

## IN PURSUIT OF LOST TIMES – FROM HUNTER-GATHERERS TO HUNGARIAN CONQUERORS IN THE LAND OF BUDAPEST

### Museological challenges and solutions in the making of the new permanent exhibition in the Castle Museum of the Budapest History Museum

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Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 13. (2024) Issue 3, pp. 58–64.

*A new permanent exhibition presenting the prehistoric and Migration Period archaeological relics discovered in the territory of the Hungarian capital was opened on the second floor of the Castle Museum of the Budapest History Museum (BTM) in Buda Castle on 30 May 2024. The exhibition, also marking the 150th anniversary of the merging of Pest, Buda, and Óbuda, features the most important and interesting items from the BTM's collections. Its timeframe spans thousands of years: the oldest exhibits are stone tools made by the first prehistoric inhabitants of the area, while the youngest ones have been left behind by the first Hungarians residing there. This article offers a behind-the-scenes look at how this exhibition was created, highlighting the dilemmas and challenges one faces when making an exhibition today and presenting an overview of the methodological, technical, educational, and other aspects of our work.*

The exhibition fills a gap, but it is not the first to do so: in its design and building, we could benefit from the lessons and experiences of the previous permanent exhibition, entitled *Ancient Peoples, Antique Cultures – The History of Budapest from Prehistory to the End of the Avar Period*, on display from 1998 to 2020. The exhibition area is a multifunctional space, and it has been used in ways other than hosting temporary exhibitions in the past four years.

The new permanent archaeological exhibition aims to present the pre-medieval periods of the history of Budapest, focusing almost exclusively on the prehistoric and Migration Period archaeological record of the city. This selective approach is due to the absence from the recent exhibitions of BTM (and Budapest in general) of the significant find material and knowledge accumulated about these two major periods. The archaeological record of the Roman Period has been present, largely in the Aquincum Museum and Archaeological Park and its associated external exhibition sites, while that of the Middle Ages was on display in previous permanent exhibitions in the Castle Museum. In one of these, entitled *Budapest – Light and Shadow. 1000 Years of History of the Capital*, prehistory, and the Roman and Migration periods have been briefly introduced with some short texts and a few display cases. Thus, the countless millennia of prehistory and the shorter but more turbulent Migration Period, together with the daily life of the peoples who lived in the area of Budapest then, have so far remained invisible to those interested in our past. The title of our exhibition, inspired by the *À la recherche du temps perdu* [In Search of Lost Time] by Marcel Proust, refers to this hiding beneath the surface and invisibility both physically and figuratively—as, in contrast to antiquity and the Middle Ages with their well-known architectural heritage, the two historical periods in its focus have left no visible traces or relics in our region.

When designing the exhibition, our primary goal was to present the most spectacular and eloquent artefacts of the ancient past of the Hungarian capital and convey the best of our accumulated knowledge in a new guise by exploiting the full potential of 21st-century technical possibilities to meet the demand of visitors and provide an entertaining experience for everyone from the youngest to the oldest.

The space available for the exhibition was severely limited by the need to provide access to the ‘*Hauszmann Story*’, a temporary exhibition (by Várkapitányság Ltd) in the other wing of the building, as well

