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SETTLEMENT, ECONOMY AND SOCIETY IN THE LATE BRONZE AGE IN EASTERN HUNGARY
The launch of a new project

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Our project investigates the socio-economic organization behind the observed – seemingly hierarchical – settlement patterns in the Late Bronze Age in the southern part of the Great Pannonian Plain. The aim of this project is to excavate parts of the Late Bronze Age fortified settlements of Csanádpalota-Földvár and Medgyesegyháza, Lagzi-dűlő based on a systematic research method we devised for the analysis of Late Bronze Age settlements in the region. The results of the analysis of Csanádpalota and Medgyesegyháza will be compared to those of the intensive research at the Late Bronze Age settlements of Makó–Rákos, Császárvár and Csanádalberti, Fekete-halom. Through the comparative analysis of the results, we will get a comprehensive view of the subsistence economy and social characteristics of these Late Bronze Age settlements and their networks. A further aim of the project is to launch the non-destructive prospection of similarly dated fortified settlements in the southern part of Hajdú-Bihar County for comparative purposes (Kokad, Pocsaj). Through multidisciplinary, scientific analyses we hope to get a better understanding of certain economic aspects of LBA life: control over work force, craft specialization and the organization of food production.

Keywords: Late Bronze Age, settlement patterns, fortified settlements, economy

INTRODUCTION

The Bronze Age in the Carpathian Basin witnessed a series of major socio-political changes throughout its almost 2000-year-long history between ca. 2600 and 800 BC. One such major transformation can be observed at the beginning of the middle phase of the Late Bronze Age in Hungary, and one main evidence for these changes is the emergence of a system of fortified settlements in the southern part of the Great Pannonian Plain around between 1400 and 1300 BC. These settlements show a great concentration in a clearly definable area: in Hungary north of the Maros/Mureş River, in the so-called Békés-Csanád loessland (Lichtenstein & Rózsa 2008; Milo et al. 2009; Rózsa 2010; Priskin et al. 2013; Czukor et al. 2017; Szeverényi et al. 2017), in Romania in the plain regions of the Banat, in the area bordered by the Maros/Mureş, Tisza/Tisa and Timiş/Temes rivers (Gogâltan & Sava 2010, 52–71), and in Serbia in the eastern Voivodina, mostly along the Tisza (Molloy et al. 2017; 2020) (*Figs 1–2*).

Most of the settlements have been identified based on aerial photos and satellite images. Systematic research including field survey and excavation has been carried out only at a few sites. Based on the finds discovered so far, the construction of these earthworks can be dated to the middle phase of the Late Bronze Age (according to Hungarian terminology), to the so-called Pre-Gáva/Cruceni-Belegiš II horizon (ca. 1350–1100 BC).

The size of these fortified settlements varies considerably. Most of them have a size of only a few hectares, but at least five sites (Corneşti–Iarcuri, Csanádpalota–Földvár, Sântana–Cetatea Veche, Idjoš–Gradište, and Orosháza–Nagytatársánc) have an area of hundreds of hectares. The settlement of Corneşti–Iarcuri rises

