

RITUAL DEPOSIT FROM THE HUN PERIOD FROM TELKI (CENTRAL HUNGARY).

A preliminary report.^{1,2}

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The paper presents a preliminary report on a new ritual deposit of the European Hun period, discovered near Telki in central Hungary. The archaeological and archaeometric analysis of the finds is currently in progress. The assemblage is made up of elements of horse gear, personal adornments (the mounts of a shoe-set and at least three belts) and weaponry. The analogies of the objects can be found in the supra-ethnic elite culture of the later Hun period in Europe. In view of its context, the assemblage is a structured deposit that was buried as part of a ritual. Comparable assemblages can be interpreted as tokens of the shared ideology of a newly emerging ‘imperial’ elite of the last phase of the Hunnic rule in Europe.

The first objects, found lying on the ground near the Annalak hunting lodge (Fig. 1.), were presented to the Hungarian National Museum by their finder, Gábor Ehmann, in February 2016, who showed us the exact findspots of the artefacts he had found, where we subsequently conducted an excavation, during which additional objects came to light (Fig. 2.). The site was investigated during two excavation seasons in 2016 and 2018: aside from the traces of a Celtic presence, most of the finds dated to the fifth century AD – the latter represent the first professionally excavated and documented Hun-period sacrificial assemblage in Hungary.

Until recently, ‘funerary sacrificial deposits’ of the European Hun period were interpreted as the material relics of a funerary ritual of steppean origin and as incontestable tokens of the presence of steppean populations, specifically of Huns. While the finds from Telki most likely indeed represent the remains of a funerary sacrificial deposit, the assemblage itself nevertheless called for a fresh look at the very concept and nature of these deposits. This re-examination is enabled not only by the professional excavation and by the field documentation, an immense advantage over the other similar assemblages, but also by the various natural scientific analyses that are currently in progress, some of which have already yielded a wealth of new information about the objects themselves.



Fig. 1.: Telki, the location of the site



Fig. 2.: The site during the first days of the excavation

THE SITE AND THE SPATIAL PATTERNING OF THE FINDS

Telki Hill is the westernmost elevation of the hilly region encircling Budapest from the west, a location accessible through a gully from Zsámbék Valley (Fig. 3.). The site is located on a narrow plateau at the

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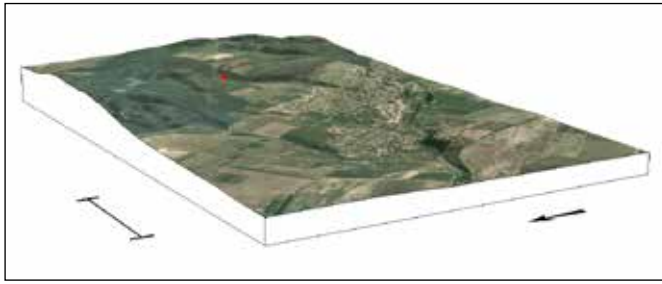


Fig. 3.: The location of the site on the northern slope of Telki Hill (3D terrain model by Nicklas Larson, Hungarian National Museum)

northern foot of the hill slope. The choice of location for depositing the assemblage may have been influenced by the fact that Telki Hill is the first prominent landmark seen from the valley.

The finds laid at a depth of 0–50 cm and were found in clusters over an approximately 18 m by 20 m large area (Fig. 4.). The find clusters outlined a horseshoe-shaped area that had a more or less northern orientation. The assemblage consists of the elements of one or more sets of horse gear,