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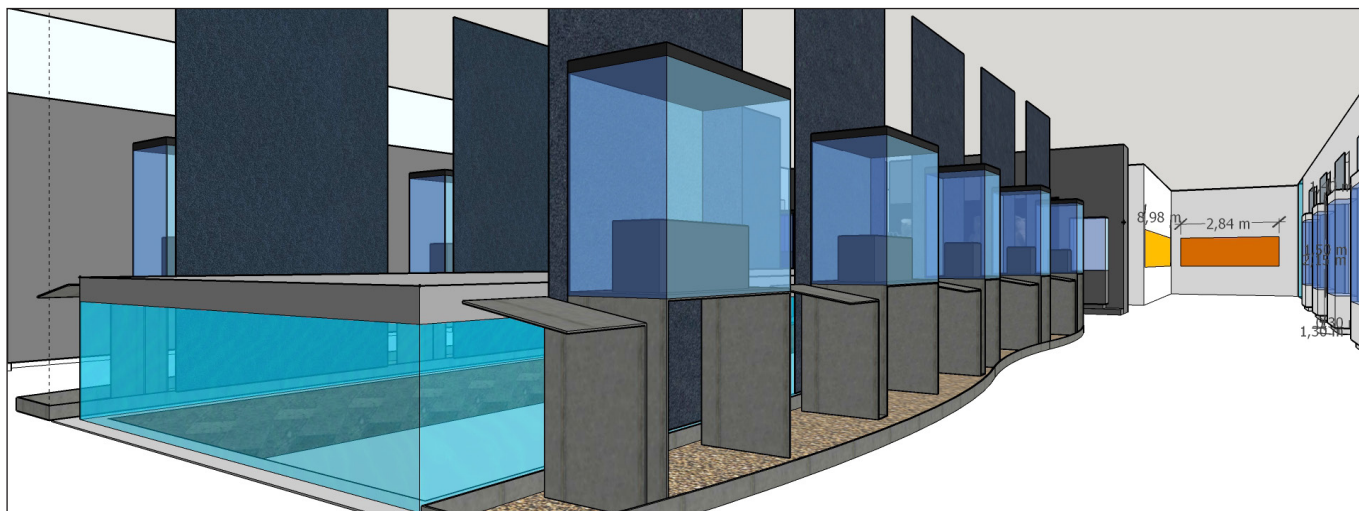


Fig. 1. Detail of the visual design of the exhibition (by Nándor Révész)

as to the toilets, lifts, and the first floor, while also ensuring that all office rooms remain accessible. The total floor area around the staircase in the middle of the rectangular room, together with the elongated corridor-like space in front of the lifts, was about 266 m<sup>2</sup>. This space is between the open *Oroszlános udvar* [Lions' Court] in the northwest and the glass-roofed *Barokk udvar* [Baroque Hall] in the southeast, which provide it with natural light from both long sides. Accordingly, when designing the exhibition and deciding on the size and place of the showcases and other installations (e.g., displays for digital content), we had to consider the natural lighting of the exhibition room, as well as the need to leave some windows accessible and the passageways free for fire and accident prevention. This was particularly challenging in the case of the showcases along the outer walls: the depth of these is small by necessity, but they were designed to be as high and wide as possible and effective (i.e. the exhibited items are not too high), and most finds were fastened to their back walls. The plinths of the showcases are relatively low to make the most of the space available and to provide the best possible view for visitors; however, this design also limited the space available for texts.

After developing the structural framework of the exhibition (Fig. 1), single artefacts and artefact assemblages of different ages were selected based on a thematic order established by the curators. In addition to aesthetic considerations, we also sought to ensure that the selection represented all the periods concerned and reflected all kinds of human activity typical of the respective periods. Since the collections and the planned exhibition are linked to two separate institutional sites (Aquincum Museum and Castle Museum), the selected items were photographed, and each showcase's internal layout was designed in the respective institutions. The list of exhibits was finalised in this phase, with considerations to, besides their chronological positions, several other aspects (e.g., raw material and function). Next, the internal layout of the display cases, including planning the installation of every artefact, was finalised with Nándor Révész, project manager of the exhibition. These were only slightly modified later, during the fine-tuning of the showcases in the exhibition space.