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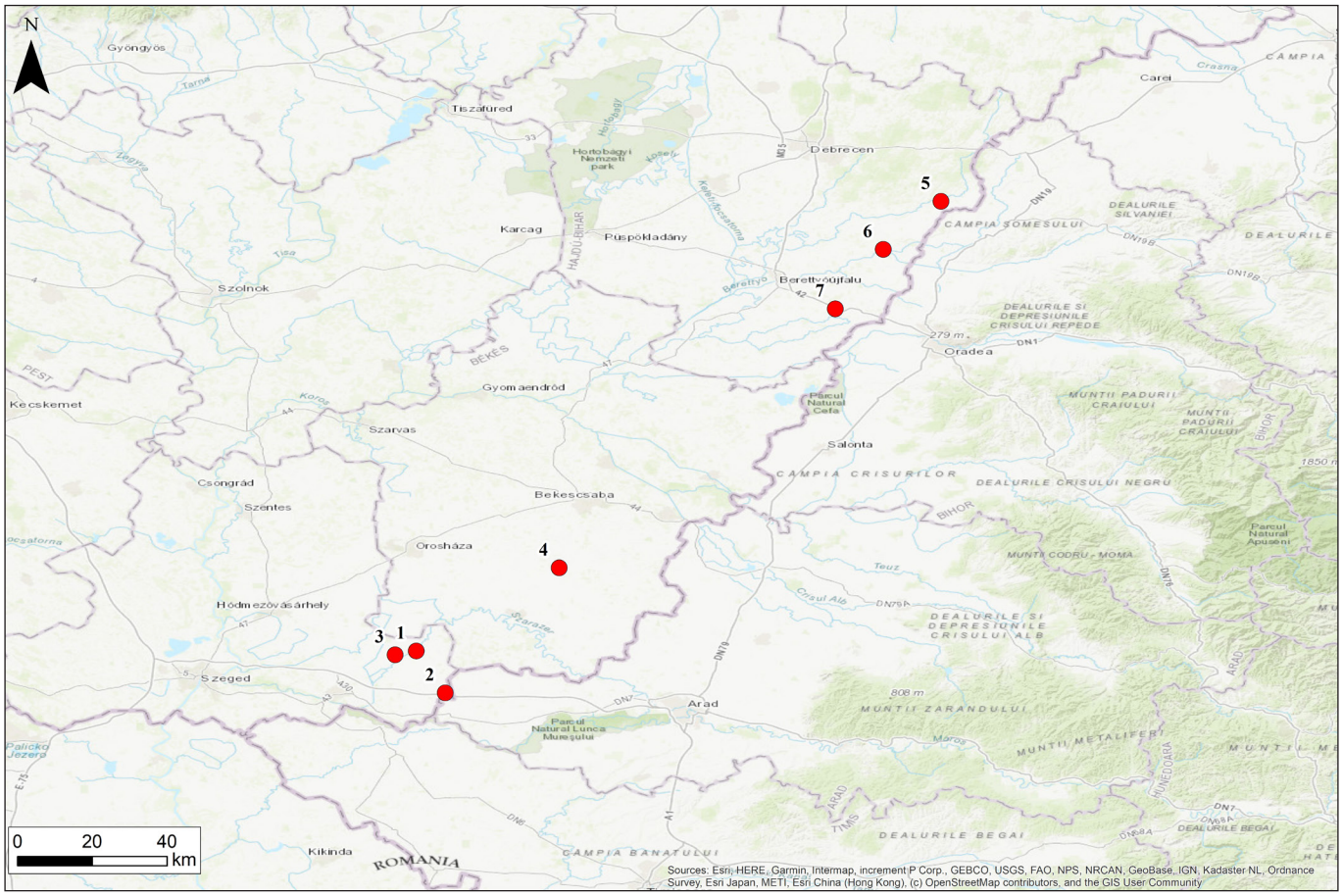

Fig. 1. Late Bronze Age sites investigated in our current project. Csongrád-Csanád and Békés county: 1. Csanádalberti–Fekete-halom, 2. Csanádpalota–Földvár, 3. Makó–Rákos–Császárvár, 4. Medgyesegyháza–Lagzi-dűlő. Hajdú-Bihar county: 6. Kokad–Akol-dűlő, 7. Pocsaj–Temető, 8. Biharkeresztes Fekete-tanya

above all of them with its extension of more than 1700 hectares. Beside their size, these settlements differ from each other with regard to the structure of their systems of ramparts and ditches (simple or multivallate).

The settlements of various sizes and structure may form a hierarchical settlement network. 'Mega-sites' with complex enclosures can be seen as primary centres, perhaps the residences of the elite of a polity of the given micro-region. Smaller and simpler secondary centres (smaller fortified settlements) surround them, such as Makó–Rákos–Császárvár or Végegyháza–Zsibrik-domb in Hungary; they might have been the residences of the local elites. They are in turn surrounded by small, non-fortified hamlets or farmsteads, identified in considerable numbers during full coverage surveys in Hungary, primarily in Csongrád County, but some are known in Romania as well.