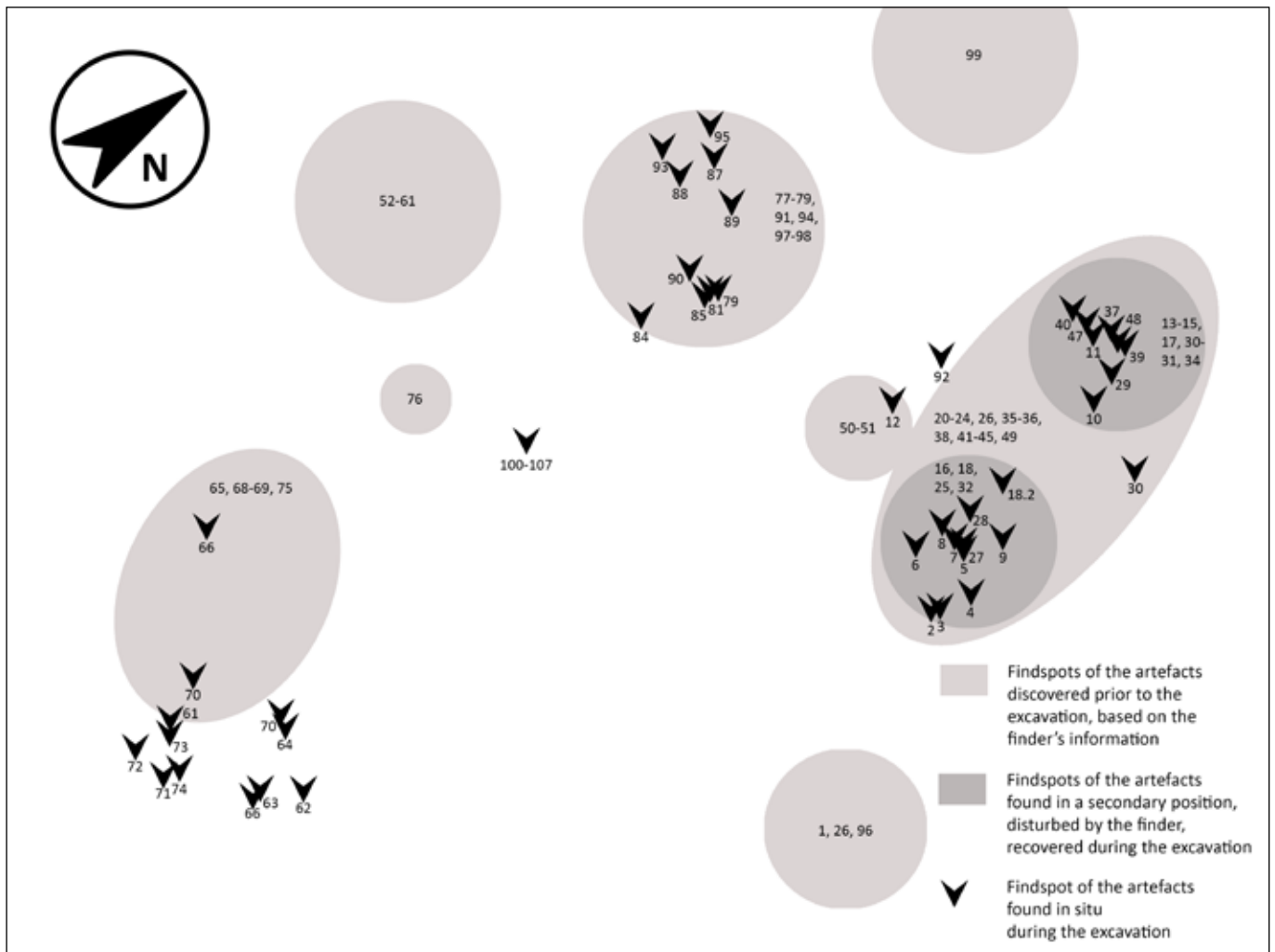


Fig. 4.: Spatial distribution of the finds

personal adornments (the mounts of a shoe-set and at least three belts) and some pieces of weaponry. The south-easternmost artefact was the horse-bit (Fig. 5.). The articles found north of the horse-bit representing the adornments of the headstall and the reins formed two clusters (Fig. 6.): they included double-headed, garnet-inlaid and silver-gilt crescentic studs, small strap-ends, small silver buckles as well as a disc-shaped and a lozenge-shaped pendant. Remains of the saddle and its strapping were found in the western clusters. The silver gilt sheet fragments covered with a scale pattern (Fig. 7.) were identified as saddle ornaments. The lunular pendants and the small, silver-gilt pyramidal bells most likely decorated the saddle straps.

Lying between the above articles were various other objects forming two separate clusters. Eighth golden mounts of a shoe-set were uncovered *in situ* in the southern cluster (Fig. 8.). The northern cluster comprised