The artefacts in the museum collections only required maintenance, while the conservation of some recently excavated finds was scheduled directly for the exhibition. A particular challenge was that, in order for the exhibition space to meet safety requirements, the objects on display were predominantly displayed on vertical surfaces, which meant a lot of extra installation, restoration, and maintenance work. Although the construction followed meticulous designs, even the building of the showcases brought several problems to be solved. We used blocks on horizontal surfaces and platforms, and metal and plexiglass pipes, and (in the lower zones) steel cantilevers fixed to the back walls of the showcases to use the spaces available as effectively as possible. During the installation of the finds, special attention had to be paid to choosing an installation type that fits their material (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Snapshots of the building of the exhibition (photos by Gábor Szilas, Farkas Márton Tóth)

The exhibition is divided into three major units: an introductory, a thematic, and a period-specific. The related showcases and installations have been clustered, but it was impossible to create a separate route to each unit in this single space.

The introductory section begins with the introductory wall opposite the staircase. This wall contains the main title and, under that, an animated timeline presenting the archaeological periods in the territory of Budapest. Each period is illustrated by a drawing of an exhibited artefact, accompanied by a well-known analogy that relies on the visitors' background knowledge. The display case right of the reception wall is entitled *There is nothing new under the sun*. It holds a recent find or find assemblage and its contemporary version. The content will be changed every year to highlight the link between the people of the present and the past and the timelessness of each innovation and design. The plinths of the reception wall and of the showcases of the period-specific part are 'rising' from a gravel bed lined with a wavy steel plate, the allegory of the Danube's bank, to emphasise the key role of the river in the history of the area (Fig. 3).

The long space on the right side of the exhibition room contains panels and maps with general information about the history of the prehistory and the Roman and Migration periods (eras of the conception and birth of the Hungarian capital), the characteristics and methodology of urban archaeology, and the relationships between the people who lived there and their environment. Particular emphasis is



Fig. 3. The introductory wall and the showcase on the Palaeolithic (photo by Nóra Szilágyi)

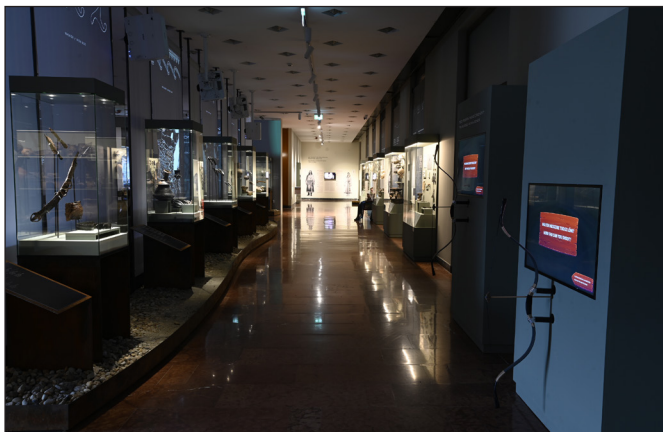


Fig. 4. Exhibition space with the period-specific (left) and thematic displays (right) and the installation presenting the Avar Period graves of Növény Street (on the short wall in the background) (photo by Nóra Szilágyi)



Fig. 5. Showcases presenting the Copper and the Bronze Age, respectively, with a snapshot of the animation about Late Bronze Age cremation on the banner between them (photo by Nóra Szilágyi)

placed on the favourable living conditions the natural environment and geomorphology of the area Budapest have represented. A slideshow of new and archival photos offers a glimpse into the fascinating world of urban excavations with their specific atmosphere and circumstances.

A separate wall houses the case study illustrating the complete process of archaeological research (*‘Buried, unearthed, revived’*). It shows life-size graphic reconstructions of a woman and a man buried in two recently excavated graves of the Avar cemetery in Növény Street, with the grave finds (jewellery and clothing accessories) fastened in small glass boxes to the places where they had been worn once. Infographics complement the drawings. The life-size reconstructions of the Avar woman and man incorporate anthropological results, observations on the relative positions of the appearing items in the graves, and the accumulated knowledge on the fashion of the period. Their aim is to bring past and present people as close as possible to help visitors connect with the presented periods and artefacts, thus accentuating the purpose of archaeology and the importance of protecting our common heritage. As the site with the two presented graves was excavated during the planning phase of the exhibition, it could be documented in a way that suits the special perspective of the exhibition, thus exploiting an excellent opportunity to present archaeological fieldwork. By viewing a slideshow of the photos of this documentation, visitors can follow the path of the exhibited artefacts starting from the first turn of the shovel (Fig. 4).

