

PREHISTORIC CENTER ABOVE THE ZALA RIVER The Results of Recent Research at Zalaszentiván-Kisfaludi Hill

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The Zalaszentiván-Kisfaludi Hill archaeological site has been known in the professional literature for a long time as a prehistoric hillfort. In recent years, between 2004 and 2015, new information has come to light about the site. The area of the hillfort was subject to a preventive archaeological excavation in 2004-2005, aerial archaeological surveying in 2010 and a survey performed with metal detectors in 2015. Here I will make an effort to briefly summarize and present the most recent findings.

This archaeological site has been known of for more than 130 years and was first described in 1885 by Vilmos Lipp, the outstanding expert on the area and the founder of the Vas County Archaeological Society.² The prehistoric hillfort lying to the northeast of the Csácsbozsok section of Zalaegerszeg is now administered as a part of the outskirts of the town of Zalaszentiván. The long, narrow ridge of Kisfaludi Hill rises sharply from the wide, flat, mostly marshy floodplains of the Zala River and runs in a north-south direction. It is bordered by the Zala River basin to the west and a deep valley with steep sides, the so-called “Várvölgy” (“Castle Valley”) to the east (Fig. 1).

The site is widely known to Hungarian and international researchers due to the central location of the hillfort and the metallic finds that have been discovered so far. The prehistoric finds coming from here are from the Late Bronze Age (1400/1300 B.C.-900/800 B.C.), the Early Iron Age (900/800 B.C.-400 B.C.) and the Celtic period (400 B.C. -0 A.D.). On the basis of our current knowledge it seems that the golden age of the site was during the time of the Tumulus and Urnfield cultures of the Late Bronze Age.

It was in this area that in 1920 a resident of Zalaegerszeg, János Máta, found the famous bronze deposit made up of four spiral arm bands and a socketed axe dated to the 14th century B.C. (Fig. 3), which today can be seen as part of the permanent collection in the Göcseji Museum. In addition to the metal finds, a sandstone cast for making a bronze spear (Fig. 4) also clearly indicates that the hillfort was a metalworking center in the Late Bronze Age, similar in significance to Sopron-Burgstall, Velem-Szent Vid-hegy or Várvölgy-Nagy Láz-hegy in the Western Trans-Danubian region.

The archaeological investigations of the earthen fort began in the 1960s, and as with so many other earthen forts in Hungary it was first surveyed by Gyula Nováki.³ The prehistoric settlement is around the