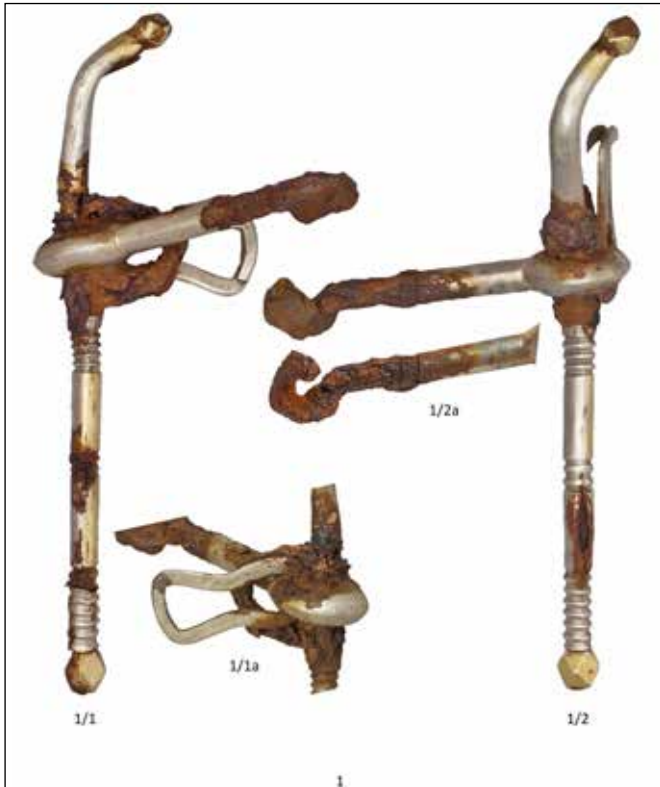


Fig. 5.: The snaffle-bit and its details during conservation



Fig. 6.: Harness ornaments

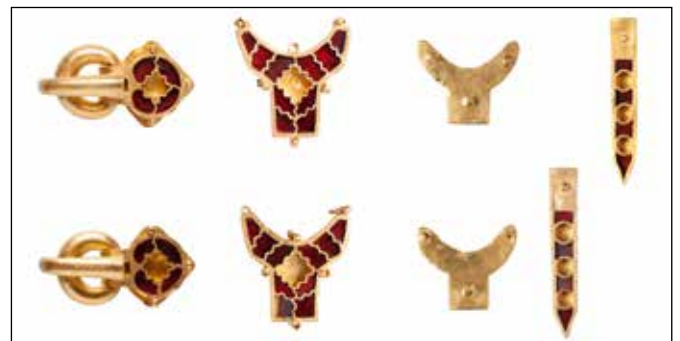


Fig. 8.: The shoe-set



Fig. 7.: Scale-ornamented mounts, presumably from the saddle



Fig. 9.: The iron arrowhead

the remains of two iron belt sets, a silver-gilt belt buckle with niello inlay and a short dagger in a scabbard with golden mounts. The rectangular iron buckles, the slender iron belt mounts, the chape mount of the dagger scabbard and the scabbard mouthpiece, a semi-circular mount, and a lozenge-shaped mount are all decorated with garnet inlays. An 11 cm long socketed arrowhead was found some 2–3 m north of the belt and the dagger (Fig. 9).

THE ARTEFACTS

The parallels to the articles of the Telki assemblage reflecting their cultural connections can be found in various Hun-period assemblages whose date ranges from the late fourth to the middle third of the fifth century. In addition to formal similarities, the manufacturing techniques and the materials both reflect cultural connections spanning immense territories.

ANALOGIES OF THE OBJECTS

Comparable horse gear ornaments are relatively widespread in the European Hun period. Scale-ornamented sheets were the customary decorations of saddles. However, the analogies of the other objects such as the horse-bit, the lunular pendants, bells, small split-end strap-ends, garnet-inlaid gold studs and various other mounts were distributed over an extensive territory during the Hun period and their use can be dated from the late fourth to the mid-fifth century. Most of them lead eastward to the steppe and to the northern fringes of the Caucasus, while some parallels are also known from the Carpathian Basin (cf. ANKE 1998; BÓNA 1991).

Finds indicative of similar footwear are known from the elite burials of the Hun period and the ensuing era (e.g. Blučina, TIHELKA 1963, 471, 489, Obr. 15) and from sacrificial deposits (Brut, GABUEV 2014, 125–126, Ris. 8–9; the number of lunular and triangular mounts suggests at least two sets in the Szege-Nagyszéksós assemblage: FETTICH 1953, Taf. I. 9–13).

