

FIRST KINGS OF EUROPE - LEADERSHIP AND INEQUALITY IN PREHISTORIC SOUTH-EAST EUROPE.

International conference in the Hungarian National Museum, 26–28 April 2023

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In the beginning, there was a “Big Idea” about the First Kings exhibition (as it was called by Susan Neill, Exhibition planning director at the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History) that emerged some eight years ago. Since that time, countless difficulties crossed the road for the American organisers and their many partners across the Carpathian Basin and South-east Europe: stages of hope and stages of stagnation, and then the Covid pandemic put the process on ice for a longer period. Yet, the strong will of all the participant experts came over in the end, and the exhibition could be opened first in New York in September 2022 and then, beginning in late March this year, in [Chicago](#).² This collection has been put together to highlight millennia of European prehistory, from egalitarian societies to complex hierarchies, from the early Neolithic to the Iron Age. The exhibition gathers more than 700 exquisite objects from eleven countries — including jewellery, weapons, armour, and more — that have never been shown together before and seem to be a sensation in the United States. It goes without saying that an important exhibition like this never stands alone: several accompanying events have been organised during the time of its tour among important museums. One of these “fringe” events was a series of online lectures organised by one of the partner institutions, the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World at New York University. In this row, the international [conference](#) hosted and organised by another partner institution, the Hungarian National Museum, can be seen as an outstanding highlight.



Fig. 1. Abstract book and design of the conference (source: Facebook profile of the National Institute for Archaeology of the Hungarian National Museum)

The conference,³ wearing the same title as the exhibition, also had the very same topic in focus: the emergence (or ubiquitous nature?) of social inequality over the later prehistoric periods between the late 7th millennium and the 7th–6th centuries BC. Certainly, like all social structural processes in human history, inequality has been manifested in many different ways and variants. The main focus of the conference was to shed light on precisely some of these compound processes.

After the official opening speeches, given by Gábor Virágos, Director of the National Archaeological Institute of the Hungarian National Museum, Susan Neill, Exhibition planning director in the Chicago

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² After Chicago, the exhibition is planned to open in a third venue, in the Canadian Museum of History Gatineau in Quebec, Canada, in April 2024.

³ About the exhibition and the conference, see a report with William A. Parkinson and Attila Gyucha in [Magyar Narancs](#) and another, by the Hungarian organisers, in [Magyar Múzeumok](#).

Field Museum, the local organisers, Szilvia Fábíán and Gábor J. Tarbay, and William A. Parkinson and Attila Gyucha, the archaeologists who dreamed up and created the First Kings exhibition. Some theoretical baselines of the development, nature, and forms of inequality were summarised from hunter-gatherer sharing societies until the necessary stages of organisation of larger groups of people. Two presentations were chosen here, one about the late neolithic tell settlement orbit in the Alföld region (by Pál Raczky and colleagues) and one about the profound changes in social complexity after the rise of Bronze Age societies by Kristian Kristiansen. Each of the following three sessions focused on one of the large prehistoric eras: the Neolithic, the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age. Among the invited speakers, William A. Parkinson and Attila Gyucha gave an account of their decades-long project in South-east Hungary; Eszter Bánffy presented her former results from Southern Transdanubia, while Szilvia Fábíán focused on the Chalcolithic, right before the onset of the Early Bronze Age in the Carpathian Basin. Next came Bronze Age talks and reports, presented by János Dani with colleagues, Florin Gogâltan, and Mario Gavranović, while Gábor J. Tarbay, Botond Rezi, Hrvoje Potrebica and Matija Črešnar presented a strong session on Late Bronze Age and Iron Age metal hoards and related power structures in various regions of Central and South-east Europe. Among the numerous presenters from Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, and Germany, Dusan Borić (from Rome and New York) gave an excellent theoretic baseline for a better understanding of some aspects of inequality.

All sessions were rounded up with panel discussions led by Vajk Szeverényi, Eszter Bánffy, Gabriella Kulcsár, and Zoltán Czajlik, respectively, with many of the speakers on the podium. While the topics also concentrated on the process that eventually led to the “first kings” as the conference (and the exhibition) title promised, it was also possible to pinpoint special shades and theoretical questions around the main theme.

Each conference has scientific merits; yet, social programmes around it often become, on the rule, perhaps equally important. This time, both the hosting Hungarian National Museum ensured the frames of friendly talks with nice food and wine and the breweries close to the Museum served as excellent venues for exchanging thoughts and forging plans for new collaborations. After all, all participants enjoyed the marvellous feeling of being physically together at last, after long years of pandemics and isolation.



Fig. 2. Organisers and presenting participants of the conference (source: Facebook profile of the National Institute for Archaeology of the Hungarian National Museum)