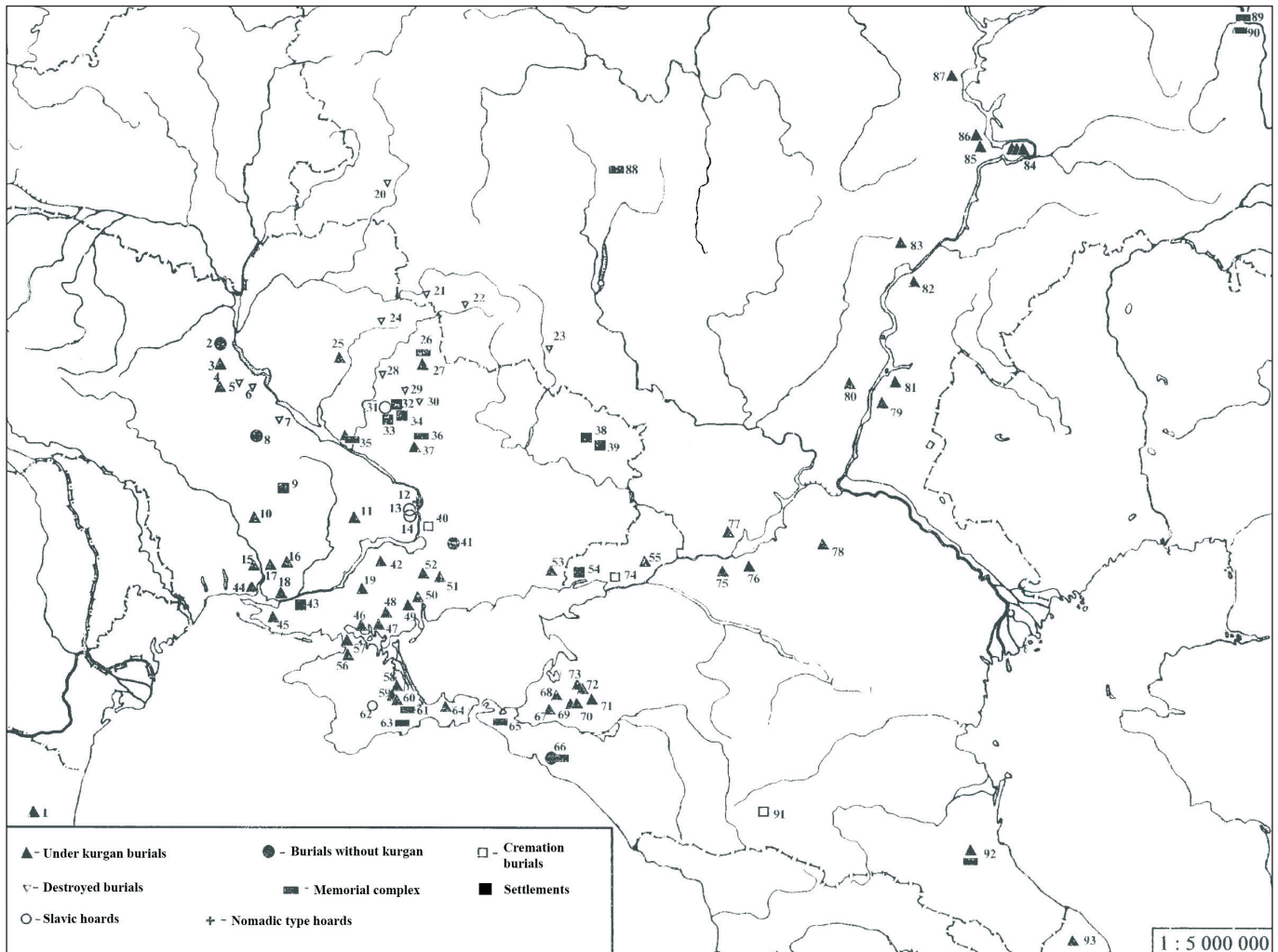


Figure 4: Eastern European archaeological sites from the 6th–7th century. The sites belonging to the Sivašovka horizon are indicated by triangles (Комар, А. В.: Перещепинский комплекс в контексте основных проблемы истории и культуры кочевников в Восточной Европы в VII. нач. VIII. в. Степи Европы в эпоху средневековья 5 (2006), 85–125, after 16.1.)