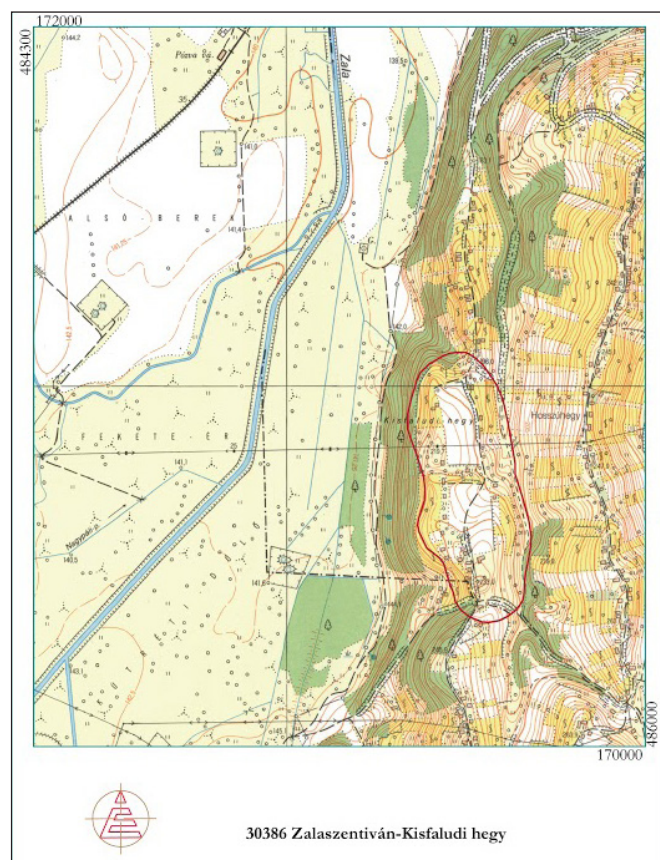


Fig. 1. The site at Zalaszentiván-Kisfaludi Hill. EOV 1:1000

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² Nováki, Gyula: Zur Frage der sogenannten „Brandwälle“ in Ungarn. *ActaArchHung* 16 (1964), 120.

³ Nováki, Gyula: Zur Frage der sogenannten „Brandwälle“ in Ungarn. *ActaArchHung* 16 (1964), 119–131.



Fig. 2. Aerial photo of the site Zalaszentiván-Kisfaludi Hill.
(Credits: Zoltán Czajlik, ELTE BTK Régészettudományi Intézet, 9 April 2010.)

middle of the hill. Its location is circumscribed by two originally natural gullies. One is above the so-called “Szentkút” (“Holy Well”) and the second separates the hillfort from the higher peak above Csácsbozsok. The area of the settlement is long and irregular. In terms of attacks on it, the western and eastern sides could hardly have been considered due to their natural slopes. However, it would have been relatively easy to attack from the north and the south, along the continuation of the ridge. In accordance with this, traces of fortifications and deep ditches can be found and seen at these two ends of the settlement. The former rampart on the southern side in particular is clearly visible even today.

Due to its 3.5 hectare area, it can only be stated that up to now a very small portion of the site has been excavated. In addition to excavations, research into the enormous fortification encircled by an earthen rampart has been performed employing the latest methods in the air and on the ground, and these have proved to be particularly successful.

Due to the aerial archaeological research performed by Zoltán Czajlik (Eötvös Lorand University, Faculty of Humanities, Institute of Archaeological Sciences) in the spring of 2010, we now have high-resolution aerial photographs of the entire earthen fort and its surroundings (*Fig. 2*), which help in analyzing it and have made it possible to compare it to other contemporary hillforts. The favorable location of the site is evident in the aerial photographs as well. The imposing natural promontory that was further fortified by the inhabitants rises above the floodplains of the Zala River and commands a view of the river valley from its plateau. The aerial photographs and observations made on the ground reinforce the idea that Kisfaludi Hill in Zalaszentiván was a central settlement in terms of controlling the lowland settlements and the trade routes in the area during the time of the Tumulus and Urnfield cultures.

An important element of the field research was the preventive archaeological excavation on the site led by the author in 2004-2005. This took place along the path of the dirt road running along the midline of



Fig. 3. Bronze treasure found in 1920 at the site Zalaszentiván-Kisfaludi Hill. Göcseji Múzeum, Zalaegerszeg

the ridge that can be seen in the aerial photograph (*Fig. 2*).⁴ The construction of a network of water mains provided the reason for the research, which supplied a variety of new data. The excavation was able to run along a 1.8 meter wide trench at a length that cut through more than two-thirds of the site. The excavation confirmed the central role the settlement had in the Late Bronze Age, the Early Iron Age and the Celtic period of the Iron Age.

Hearths, pits, large-scale shallow features – most likely the traces of pit-houses – and large amounts of ceramic materials were discovered from the Late Bronze Age period. In the central section of the settlement the archaeological layer was as deep as four meters. The traces of carbonized beams and the baking surfaces of large hearths were uncovered in the wide, black cultural layer. While the limited width of the excavation area restricted the information that could be learned about the settlement structure, it did clearly show that intensive life took place in the hillfort and that the area was continuously occupied in the Late Bronze Age period. Significant handicraft activities can be reckoned with, and the cooking surfaces of the hearths, the pots that were uncovered and the large amounts of ceramic fragments suggest the serious production of ceramic utensils.