The two rectangular iron buckles are Mediterranean types, which first appeared in the Mediterranean and the Danube region as early as the third quarter of the fifth century (QUAST 1993, 84–86, 135–136; the exemplars geographically closest to the Telki buckles come from the Gepidic cemetery at Szentes-Berekhát: QUAST 2001, 432–433). An exact counterpart to the scabbard mouthpiece (*Fig. 10*, in purple frame) can

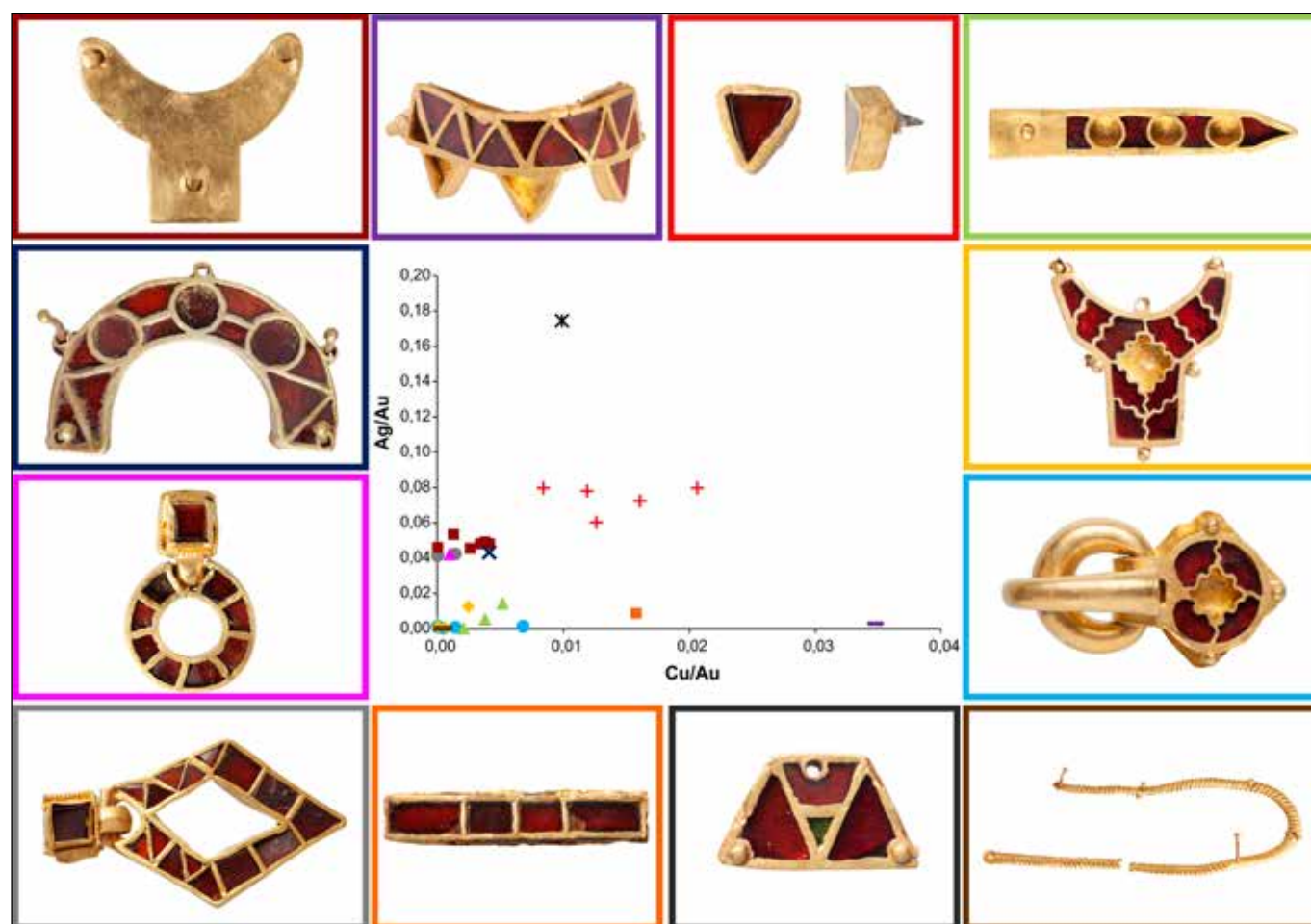


Fig. 10.: Chemical composition of the gold objects (diagram: Viktória Mozgai)