While such a hierarchical image of this network of settlements may seem convincing from a certain point of view, identifying these sites as the fortified residence of the local and regional elite remains problematic. This would mean, for example, that the enclosures had a defensive purpose; this, however, has not yet been proven. In the case of the 'mega-forts', their external enclosures are so long that they would be indefensible in the case of an attack, even if they had a rampart. We may assume this function only in the case of the innermost areas, enclosed by a double ditch and a rampart in Csanádpalota. Another possible function is that of a fold to keep animals. However, much smaller enclosures would have sufficed for this, which could have been built in less time and with less effort. In some cases, based on the surprisingly small number of finds from field surveys, the lack of unambiguous house remains, and the presence of structured depositions in unusual pits, they may be interpreted as non-residential ritual centres occupied or used only seasonally or during specific periods. However, these different 'functions' do not necessarily exclude each other, and further research at each individual site will be needed to better understand their character. We may never-

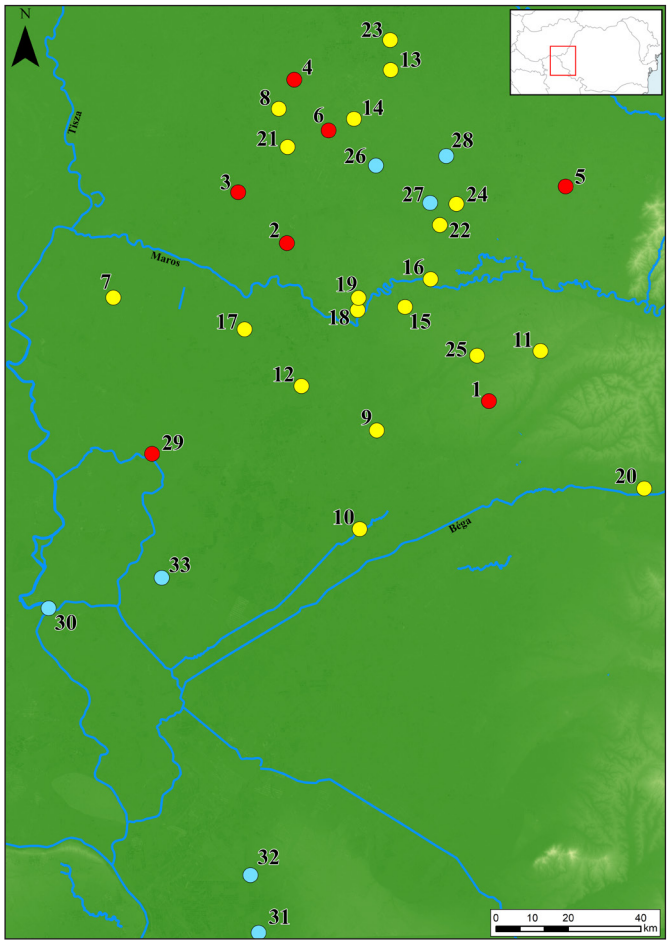

Fig. 2. Late Bronze Age fortified settlements in the southern Great Pannonian Plain. Red dots: excavated: 1. Corneşti–Iarcuri, 2. Csanádpalota–Földvár, 3. Makó–Rákos–Császárvár, 4. Orosháza–Nagytatársánc, 5. Sântana–Cetatea Veche, 6. Végegyháza–Zsibrik-domb. Yellow dots: surveyed: 7. Beba Veche, 8. Békéssámson–Szőlősi-Határ-dűlő, 9. Biled–Câmpia Arsă, 10. Cenei, 11. Friteaz–Ţârvenca, 12. Lovrin, 13. Medgyesegyháza–Lagzi-dűlő, 14. Mezőkovácsháza–Kis-Ádáz-dűlő, 15. Munar–Wolfsberg, 16. Pecica–Şanţu Mic, 17. Sânnicolaul Mare, 18. Semlac–Livada lui Onea, 19. Semlac–Pusta lui Cucu, 20. Topolovăţu Mare, 21. Tótkomlós–Szőlősi-határ-dűlő, 22. Turnu–La Prioran, 23. Újkígyós–Örök-dűlő, 24. Variaşu Mare, 25. Vinga. Blue dots: uncertain: 26. Battonya–Tompapuszta, 27. Battonya–Vörös-dűlő, 28. Kisdombegyháza–Szederjes-dűlő. New sites from Voivodina: 29. Idjoš–Gradište, 30. Bordjoš, 31. Crepaja, 32. Kovačica, 33. Bašaid.

theless assume that the function of these enclosures was probably as much symbolic as practical, connected to the identity of the local population.