The amount and quality of the large numbers of finds that await processing, the previously discovered spear cast made from sandstone (*Fig. 4*) and the bronze objects found nearly one hundred years ago (*Fig. 3*) have made it certain that bronze processing also took place at this central settlement. It could be hypothesized that the some 500 meter long flat plateau of the earthworks contained further metal objects. In the interest of searching for these, systematic scouting for finds using instrumentation was performed in the summer of 2015 within the context of the Eötvös Lorand University bronze object research program

⁴ Previously two excavations had also been performed on the site. First, Gyula Nováki excavated here in 1960, investigating the burnt rampart running on the interior of the earthen fort. In 1977 Mária Fekete performed a rescue/verification excavation in the area.

under the leadership of Gábor V. Szabó, an associate professor at Eötvös Lorand University. This work was made significantly easier due to the current condition of the terrain. A large portion of the site and the hilltop is an area of grass and weeds covered in only small shrubs, which made the effective use of highly sensitive metal detectors possible. Therefore, the two-day investigation using several metal detectors produced significant results and the discovery of terminus ad quem finds.

During the investigations performed with metal detectors 8 small fragments of curved sickle blades (*Fig. 5, nos. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9; Fig. 6, nos. 6, 7, 8*), 2 sickle handles (*Fig. 6, nos. 3, 5*) and 2 handles and the beginning of a blade together (*Fig. 6, nos. 1, 2*) were found. The blade fragments were small, averaging 3x3 cm, and were pronounced and strengthened with ribs on their curved upper sections. The handle pieces that were found were decorated with lengthwise ribs. The most informative of the sickle finds was the nearly intact fragment with a knobbed end seen in figure 6 (*Fig. 6, no. 1*). From this it can also be determined that the smaller fragments belonged to a similar type as well. Finds similar to the fragments from Zalaszentiván have come to the Göcseji Museum from Oltárc-Márihegy.⁵ Two of these sickles correspond to the decorated handle fragment from Zalaszentiván, and counterparts of the other three handle fragments can also be seen here.⁶ The curved rib on the Zalaszentiván fragments can also be clearly discerned on the blades of the Oltárc finds. The authors place the Oltárc treasure ensemble between 1300-1200 B.C.⁷ The sickle fragments may have functioned as tools, but they also often appear in Late Bronze Age treasure hoards. In this context the sickle may have served a sacred function as well, or may have been a votive offering or even a symbol of power.

Of the metal objects that have been found randomly, the saw blade fragment (*Fig. 6, no. 4*) discovered by the research group using metal detectors stands out. The saw blade has sharp teeth on one side and a hole to insert a handle on its end. Similar saw blades were found in the Fegyvernek hoard that came to light in May of 2015.⁸ It can clearly be seen on the saw blade fragment that it may have been a belonging for everyday use.

During the investigation with metal detectors, a piece of a straight blade with a wide, prominent rib in the middle (*Fig. 5, no. 4*) was also found, which in all likelihood may have belonged to the blade of a sword or a dagger. It may have functioned as a weapon, and was also a characteristic piece of bronze treasure hoards.