Péter Somogyi was the first to raise an objection to designating this as a culture.¹¹ Certainly, within this there was the traditional notion that archaeological cultures are equivalent to ethnicities. However, the spread of the Sivašovka culture covers the settlement area of several tribes appearing in written sources – the Kutrigurs and the Utigurs – so there is no basis for an ethnic interpretation. Therefore, hereinafter I will only use the more ethnically neutral term “horizon”, which only has a chronological dimension.

Following the first description of the Sivašovka horizon all the way to the first half of the 2000s, the Russian and Ukrainian researchers only published data from a few graves, with large summary works being more typical of the period.¹² However, in the last ten years, a series of publications on finds with a modern

¹¹ Somogyi, Péter: Lábbeli veretek a Délorosz-sztyepről (Studs on Footwear from the Southern Russian Steppe). *A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve 1984–1985* (1991)/2, 105–106.

¹² Баранов, И. А.: *Таврика в эпоху раннего средневековья (Салтово-маяцкая культура)* (Kiev: Naukova Dumka, 1990); Приходнюк, О. М.: *Степове населення України та східні слов'яни (друга половина I тис. н.е.)* (Kijev–Csernyivci: Prut, 2001); Рашев, Р.: *Правьлгарите през V–VII век* (Sofia: Orbel, 2005).

approach has appeared, making it possible to examine several dozen burials in detail.¹³ Due to the new publications, our image of the horizon has been refined since Orlov proposed it (*Fig. 4*).

The finds that have been discovered have been traditionally dated to within a narrow time period, between the second half of the 6th century and the beginning of the 7th century, which the majority of researchers have accepted.¹⁴ However, in connection with clarifying the upper limit of the time period, Péter Somogyi has stated that it is possible to account for the continued survival of the population all the way to the middle third of the 7th century.¹⁵

Numerous concepts have arisen related to the ethnic interpretation of the Sivašovka horizon. The most widespread is the (Kutrigur) Bulgar hypothesis, but in addition there is the possibility of identifying it with the western Götürks, the Khazars, or the Avars.

COMMON ELEMENTS IN THE CULTURE OF 6TH–7TH CENTURY EASTERN EUROPEAN NOMADS

A group of written sources from Eastern Europe in the 6th–7th century mention a population that had appeared recently – possibly the Utigurs or Kutrigurs – which had not been written about previously by contemporary chroniclers. If, however, the archaeological finds are more carefully scrutinized, surprising similarities can be discovered between the relics of the Eastern European steppe in the 4th–5th centuries and the 6th–7th centuries. This can be observed primarily in the burial customs: the northeasterly orientation, graves with sidewall niches and grave pits with ledges on the long sides, the partial equestrian and ovine burials, vessels placed next to the head and sheep rump-bones can be found in both periods. Alongside the uniformity in the rites, in the last decade more and more groups of finds have been published where there are both 5th-century Hun Period objects as well as 6th-century relics characteristic of the Sivašovka horizon, clearly demonstrating the transition between the two periods. However, the Hun Period materials from east of the Don river are only known as scattered finds even compared to the centuries that followed, so the publication of more graves that can be dated to the 5th–6th century is necessary for the examination of this transition.

THE REGION EAST OF THE TISZA RIVER AND EASTERN EUROPE

Prior to tackling the issue of comparing the Early Avar Period population of Eastern European origin to the Sivašovka horizon, it is necessary to note a few facts beforehand. The comparison is made difficult due primarily to the disproportionate distribution of the two types of find materials. In Eastern Europe, nomadic burials that can be dated to the 6th–7th century are found from the Dniester to the Volga, over nearly a million and a half square kilometres. However, these are not made up of cemeteries with large numbers of graves, so there are only about 140 graves from which any information is available.¹⁶ In contrast to this, there

¹³ Комар, А. В. – Кубышев, А. И. – Орлов, Р. С.: Погребения кочевников VI–VII вв. из Северо-Западного Приазовья. *Стени Европы в эпоху средневековья 5* (2006), 245–374; Скарбовенко, В. А. – Лифанов, Н. А.: Погребально-поминальные комплексы раннесредневековых кочевников из Восточного Приазовья (по материалам раскопок могильников Лебеди IV и Лебеди VIII в 1980 г.) *Материалы по археологии и истории античного и средневекового Крыма IV* (2012), 22–46; Лимберис, Н. Ю. – Марченко, И. И.: Погребения эпохи великого переселения народов и раннего средневековья из курганов степного Прикубанья. In: *Петербургский Апокриф. Послание от Марка*, ред. Казанский, М. – Рабинович, Р. – Ткачук, М. (Szentpétervár–Kisinyov: STRATUM, 2011), 417–441.