If we assume that these settlements were the fortified centres of political units, the residences of the socio-political elite, and/or were the ritual-ceremonial centres of these polities, then their appearance fits a long-term trend characterized by cyclical changes in settlement patterns – and probably in socio-political organisation. During the last part of the Early and in the Middle Bronze Age, the residence of the socio-political leaders was located in tell settlements and hillforts. These were mostly abandoned or destroyed by the beginning of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1450 BC), and were replaced by a dispersed settlement network in the Tumulus Grave Period. Around 1350 BC, this gave way to a new process of settlement nucleation, as a result of which the above-mentioned fortified settlements emerged.

The primary aim of our project is to gain a better understanding of the socio-economic make-up of Late Bronze Age communities in southeast Hungary through the comparative, micro-regional, multi-scalar, interdisciplinary analysis of archaeological remains from fortified and non-fortified settlements. Our approach is micro-regional, as we investigate Late Bronze Age settlements throughout the Békés-Csanád loessland, with special focus on the relationship between the sites. The project investigates Late Bronze Age remains, from the level of individual features and households to large regions from a landscape-archaeological perspective. The research is interdisciplinary as we use both archaeological procedures and numerous scientific methods to gain insight into Bronze Age life.

Before the current project, our work included large-scale preventive as well as and small-scale planned excavations at the monumental fortified settlement of Csanádpalota, and small-scale research projects and excavations at the fortified site of Makó–Rákos–Császárvár and at the unfortified settlement of Csanádalberti–Fekete-halom. We carried out both extensive field surveys and intensive, systematic surface collections in grids at these sites, while geoarchaeological coring was used to assess the structure of fortifications and the character of occupation, and geomagnetic prospection helped us identify targets for excavation. So far the same, systematic non-invasive methodologies were used at all sites to ensure the comparability of our data. In a 2017–2019 project, we carried out excavations at Csanádalberti–Fekete-halom, where part of a Late Bronze Age house with foundation ditches was unearthed (*Fig. 3*). As a ‘control group’, we included two Late Bronze Age fortified settlements from Hajdú-Bihar county to the north as well, where we have recently begun non-invasive research (*Figs 4–5*).