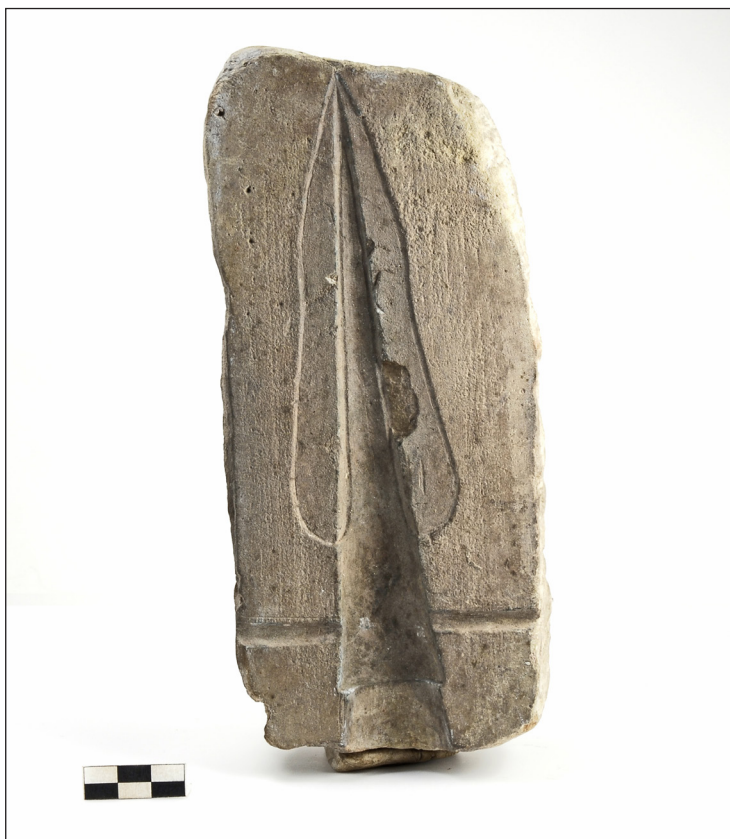


Fig. 4. Cast from the site Zalaszentiván-Kisfaludi Hill. Göcseji Múzeum, Zalaegerszeg

⁵ Ilon, Gábor – Straub, Péter – Tarbai, J. Gábor: [Rejtett régészeti kincsek Zalában](#) (Hidden Archaeological Treasures in Zala). Fig. 2/16. (most recent download: 7 April 2017)

⁶ Ilon, Gábor – Straub, Péter – Tarbai, J. Gábor: [Rejtett régészeti kincsek Zalában](#) (Hidden Archaeological Treasures in Zala). Fig. 2/16. (most recent download: 7 April 2017)

⁷ Ilon, Gábor – Straub, Péter – Tarbai, J. Gábor: [Rejtett régészeti kincsek Zalában](#) (Hidden Archaeological Treasures in Zala). (most recent download: 7 April 2017)

⁸ [Szenzációs bronzkori kincseket talált egy férfi Fegyverneken](#) (A Man Found Sensational Bronze Age Treasures in Fegyvernek). (most recent download: 7 April 2017)

The spiral disk wound from bronze wire with a rhomboid cross section belongs to the group of apparel items (*Fig. 5 no. 1*). The wide, spiral arm bands from the treasure hoard comprised of four arm bands that was found at the site earlier, in 1920, also had similar wire disks on their ends (*Fig. 3*). However, the so-called *passementerie* brooch, which was used to fasten garments on the upper body, and was from somewhat later in the course of the Late Bronze Age was also based upon this form.⁹ We are not able to satisfactorily determine the precise function from the fragment discovered at Zalaszentiván.

It is also difficult to make a precise determination on another fragment (*Fig. 5 no. 2*). When we found it we thought it was a saw, due to its tiny, toothed edge, but this was contradicted by the rib in the middle, since this would inhibit its use as a saw. It was brought up that it might be a sword blade. However, when it was restored and cleaned a pattern decorated with delicate chasing appeared. A line of fine points can be seen running parallel to the rib in the center of the bronze sheet, and on the other side we observed a repeated pattern of semicircular arches, three of which are visible on our fragment. On the basis of the fine craftsmanship and the material of lower quality, I believe that this may have been a curved bronze sheet similar to that

of the spiral arm bands found in 1920. Over the millennia it became damaged, broke and the relatively small fragment became deformed and is now straight (*Fig. 5 no. 2*). Nagy Marcella has presented a similar spiral arm band decorated with chasing from Hegyhátszentmárton.¹⁰ The find, which has parallels in the spiral arm band from Zalaszentiván found in 1920 as well as the piece discovered during the present research, is dated to between 1700 and 1500 B.C. by the author.¹¹ Similarly arching, chased decoration can also be observed on the spiral arm band made of gold from Pecica, Romania.¹² A motif comprised of etched groups