¹⁴ A different system for dating has appeared in the work of A. V. Komar. Комар, А. В.: Перещепинский комплекс в контексте основных проблемы истории и культуры кочевников в Восточной Европы в VII. нач. VIII. в. *Стени Европы в эпоху средневековья 5* (2006), 85–125.

¹⁵ Somogyi, Péter: Drei frühawarenzeitliche Bestattungen aus der Fundstelle Nr. 264 von Gyoma–Három kora avar kori sír a Gyoma–264. sz. lelőhelyről (Three Early Avar Period Graves from the Gyoma 264 Site). *A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve – Studia Archaeologica III* (1997), 106, 15. j.

¹⁶ For the most recent list, see: Комар, А. В.: Кочевники восточноевропейских степей второй половины VI первой половины VIII в. In: *Атлас Западный Тюркский Каганат*, ред. Досымбаева, А. – Жодласбеков, М. (Asztana: Service Press, 2013), 676–677.

are more than 1,200 known burials just from the region east of the Tisza river that can be linked to this culture.¹⁷ These numbers for examples of individual burials is not comparable. Parallels to the orientation, the grave forms, the partial equestrian, sheep and cattle burials, the sheep rump-bone placed as a food offering, and the vessels placed next to the head can all be found in the nomadic graves between the Dniester and Volga rivers¹⁸ (Fig. 5).

Despite the aforementioned results, the theory of a relationship between the Early Avar Period population of Eastern European origin and the Sivašovka horizon is not universally accepted amongst Hungarian researchers. The reason for this is that previous research also used numerous analogies from the former Soviet Union to show the eastern links of the early Avars, in the course of which efforts were made to find as many material and ritual parallels as possible at the individual features. In contrast to this, here it is a wider cultural comparison of two regions that is under discussion. In my opinion, the uniformity of the two populations is not shown in the examination of their archaeological legacies through perfect analogies, because the influences of neighbouring groups must also be taken into account. In the present case, it is far more important that both populations employ an identical set of ritual



Figure 5: Grave from Sivašskoe. The amputated lower legs of the horse are on the ledges at the two sides of the pit
(Комар, А. В. – Кубышев, А. И. – Орлов, Р. С.: Погребения кочевников VI–VII вв. из Северо-Западного Приазовья.
Стени Европы в эпоху средневековья 5 (2006), after 312. ris. 32, 1.)

¹⁷ Lőrinczy, Gábor: Kelet-európai steppei népesség a 6–7. századi Kárpát-medencében. Régészeti adatok a Tiszántúl kora avar kori betelepüléséhez (Eastern European Steppe Populations in the 6th–7th Century Carpathian Basin. Archaeological Data on Early Avar Period Settlement of the Area East of the Tisza River). *A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve – Studia Archaeologica* IV (1998) 343–344. Since 1998, many more graves have been found, so this number can be placed at about 1,600–1,700.

¹⁸ Gulyás, Bence: Újabb adatok a kora avar kori Tiszántúl kelet-európai kapcsolataihoz (New Results of Research Concerning the Relation between Eastern Hungary and the East European Steppe in the Early Avar Period). In: *Hadak útján. A népvándorláskor fiatal kutatóinak XXIV. konferenciája*. ed. Türk, Attila (Budapest–Esztergom: Archaeolingua, 2015), 499–512.

devices, or in other words, those performing the rites select individual customs from within the same range of variations. A good example of this is the examination of animal sacrifices: along both the Tisza and the Don rivers there are examples of partial equestrian, cattle, sheep, and goat remains, while at the same time there are no examples of wild animals, swine or poultry placed as sacrifices in the grave.