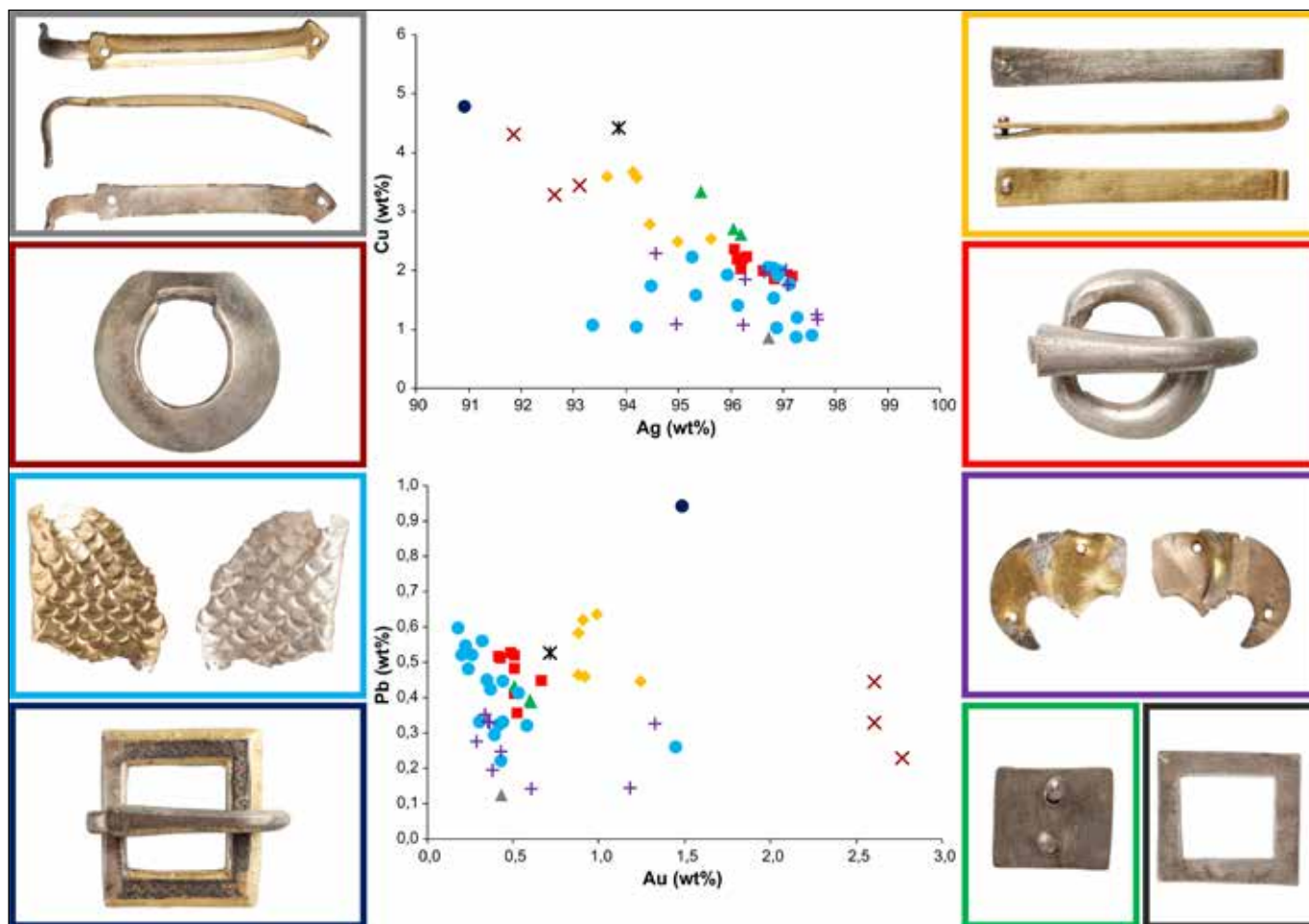


Fig. 11.: Chemical composition of the silver objects (diagram: Viktória Mozgai)

be cited from the Pouan burial (third quarter of the fifth century, KAT. MANNHEIM 2001, 145–146). The silver-gilt niello-ornamented buckle (Fig. 11, in dark blue frame) is a well-known late Roman variant of Gala-type military belt sets that were widely used both in Western and in Eastern Europe (KAZANSKI 1993a, 120–124; NAGY 2004, 242–249). The large, socketed, barbed arrowhead (Fig. 9.) differs markedly from the three-winged arrowheads used widely by steppean nomads during the fifth century and has more in common with the form of late Roman specimens.

All in all, while the pieces of the horse gear can be dated to the late fourth and earlier fifth century, the actual date of the deposition and of the assemblage as a whole is obviously defined by the latest pieces, namely the iron belt set and the shoe-set (Fig. 8.), which can be assigned to the middle third or to the third quarter of the fifth century. The initial phase of this broad date is consistent with the generally accepted chronology of Hun-period sacrificial assemblages.

MATERIAL AND TECHNOLOGY

The chemical composition of the objects and their decoration was determined using non-destructive analytical methods. The gold objects were manufactured from high-quality gold (> 90 wt%). Based on the gold, silver and copper content, they form different groups, indicating the possible use of different ore sources (Fig. 10.). The different chemical groups coincide with the different typological and chronological groups. Objects with a gold content higher than 99 wt% were most probably produced by re-melting late Roman gold coins (*solidi*).