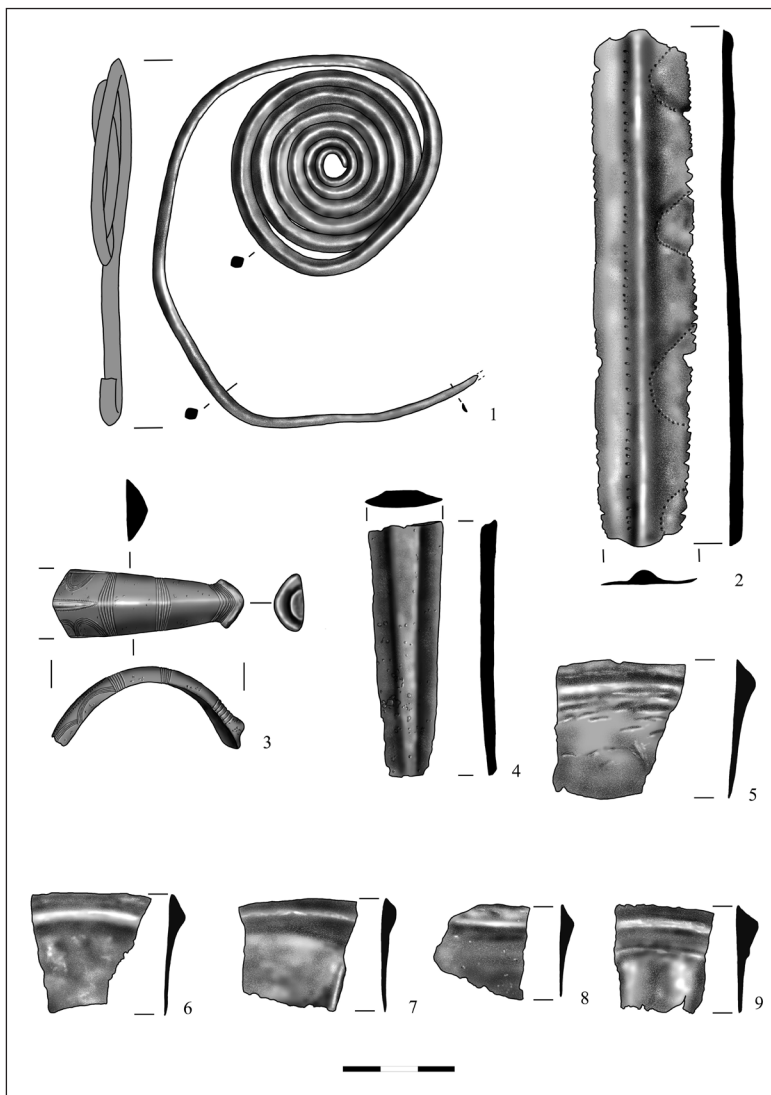


Fig. 5. Metal finds from Zalaszentiván-Kisfaludi Hill. Objects unearthed by the metal detector search lead by Gábor V. Szabó (ELTE BTK Régészettudományi Intézet).

⁹ Kósa, Polett – Tarbay, J. Gábor: [Egy talányos késő bronzkori fibula](#) (A Mysterious Late Bronze Age Brooch). (most recent download: 7 April 2017)

¹⁰ Nagy, Marcella: [Bronzkori kartekercs Hegyhátszentmárton határából](#). (Bronze Age Spiral Arm Band from the Outskirts of Hegyhátszentmárton). *Savaria - A Vas Megyei Múzeumok értesítője (Savaria –Bulletin of the Vas County Museums)* 31/1 (2007) [Szombathely, 2008], 280–299. (most recent download: 7 April 2017)