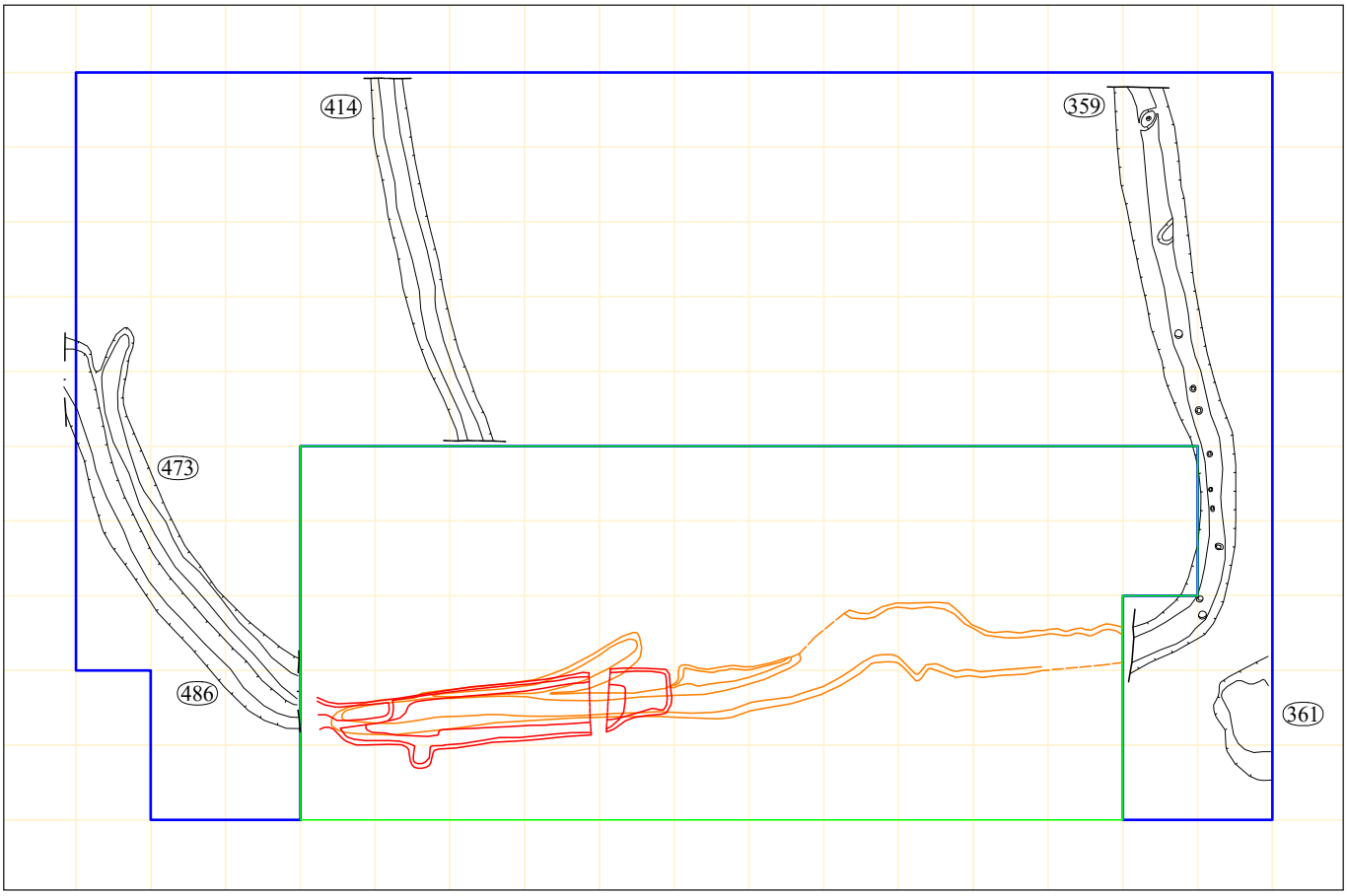

Fig. 3. Late Bronze Age house with a foundation trench at Csanádalberti–Fekete-dűlő

Fig. 4. The Late Bronze Age fortified settlement of Kokad–Akol-dűlő (Google Earth)

Fig. 5. The Late Bronze Age settlement of Pocsaj–Temető (Google Earth)

AIMS AND METHODS

Our main research questions focus on the socio-economic organization that is reflected by the Late Bronze Age settlement pattern in the southern part of the Great Pannonian Plain. Do differences in size reflect functional differences between settlements, with different roles in the settlement hierarchy, or was there a more complementary, heterarchical arrangement? Our primary focus is the study of the organization of some major aspects of the economic life of these communities.

Our method for primary data collection is small-scale, targeted excavation at two sites: Csanádpalota–Földvár and Medgyesegyháza–Lagzi-dűlő. The aim is to identify and investigate dwellings and habitation areas in the centre of both sites. At Medgyesegyháza, the excavations are preceded by a systematic field survey, geomagnetic prospection and geoarchaeological coring.

The findings of our earlier excavations at three sites (Csanádpalota–Földvár, Makó–Rákos–Császárvár, Csanádalberti–Fekete-halom) will provide comparative material for further multidisciplinary analyses. These will revolve around three major issues: construction works (enclosures and houses/household units), craft specialization and organization (pottery manufacture, stone tool production and use) and subsistence (zoology, botany, analysis of pottery and of macrolithic tools, and residue analysis).

FIRST RESULTS

Our project was launched in September 2020, and here we provide a brief summary of our progress. First, we continued the non-invasive research at Medgyesegyháza, where we conducted field surveys and geophysical prospection. The large amount of Late Bronze Age pottery found on the surface indicates intensive occupation in most of the area. The geomagnetic image provides a clear picture of the structure of the enclosures, the location of a number of large features, and may indicate the location of a few larger buildings in the east (*Fig. 6*). These will be the targets of our future excavations at the site in the next two years.