The silver objects were made of high-quality silver (> 90 wt%). Copper was added intentionally as an alloying element to increase the hardness of the soft silver (Fig. 11.). The objects can be grouped according



Fig. 12.: Golden cloisonné cellwork on the large iron buckle (detail). Photo: Eszter Horváth



Fig. 13.: Loose flat-cut garnet from the large iron buckle. Photo: Eszter Horváth

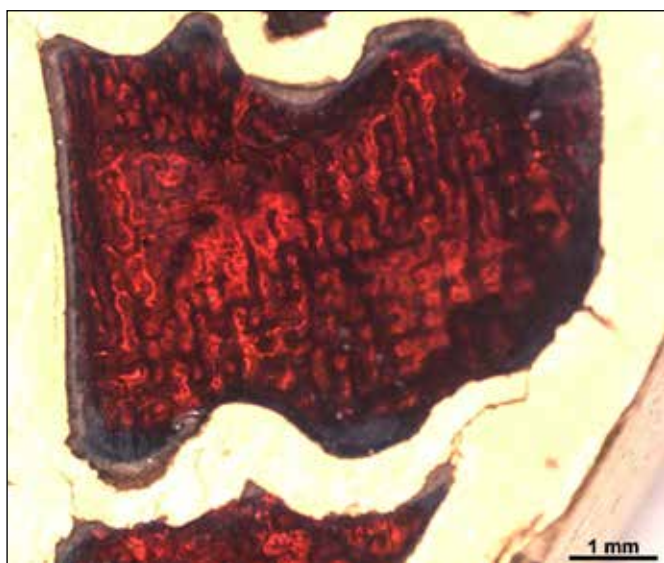


Fig. 14.: Pressed grid-patterned backing foil from a triangular mount of the shoe-set. Photo: Eszter Horváth

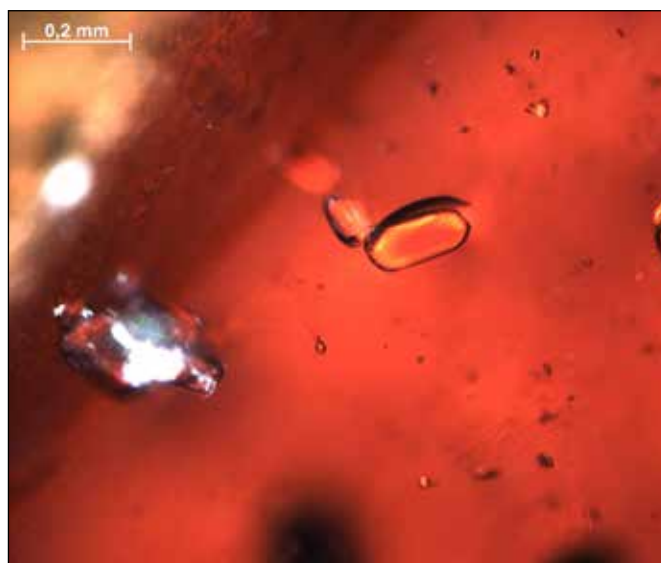


Fig. 15.: Mineral inclusions in one of the garnet inlays of the mount with round pendant. Photo: Eszter Horváth

to their gold and lead content, indicating the possible use of different ore sources (Fig. 11.). Most of the silver objects are embellished with fire-gilding, indicated by the presence of mercury. A silver-gilt buckle is decorated with niello inlay made of silver sulphide.

THE GARNET INLAYS

Golden objects decorated with gemstones, most often with red garnets, are typical elements of Hun-period ritual deposits. Approximately forty objects representing fine polychrome metalwork were unearthed at Telki, most of them crafted from gold. In the case of the two large belt buckles and the associated mounts, the base metal is iron and only the cells are made of gold (Fig. 12.). The objects are decorated with some 230 inlays in all, of which no more than four are glass inlays (two whitish and two green plates), the rest being predominantly red garnets. Most of the garnets are one millimetre thin, flat-cut slabs, with carefully polished surfaces and bevelled or straight-cut edges (Fig. 13.). The flat slabs are mounted in *cloisonné* cellwork or in a single cell. In order to enhance their optical effect, plain or patterned (cross-hatched) backing foils were placed between them and the backing paste (Fig. 14.). The garnets are currently undergoing gemmological and geochemical analyses in order to determine their geological sources (Fig. 15.). Based on the preliminary results, most of the garnets are intermediate pyrope-almandine crystals originating from placer deposits in Sri Lanka, known as *Taprobane* in the written sources, which were then transported to the production sites *via* long-distance trade routes.