¹¹ Nagy, Marcella: [Bronzkori kartekercs Hegyhátszentmárton határából](#). (Bronze Age Spiral Arm Band from the Outskirts of Hegyhátszentmárton). *Savaria - A Vas Megyei Múzeumok értesítője (Savaria –Bulletin of the Vas County Museums)* 31/1 (2007) [Szombathely, 2008], 280–299. (7 April 2017)

¹² Kemenczei, Tibor: [A pécskai/Pecica második bronzlelet](#) (The Second Bronze Find from Pécska/Pecica). *Folia archeologica* 42. *Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum Évkönyve (42nd Yearbook of the Hungarian National Museum)* (1991), 27–45. (The spiral arm bands can be seen on page 29.) (utolsó elérés: 2017. április 7.)

of arched lines also appears on the fragment that was discovered of a cast bronze bracelet that is slightly oval with a triangular cross section and an open end (Fig. 5 no. 3).

While it is possible to evaluate the objects displayed here that were found during research using metal detectors individually in this manner, due to the fact that they were found distributed in a clearly defined area of the flat hilltop it may also be possible to interpret them as parts of a treasure hoard. We can separate them into two find horizons in time (hypothetical treasure hoards) on the basis of the above objects. The decorated spiral arm band fragment (Fig. 5 no. 2) and the bracelet decorated with groups of arched and straight lines (Fig. 5 no. 3) can be placed in the first period. Hypothetically the spiral disk that can be seen in Fig. 5, no. 1 could be linked to this hoard. These objects can be dated to Reinecke's BB1 period of the so-called Mostelbach-Regelsbrunn phase of the Tumulus culture between 1700 and 1500 B.C., at the transition point between the Middle and the Late Bronze Age. The second group of finds is the sickle with a handle decorated with straight ribs and a knobbed end (Fig. 6 no. 1), the saw blade (Fig. 6 no. 4) and the blade fragment with a trapezoidal cross-section (Fig. 5 no. 4). These objects can be placed between 1300 and 1200 B.C., in the BD-HaA1 period of the Urnfield culture.

The investigations performed with metal detectors brought to light finds from the Late Bronze Age Tumulus and Urnfield periods. Due to this it reinforced the results of previous research, according to which the hillfort of Zalaszentiván-Kisfaludi Hill first flourished at the beginning of the Tumulus period, during the transition period between the Middle and Late Bronze Age. However, finds from the Urnfield period dominate the scattered finds from the site¹³ and the ceramic finds from the excavated features. The prehistoric hillfort of Zalaszentiván-Kisfaludi Hill reached its zenith in this period, and the renewed prosperity of the settlement can be placed during this time.

One of the characteristic types of settlements in Trans-Danubia in the Late Bronze Age was hilltop fortified settlements or hillforts. In addition to hillforts, settlements with a village-like character on the high banks of rivers or streams were a defining form of this period. The villages on the banks of the Zala River were clearly visible from the top of Zalaszentiván-Kisfaludi Hill. The trade routes of the period also fol-

