

REMARKS ON AN EXHIBITION OPENED IN THE NIGHT

A glimpse into the past. The centuries of the Bronze Age in Zala County

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*The building of the Thúry György Museum in Nagykanizsa, under 5 Fő Street, hosted a huge crowd, conversations, folk dance, theatrical plays, jazz music, and fire jumping from 16 to 24 hours on 22 June 2024. Simultaneously, visitors could participate in guided tours (Figs. 1–2). This was the main venue of the well-known and popular Museum Night event in the town. As part of the programme, the author of this paper welcomed the visitors and opened the temporary exhibition entitled *A Glimpse into the Past—Centuries of the Bronze Age in Zala County*. The following is a reworked and completed version of the opening speech.*

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I would like to start with a T-shirt (Fig. 3) with a symbolic meaning to refer to the night, magic, pagan times, and Midsummer Night. The summer solstice: the light, perhaps the Moon, the white, the silver. The female principle. The duality present in the mythology of all ancient peoples and world religions. This was no different in the Bronze Age.

The T-shirt has the name of Hallstatt, a town in Austria, written on it. The salt mined there, in the Alps about 400 km away, has always been key in seasoning food and preserving meat; thus, it was a traded good already in Bronze Age Europe. Some lucky finds of salt lumps have been discovered on the outskirts of Lébény and near Győr during the rescue excavations preceding the construction of Motorway M1 a couple of decades ago. Analyses to identify the provenance of these finds have yet to be carried out.

But when was this Bronze Age exactly? In the Carpathian Basin, between 2,800–2,600 and 800–750 BC. But it started a few centuries earlier in the territory of Greece and a few centuries later in the area that is Denmark today.

It is divided into Early, Middle, and Late Bronze Age. It was named after an artificial material, an alloy of copper and arsenic and, later, tin or, rarely, antimony, which influence its hardness, melting point, colour, and shine. Copper mines operated in the Carpathian Basin in the mountains of today's Slovakia, western



Fig. 1. Opening event of the exhibition and the visitors, with Csilla Száraz and Gábor Ilon on the stage (photo by Zoltán Hohl, Thúry György Museum in Nagykanizsa)



Fig. 2. Csilla Száraz guiding a night tour. On the right: bronze artefact from the Oltárc hoard in the first room of the exhibition (photo by Zoltán Hohl, Thúry György Museum in Nagykanizsa)

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Romania, and in the Eastern Alps around Mittelberg in Austria. Tin was obtained from the territory of today's Czech Republic and the faraway mines in the Pyrenean Peninsula and the British Islands.

The exhibition on the first floor of the museum building covers the history of the Late Bronze Age in the territory of the county, focusing primarily on the last 600–650 years, representing about 18–20 generations. Archaeologists refer to this era as the 'Hallstatt A-B Period', the time of the so-called 'Urnfield Culture'. The name is a fruit of the German scientific approach at the end of the 19th century when research focused mainly on funerary rites.

Around 1,600 BC, the connection networks facilitating the circulation of salt and ores became completed with new routes for the amber trade, linking the Baltic territories with the Balkans, Mycenae, Crete, and Sardinia. A mark of this route network is the Late Bronze Age (early Urnfield Period, or Hallstatt A) amber necklace found in Zalaszentmihály–Pötréte. From the 14th century BC, the attire of the elite included, besides gold and amber accessories and jewellery, blue and green glass beads originating from Egypt or Mesopotamia or produced by workshops in the Po Valley in northern Italy. Such a bead (a blue one) was discovered pulled on a piece of jewellery in a gold treasure in Várvölgy–Nagyláz-hegy, a 160-hectare hillfort settlement, the biggest such site of the Urnfield Culture in Hungary.

The first time in history when Europe was united in some sense also started around 1,600 BC, at the time of the Tumulus Culture; the phenomenon is marked in the archaeological record by the emergence of measures of value and the presence of identical symbols in extensive areas. A great example of these earliest standards of value is the so-called 'ring-money' in the Oltárc hoard (on display in the exhibition), while the shared symbols, the sun and moon representations, commonly appeared on accessories, jewellery, and vessels. The vessel from Nagykanizsa–Bilkei dűlő, with three inlaid silver circles on its shoulder, is unique to the archaeological record of the period in Hungary. The public in the EU countries could become familiar with this Bronze Age cultural unit through a grand exhibition series entitled *L'Europe au temps d'Ulysse. Dieux et Héros de l'Âge du Bronze (Gods and Heroes of Bronze Age Europe—The Roots of Odysseus)*, held in Copenhagen, Bonn, Paris, and Athens. The lands in the western region of the Carpathian Basin, including today's Zala County, the watercourses arriving there from the Alps and the West, the roads accompanying them, and the Amber Road that crosses these all were part of this European unit.