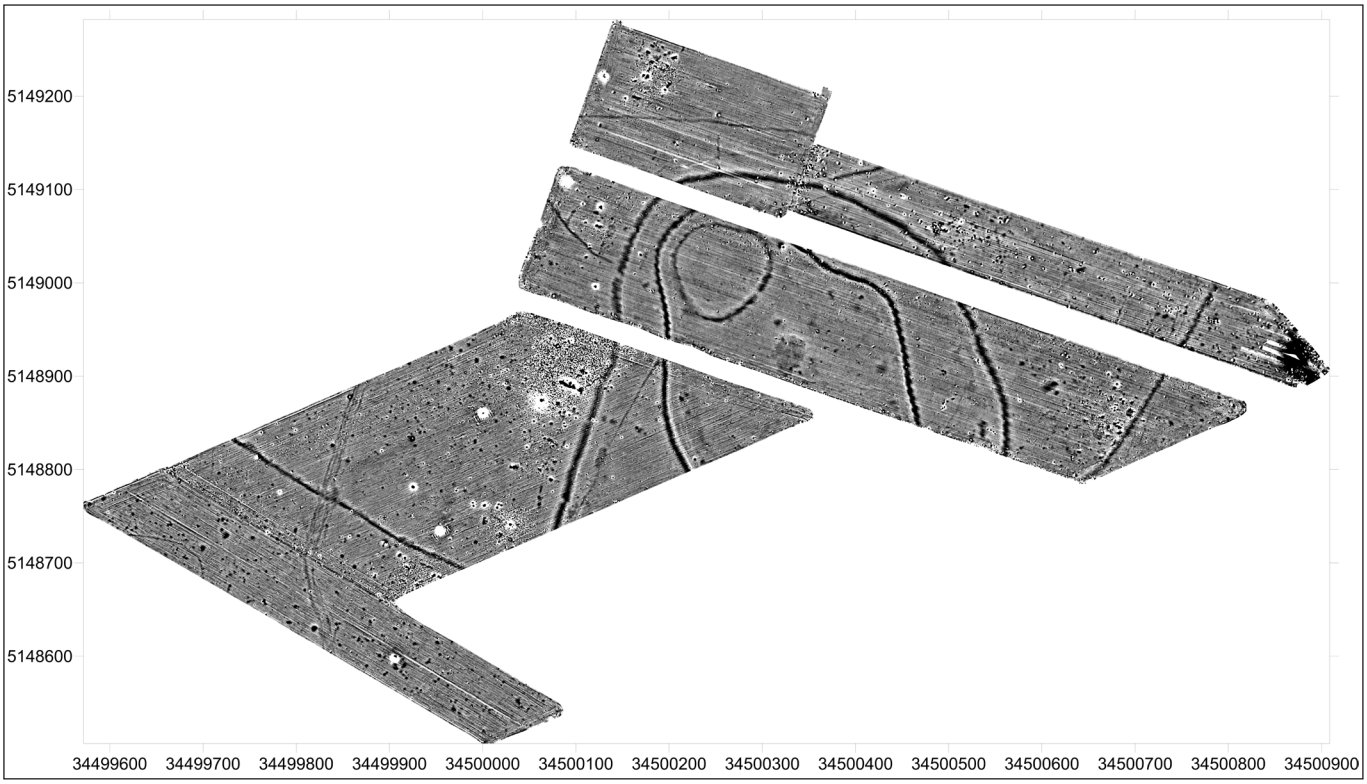

Fig. 6. Geomagnetic survey at Medgyesegyháza–Lagzi-dűlő

At Csanádpalota–Földvár, where the field survey and the geomagnetic survey had already been carried out in the previous years, we started the project with a small-scale targeted excavation aiming at an area where the geomagnetic survey showed anomalies arranged in a rectangular shape (*Fig. 7*). We opened a 10×10 m trench above what we hoped to be a Late Bronze Age house, but the excavation did not confirm our interpretation of the geomagnetic image. Although we did not recover any structural remains or archaeological features, we did find a layer that yielded a large amount of Late Bronze Age sherds, with *in situ* remains of vessels of various sizes that had broken into pieces there (*Fig. 8*). While the interpretation of these findings remains unclear for the time being, their presence indicates that despite the scarcity of surface finds, an abundance of archaeological material can be expected in the centre of the site. These finds do not yet help us identify the character of the occupation and the activities carried out there (e.g. remains of feasting?), but they do seem promising and obviously require further field work.