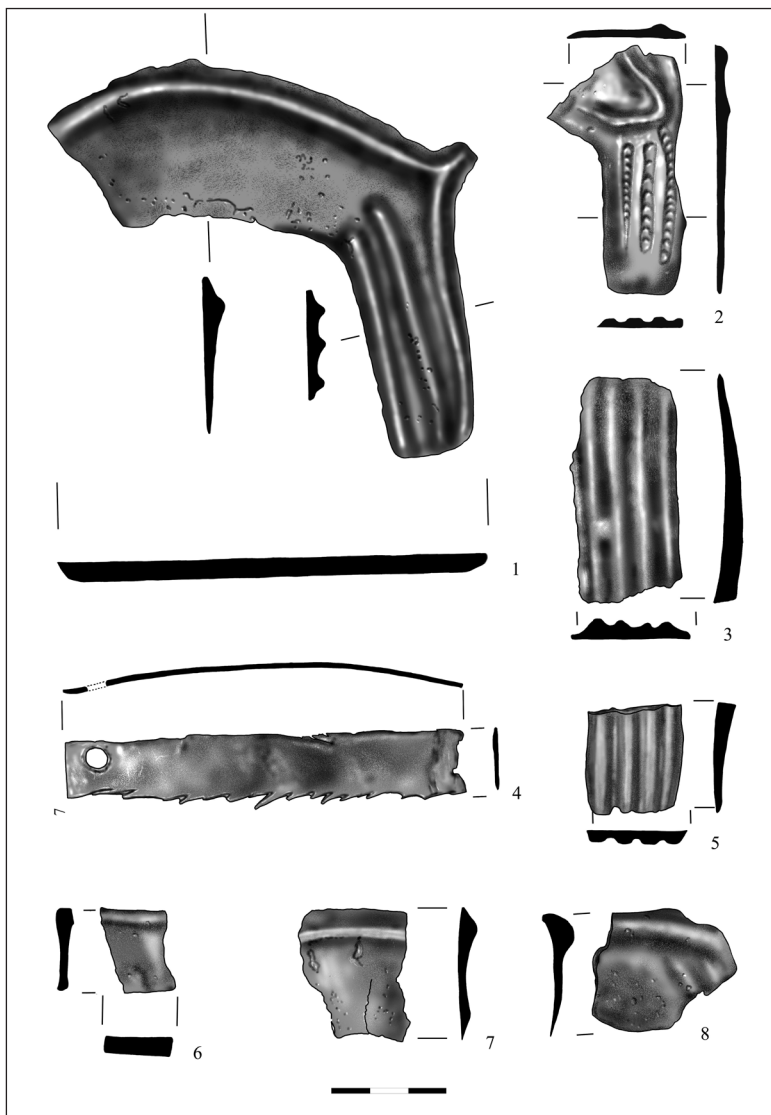


Fig. 6. Metal finds from Zalaszentiván-Kisfaludi Hill. Objects unearthed by the metal detector search lead by Gábor V. Szabó (ELTE BTK Régészettudományi Intézet).

¹³ Száraz, Csilla: [Zalaszentiván-Kisfaludi Hill. The Prehistoric Material of the Hillfort](#). *Anteus - Communicationes ex Instituto Archaeologico Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 22 (2002), 513–546. (utolsó elérés: 2017. április 7.)

lowed the streams and rivers in the county, and the raw materials for bronze work arrived at the hillfort along these routes. From the hilltop it was possible to follow their movement towards the settlement.

It is certain that hillforts served a central function in the hierarchy of settlements, and activities took place within their territory (the working of bronze, the making of ceramics, the processing of textiles and ritual observances) that required serious organization, knowledge (industrial activities), raw materials and technical equipment. They also could have provided the inhabitants of the lowland settlements with the tools made here, such as sickles necessary for agriculture. The two types of settlements may have lived in a symbiosis in this particular case. The inhabitants of the open settlements could have provided the necessary agricultural products, while the hillforts could have served a defensive function.

With its 3.5 hectare area and its favorable geographical setting, it is possible to count on the fact that the settlement on Zalaszentiván-Kisfaludi Hill was continuously inhabited. To the extent that we wish to determine social groups, in all likelihood it was craftsmen and their families as well as soldiers and their families that passed their lives in the fort.

In addition to Zalaszentiván-Kisfaludi Hill, there are several confirmed Late Bronze Age hillforts that can be found within the territory of Zala County, near bends in the Zala River and in the highlands of the Keszthelyi Mountains near Lake Balaton (Kemendollár-Várdomb, Zalaszántó-Tátika, Rezi-Vár and Várvölgy-Nagy-Láz Hill). Standing out amongst these is Várvölgy-Nagy-Láz Hill, which due to its size and the abundance of finds may have been a second important central site within the Late Bronze Age settlement hierarchy in the Trans-Danubian region during the Urnfield period. The hillforts may have been important crossroads, strategic sites and central locations for both profane and sacred activities during the Late Bronze Age in the Trans-Danubian area

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