

BOOK REVIEW: A CENTURY OF GOLD BY ÁDÁM BOLLÓK

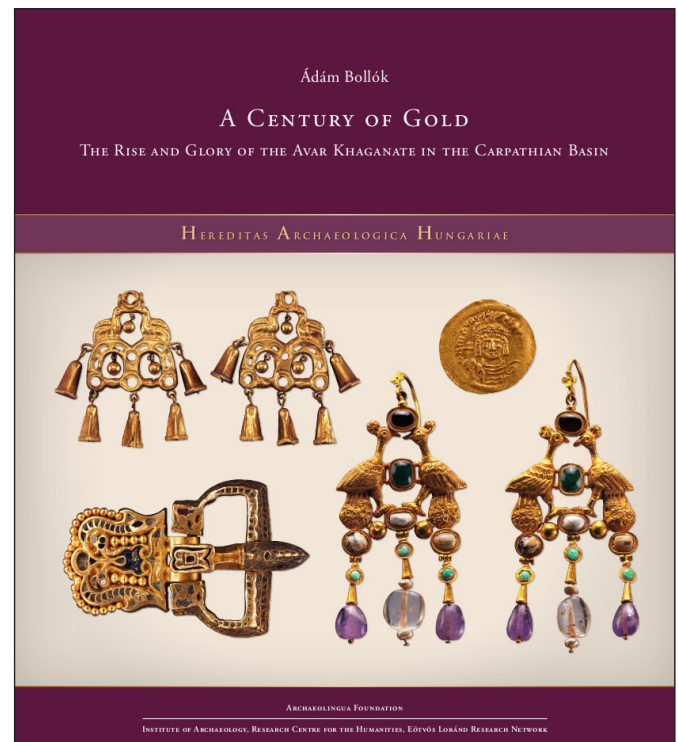
LEVENTE SAMU

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The newest volume in the Hereditas Archaeologica Hungariae takes us back to the first century of the Avar period in the Carpathian Basin, inviting us to accompany the Avars from their first appearance in Europe, their occupation of and settlement in the Carpathian Basin, to the first major crisis in their history: the years after the first aborted siege of Constantinople in 626. The book offers a detailed and captivating account of the Avars, dwelling first on their strange and unfamiliar appearance and physique, followed by a look at the colourful tapestry of Avar-period society. Long-distance connections, particularly with the East Roman Empire, represent one of the book's enduring leitmotifs deftly woven into the narrative.

The book's second chapter delves into the written sources to trace the Avars' long trek to the Carpathian Basin. Although mostly focusing on the period's political and military events, several magnificent archaeological finds and assemblages are also woven into the account. We are shown how the Avars made the long journey to the Middle Danube region and the peoples they gathered along the way as well as the population groups they encountered upon their arrival. One point that emerges clearly is that the Avars were not a homogeneous ethnic group, but a motley of different peoples who were later joined by newly-arriving groups and that this diversity is reflected in the archaeological record.

The third chapter conjures up the picture of what the Avar envoys saw and experienced when travelling to the Byzantine Empire and during their stay in its capital city. Evoking the grandeur and extraordinary beauty of the East Roman built environment, we can all the more imagine the (psychological) significance of the intended impact of this immensely sophisticated environment in diplomatic dealings. By setting this extremely important communications channel between the Avar leaders and Constantinople in an entirely new and spectacular light, the nature of the relationship between the Avars and the world around them becomes more intelligible and tangible. The lavishly illustrated chapter leads us to the many locations the Avar envoys passed and saw in the City while being accompanied to the imperial court, followed by the awe-inspiring spectacle of the court itself. This picture is still spellbinding after 1400 years, and we can easily imagine the extent to which its majestic grandeur had enthralled and overwhelmed contemporaneous visitors. The mention of the "Other" in the chapter's title attains significance later: one intriguing question is to what extent this type of cultural milieu was strange and unfamiliar to the Avar envoys. Again draw-



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ing from the literary sources, we also gain an idea of the opposite situation, of how a khagan would have received Byzantine envoys in his court.

The next chapter covers the khaganate's economy, with a focus on trade and exchange, illuminating how the delicate balance of these interactions was maintained for many decades – in part by invoking parallels drawn from more distant periods and regions – until its collapse in the wake of major political changes brought on by external events. The economy of the Avar Khaganate is a regrettably little-discussed and neglected subject and thus the examples and parallels as well as potential models reviewed here provide many fresh perspectives for future research (cf. POHL 2018, 198–254).

Readers interested in the period's material legacy will find a wealth of information in the fifth chapter, in which various commodities used in different wakes of life are set in the context of the relations discussed in the book's previous sections: textiles, spices, vessels, coins, belt sets and jewellery. Abundantly illustrated examples are cited for highlighting the differences between articles produced in Byzantium, in Byzantine workshops, and locally made varieties, the latter being no less interesting and valuable for the period's scholarship. One intriguing issue regarding the flow of various commodities, and one to which there is no ready answer yet, is whether the elite of the Avar Khaganate exercised control over all types of exchanges or whether they solely controlled the distribution of luxury goods. Was the latter sufficient for maintaining its power? This question inevitably crops up in the case of the major Transdanubian centres such as Keszthely, Kölked and Budakalász (and their broader region), occupied by communities whose presence predated the arrival and settlement of the Avars (BÁLINT 2019, 175–239; GARAM 2018; HEINRICH-TAMÁSKA & STRAUB 2009; VIDA 2018).

The book's final chapter addresses various problems of the period's material record and the background to the deposition of its most lavish assemblages. Why do the most magnificent Avar-period articles date from the period that was quite clearly beset by decline, both in terms of politics and foreign relations? This anomaly has since long perplexed Avar studies. The meticulous study of the craftsmanship of the articles in question can contribute to answering this question and to enrich this issue with new details.

The book's greatest merit is undeniably that it immerses readers in the “century of gold”. This vivid and gripping narrative of the early Avar period will quite certainly have a positive impact on the period's scholarship and on our overall perception of this period. The elucidation and presentation of as many aspects of early medieval life as possible in a similar vein would be of immense importance. Given its highly readable and engaging narrative, the volume will be an enjoyable read for all interested in this period.

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