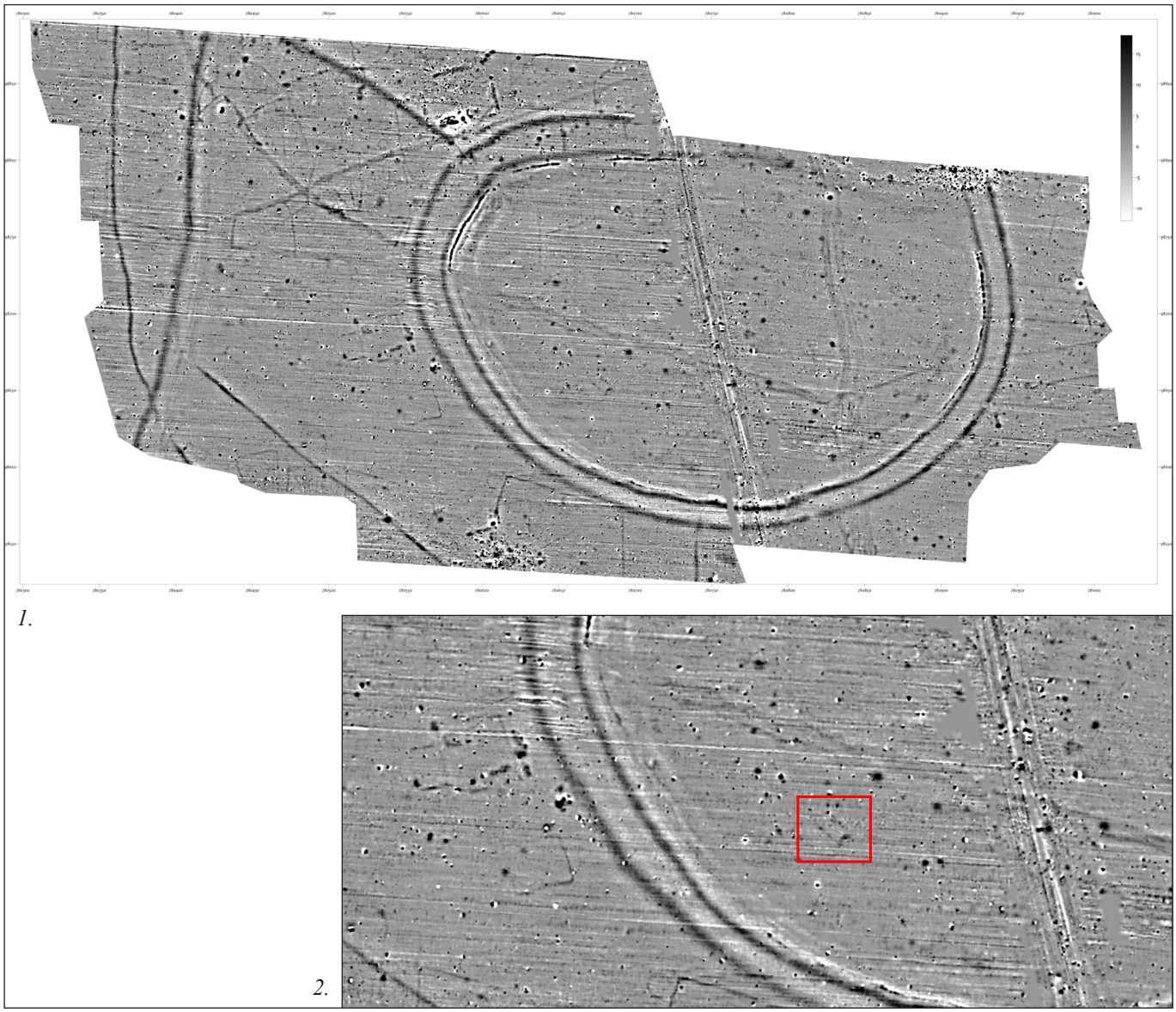

Fig. 7. 1. The geomagnetic survey of the central area of Csanádpalota–Földvár; 2. rectangular anomaly

Our project will continue with further excavations at Csanádpalota and Medgyesegyháza in the following years, and we hope that our results will be of scholarly significance. On the regional level, it will contribute to our understanding of the emergence of a 'fortified landscape' and 'mega-forts' in the Late Bonze Age in the Great Pannonian Plain (Harding 2017, 12–13). Hopefully, it will also yield important new data and contribute to the ongoing polemic about the nature of Bronze Age societies and the role of the assumed 'elite' and 'chiefs' in the organization of the social and economic life in the period. In general, we hope that our project will contribute to the integration of anthropological theories into multi-scalar research and thus increase Hungarian engagement with anthropological approaches to long-term social change.

Fig. 8. Layer with pottery deposition at Csanádpalota–Földvár

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