Alongside the formal (typological) parallels, certain procedures performed during the sacrificial rite are also the same in the two regions. A characteristic method of skinning animals can be observed in the region east of the Tisza river in the Early Avar Period. The legs are not separated at the joints, but instead a version of amputation is performed during which the hide is not stripped off from the muscle at the joints, but instead it is cut apart above the end of the tibia.¹⁹ This technique can also be observed at the burials in the Krasnodar area.²⁰ In addition, a characteristic tradition of ceramic decoration also indicates a connection. During an analysis of Early Avar Period ceramics, Tivadar Vida showed that the handmade pots decorated with flowing paint could without exception be localized to the region east of the Tisza.²¹ A parallel to this can be found in the Tuguluk grave excavated in the Stavropol Ridge area that can be dated to the 6th century.²²

Although in the light of the above data every indicator shows that it is possible to surmise the same ethnic group for the Eastern European population in the Early Avar Period and those behind the Sivašovka horizon, it is still necessary to wait before this is proclaimed as fact. Due to the low amount of Eastern European data, the publication of further archaeological sites is essential. Until then we must be satisfied with the outlining of a working theory, which the data from the coming decades will either reinforce or refute. According to this, the ancestors of the population east of the Tisza must be found amongst the descendants of the Hun Period nomads living to the east of the Don River, who were pushed west when the Avars appeared in Europe. A part of this displaced ethnic fragment settled in the area to the north of the Black Sea, while the other part settled in the Carpathian Basin, particularly in the area east of the Tisza river.

Naturally, the investigation of the origins of the population in the area east of the Tisza river only covers a fragment of the eastern connections of Early Avar Period ethnic groups in the Carpathian Basin, but with this essay I was hoping to draw attention to the possibilities for further research inherent in the findings and results of the former Soviet states. The systematic elaboration of the system of eastern connections for the relics from the Hungarian Conquest Period has begun in recent years.²³ Following this example, in the near future the review of the system of relationships in the Early Avar Period steppe region based upon recent excavations will also become necessary. All of this will supplement the varied image that has been formed up to now of the former Avar population. This combined with the results achieved to this point in the research on Mediterranean links will be able to show the variety of cultural and ethnic elements that were woven together to form this political community that for nearly two and a half centuries was a defining national confederation in late classical Central Europe.²⁴

¹⁹ Lőrinczy, Gábor: Kelet-európai steppei népesség a 6–7. századi Kárpát-medencében. Régészeti adatok a Tiszántúl kora avar kori betelepüléséhez (Eastern European Steppe Populations in the 6th–7th Century Carpathian Basin. Archaeological Data on Early Avar Period Settlement of the Area East of the Tisza River). *A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve – Studia Archaeologica* IV (1998).

²⁰ Атавин, А. Г.: Погребения VII – начала VIII вв из Восточного Приазовья. In: *Культуры Евразийских степей второй половины I тысячелетия н. э.*, отв. ред. Сташенков, Д. А. (Szamara: Szamarszkij Oblasztnoj Isztoriko-Krajevdedcseszkij Muzej im. P. V. Alabina, 1996), 209.

²¹ Vida, Tivadar: *Die awarenzeitliche Keramik*. *Varia Archaeologica Hungarica* 8 (Berlin; Budapest: DAI; MTA Régészeti Intézet, 1999), 113.

²² Ляхов, С.В. – Мячин, С. В.: Кочевническое погребение «постгуннского» времени у села Тугулул Ставропольского края (предварительная публикация). *Археология Восточно-Европейской степи* 8 (2010) 230, рис. 1.3.

²³ Türk, Attila: *The New Archaeological Research Design for Early Hungarian History*. *Hungarian Archaeology*, Summer 2012, Accessed 22 September, 2016.

²⁴ This article was proofread by Péter Langó and Tivadar Vida. The use of the illustrations was allowed by Gábor Lőrinczy and Oleksij Komar. The map showing the archaeological sites in the Carpathian Basin was prepared by Zita Hrabák. I hereby thank them for their assistance!

RECOMMENDED LITERATURE

GULYÁS, BENCE

Újabb adatok a kora avar kori Tiszántúl kelet-európai kapcsolataihoz (New Results of Research Concerning the Relation between Eastern Hungary and the East European Steppe in the Early Avar Period). In: *Hadak útján. A népvándorlaskor fiatal kutatóinak XXIV. konferenciája*, ed. Türk, Attila, 499–512. Budapest–Esztergom: Archaeolingua, 2015.

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