RITUAL DEPOSITS OF THE FIFTH CENTURY AND THE TELKI ASSEMBLAGE

REFLECTIONS OF THE DEPOSITION RITES IN THE ASSEMBLAGE AND ITS CONTEXT

The deposition of the objects in small clusters and the roughly north to south alignment of the overall distribution of the finds was not mere chance, as most burials were oriented to the north during the Hun period (TOMKA 2007, 256; NAGY 2004, 239). The overall impression from the position of the find clusters relative to each other is that their spatial patterning appears to roughly correspond to human body regions, with the head to the north, surrounded by the elements of the horse gear on both sides. On the testimony of the objects, several artefact sets of the same function were buried during the ritual; however, none were intact except for the shoe-set. Several associated articles were found in the different clusters, indicating that the pits had been dug simultaneously and that the broken or ripped-up objects had been deposited at the same time. The pre-depositional deliberate destruction of some of the assemblage's artefacts such as the saddle mounts is quite obvious.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE TELKI ASSEMBLAGE

The sacrificial deposits of the Hun period represent an important, but nevertheless little-known religious practice regarding the finer details of the ritual (see SZENTHE manuscript). Here, we shall only discuss those traits of the relevant Migration-period deposits that bear some resemblance to the features of the Telki deposit and thus any conclusions drawn from the comparisons are strongly limited.

It would appear that several parallel cultural traditions of ritual deposition wholly independent of each other can be distinguished during the fourth and fifth century in Eastern and Central Europe, one of these being the assemblages containing magnificent female jewellery of the elite of Germanic peoples (Goths and Gepids, see BIERBRAUER 1975 and QUAST 2011; for similar assemblages from Eastern Europe, see KAZANSKI 1993b, 228, Fig. 5; for the Szilágysomlyó hoards, see KISS 1999, 164–165). In contrast, the Telki assemblage can be best fitted into a warrior and mounted nomadic steppean tradition. Nevertheless, the analogies to deposits with a similar composition (weaponry, costume accessories, personal articles and horse gear) but without a funerary context can all be found in Central Europe. On the Eastern European steppe, comparable assemblages are mostly known from kurgans and kurgan cemeteries, either from barrows erected over graves, or from ones lacking any human remains. According to the current scholarly consensus, the latter contained the remains of the ritual feast (TOMKA 1986, 473–474, KOMAR 2013, ZASECKAJA 1994, 13–16). In some cases, a kurgan was lacking, but the assemblage was accompanied by a cauldron, as at Makartet and Höckricht (KOMAR 2013, LEDEBUR 1838, 46–49). All other assemblages that can be regarded as ritual deposits usually contained a single object such as a cauldron (MASEK 2017), a sword (ISTVÁNOVITS – KULCSÁR 2008, 286; ISTVÁNOVITS – KULCSÁR 2013), a damaged saddle (similar finds are also known from settlement contexts: Nyíregyháza, ISTVÁNOVITS – KULCSÁR 2014; Göd-Bócsaújtelep, MRÁV 2003; Szederkény-Kukoricadűlő, NAGY 2007, 23; Sobari, POPA 1997) or a few horse gear articles (Kapulovka, RUTKIVS'KA 1970, 199–200). However, the cultural milieu of these finds differs substantially from those of the ritual deposits resembling the one discovered at Telki. Among the latter, the largest comes from Szeged-Nagyszéksós on the Hungarian Plain (FETTICH 1953), the others from Transdanubia: from the Pécs (HAMPEL 1905, Bd. II. 370–383; ALFÖLDI 1932, 76, Taf. I–VII; ANKE 2007, 298–301), Bátaszék (KOVRIK 1982) and Pannonhalma area (TOMKA 1986), and one came to light at Katzelsdorf in Austria (NOWOTNY 2014, 236–237).

The three smaller assemblages from Pannonia contain virtually identical artefacts. In addition to the horse-bit and the gold foil harness ornaments and gold foil decorations of the sword and a bow, resembling the exemplar found at Pannonhalma, the Pécs assemblage contained a spearhead and arrowheads. The Bátaszék assemblage also contained the gold foil decoration of the bow. The swords themselves have survived at Pannonhalma and Bátaszék: in Pécs, the sword mounts and the sword pommel attest to the presence of the weapon. The single artefact of uncertain function in the Bátaszék assemblage is the small strap-end of gold foil, which may have been part of a harness set or of a shoe-set; the two small gold buckles had either been used for the attachment of the weapons or for buckling the shoe straps.