Fig. 3. A T-shirt from the Hallstatt Museum
photo by the author)



Fig. 4. Detail of the second room of the exhibition, with the arm spirals from Zalaszentiván in the showcase on the left (photo by Zoltán Hohl, Thúry György Museum in Nagykanizsa)

The artefacts displayed in the three rooms of the exhibition come from the collection of the Thúry



Fig. 5. Detail of the third room of the exhibition with reconstructed graves from the Zalakomár cemetery (photo by Zoltán Hohl, Thúry György Museum in Nagykanizsa)



Fig. 6. Detail of the second room of the exhibition with a selection of finds from Bilkei-dűlő and a building model (photo by Zoltán Hohl, Thúry György Museum in Nagykanizsa)

Museum in Nagykanizsa or lent by the Göcsej and Balaton Museums. Visitors have an opportunity to take a close look at the huge arm spirals from Zalaszentiván (Fig. 4) and assorted finds from deposits unearthed at Oltárc, Szentgyörgyvár, and Várvölgy: axle caps, axes, hammers, brooches, simple pins, and bowls. Besides pottery vessels, settlement records include spindle whorls and the bones of the consumed animals. Another find of international interest, the remains of the Bronze Age wild strawberry cake found at Balatonmagyaród, are also on display. This lucky find is one of the oldest known prehistoric desserts; its recipe, including the ingredients and the way of preparation, were reconstructed through scientific analyses. Among the exhibited cemeteries, the one unearthed at Zalakomár must be highlighted because of a grave that contained a sword—such burials are fairly rare in the nearby areas of the Urnfield Culture. Besides, the originals of the reconstructed graves in the exhibition were also excavated at Zalakomár.

While the selected artefacts certainly raise the interest of any non-professional visitor, the exhibition also includes reconstructions (of men's and women's garments, a pyre, and graves) to make sure they spend quality time there and enjoy it (Fig. 5). The model of the building unearthed at Nagykanizsa–Bilkei-dűlő is clear and reflects quality craftsmanship (Fig. 6). It would be great if the conical bronze sheet from Oltárc, the flagship artefact of the exhibition, appearing on both the invitation and the poster of the exhibition, could be displayed fastened to a cuirass made of tanned hide; however, I must admit that in light of the financial possibilities of the museum, such an expectation is unrealistic. I must add a minor remark here: the letters in some text and some survey maps are too small, which may hinder visitors, professional or non-professional, in delving into the details.

The curators of the exhibition were archaeologist Csilla Száraz and archaeozoologist Beáta Szmodics-Tugya. The objects were photographed by József Bicskei and Zoltán Hohl and drawn by Edit Ambrus. Zsolt Nyári crafted the garment reconstructions, István Eke made the GIS-based maps, and Zoltán Czajlik took the aerial photos. Other graphics, the invitation card, and the poster of the exhibition (with the creative 'looking eye') are the works of József Balogh.

Regrettably, the project yielded no printed or online version which could be cited in scientific publications; such a work, especially in languages other than Hungarian, would be expected to attract particular attention from the international audience. Csilla Farkas edited a rather informative, well-illustrated volume with minor papers on the finds of the era in the region. Altogether 1,142 visitors viewed this small volume in the past almost-whole-decade (up to 1 July 2024) since its publication only on the academia.edu page of the author of this paper, indicating that the material of this exhibition has had its own life and has been cited in publications around the world. I hope that groups of archaeology and history students from the univer-

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sities of nearby Zagreb and Ljubljana will come and visit our exhibition. Besides, local tourism may also benefit from it, as it will be open to visitors until the summer of 2025.

It gives me great pleasure that this exhibition is not the last in the series on the archaeological finds of the western part of the Carpathian Basin. The first one presented figurines (*Wonderful Beauties*, 2007), followed by a *Time snail* in Szombathely (2011), a short temporary exhibition on tumuli in Győr (2022), and the topic of this paper in 2024. Next might be *Camille* in Baja (Eastern Hungary) on a Middle Bronze Age Koszider Period find... but that must be left for another review.

RECOMMENDED LITERATURE

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