The Szeged-Nagyszéksós assemblage contained a neck-ring, two swords, a dagger, two knives, two harness sets, the gold sheets of a quiver, a whip, remains of personal adornments (buckles, shoe-set) and the fragments and ornaments of several drinking vessels (KÜRTI 1988, 163–164, with the earlier literature, and most recently KÜRTI 2007, 258–261). One important trait of the hoard is that traces of burning were noted on several objects (FETTICH 1953, 19, Pl. I. 5; 20, Pl. I. 18, 23–25; 21, Pl. III. 18, Pl. IV. 7–8, Pl. VI. 2; 22, Pl. VI. 13–14; the metal vessels are shown on Pl. XV) and that the finds formed at least two, but most probably three clusters, among which the drinking vessels represent a thematically wholly different and well-distinguishable unit, which would bespeak a deposition as a spatially and functionally discrete group.

Despite important shared characteristics (BÓNA 1991, 169–171), a detailed analysis reveals striking differences between the sacrificial assemblages. The Telki assemblage and the related ones are characterised by the presence of several artefacts/articles of the same type or of their fragments. It would appear that the pre-depositional deliberate destruction of the objects is another common trait.

The Nagyszéksós hoard is the single assemblage that contained highly valuable and prestigious metal vessels. Burnt artefacts solely occurred in this assemblage in the Carpathian Basin. Nevertheless, in contrast to the Telki assemblage, the four other major assemblages are linked by the abundance of delicate gold sheets. In view of its shoe-set, worn only by the *crème de la crème* of the elite (SCHMAUDER 2002, 157–160, HARHOIU 1997, 117–118), and the other articles arranged in groups, the Telki assemblage is closest to the Nagyszéksós assemblage. Nevertheless, it differs from the other assemblages in that it lacks steppean weaponry and, in general, by the visibly minor significance of weaponry. Yet, it is the weaponry and a few other types in which the impact of late Roman culture can be discerned. If these are not simply coincidences, which seems unlikely owing to the high number of artefacts in each assemblage, the similarities and the differences can both be attributed to cultural factors.

The lack of any traces of burning and the composition of the Telki assemblage best recalls the assemblages from the Alanic cultural milieu of the northern Caucasus: for example, an assemblage whose composition has much in common with the ones from the Carpathian Basin was found in Kurgan 1 at Brut at some distance from the grave (GABUEV 2014). The parallels to the other pieces in the assemblage, particularly to the horse gear ornaments, can likewise be cited from this milieu.

In view of the above, the Telki assemblage cannot be simply seen as reflecting the ritual of a steppean nomadic – possibly Hunnic – group. Aside from the Huns, the assemblage and its deposition rite could equally well be associated with a Caucasian Alan, a Goth or an officer of Barbarian-Germanic stock who had served in the late Roman army in Pannonia and had later entered the service of the Huns.

The redistribution of the immense riches of the aristocracy of the Hunnic Empire (BÓNA 1991, 55ff) from the 420s, in the late phase of the Hunnic rule in Europe, led to the emergence of a spectacular ‘nouveau riche’ elite, who are also mentioned in the sources (BÓNA 1991, 93–121); during Attila’s reign, this elite included not only Huns, but also the leaders of the subdued peoples. We know of the Gepidic Ardarih, of Valamir, Theodemir and Videmer, three Gothic brothers, and of the Scirian Edika, all mentioned in the period’s histories, and the presence of a chancery elite of Latin origin also seems likely. This elite was undoubtedly dominated by the military leaders. This military aristocracy, bound by common interests, which expressed its social cohesion through a shared material and, probably, spiritual culture had probably emerged by the close of the European Hun period. In our view, the Telki assemblage can be regarded as part of the legacy of this imperial elite. Irrespective of its origins, the group performing the ritual had, to all appearances, adopted and successfully mastered the sacrificial rites practiced by the military elite of the Hunnic Empire.

This aristocracy did not disappear after the disintegration of Hunnic power. Several magnificent assemblages, such as the one found at Blučina in Moravia (TIHELKA 1963, 471, 489, Obr. 15) attest to the survival of the culture that united the members of this elite. In this sense, it is not so important whether the Telki assemblage was deposited during the Hun period or shortly afterwards. The sacrificial rituals introduced by the Huns and the Hunnic power were undoubtedly practiced for some time even after the Hun period proper.

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