The furnishing in the central space was arranged in two concentric ‘rings’. The inner ring (around the staircase) consists of period-specific showcases with specially selected find assemblages, presenting, following the traditional concept of a chronological narrative, all major historical periods (*Palaeolithic, Neolithic, Copper Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman Imperial Period, Sarmatians, Huns and Germanic peoples, Avar Period, Hungarian Conquest Period*). The find assemblages and the animations projected onto the large banners next to the showcases figure the most important characteristics and innovations of each period. The upper zone of each banner (above the screen part) is decorated with a frieze composed of the most characteristic motifs of the respective period, decorating artefacts recovered preferably from the territory of Budapest.

To maintain the ease of the artefacts and arrangements and the contrast between the exhibits and the modern context in which they are presented, all finds possible were fastened to the back wall of the showcases with thin steel rods. The short animations were written and designed to connect with the presented artefacts in the respective showcases or the major innovations of the related periods. The screening of these scenes follows a programmed, asynchronous rhythm to make the experience more playful and dynamic (Fig. 5).

The third major unit of the exhibition comprises the thematic showcases and the related banners of the outer ‘ring’ along the walls of the room. These revolve around topics which are not related to any spe-

cific historical period, which contemporary people are also familiar with, and which thus may be right for reflecting on their interests: 1, social relations (*War and peace*); 2, food and resources (*'Game and fish and ev'ry dish'*); 3, life courses and genders (*A question of life and death*); 4, rituals, feasts, and beliefs (*'With prayers and vows I called upon the families of the dead'*); 5, traffic and travel (*Highways and byways*); 6, settlements, houses, households, and homes (*There's no place like home*); 7, occupations and professions (*Every man to his trade*); 8, trade, exchange, and gifts (*Giving and taking*); 9, dressing, attire, and beauty care (*Apparel makes a man*); and 10, animals and humans (*'All creatures great and small'*). In the lack of contemporary reports, the presented knowledge and experience were accumulated by communities of diverse cultures in various historical periods and deciphered solely from the archaeological record.

Natural lighting must have been diminished first to control the lighting of the exhibition room. Therefore, all but one window opening to the Lions' Court and the Baroque Hall was coated with tinted window film, and the banners were placed in front of them. All these banners can be rolled up when the room must be ventilated. The lighting of the showcases and the room was designed in the following step: all showcases were fitted with LED lights, and colour lamps were installed on the ceiling.

The upper zone of each banner (above the text) in the window openings is adorned with an artistic, modern graphic related to the presented content to raise visitors' interest and help them identify the topic in focus. To avoid the overburdening of the exhibition space and the showcases and to promote interactive communication, QR codes were applied to the plinth of each showcase, through which visitors can access additional information (reconstructions, images of scientific analyses, excavation photos, etc.). This solution was also applied to the showcase on the Roman Imperial Period, an era which, following the concept of the exhibition, gets unusually little space here compared to its role in the past of the city. In this case, the additional information draws attention to the rich archaeological record on display in the Aquincum Museum.

Most of the 700 exhibited objects are part of the Prehistoric and Migration Period Collection of BTM and the Archaeozoology Collection of the Aquincum Museum, while some are on loan from the Hungarian National Museum and the Natural History Museum. The exhibits include single finds (e.g., a Middle Palaeolithic mammoth jawbone from Remete–Upper-Cave and an Avar Period wooden bucket from Kőérberek), find assemblages (e.g., a treasure found at the amphitheatre of the civilian town and a Hungarian Conquest Period set of decorative collar mounts from Harsánylejtő), and thematic collections of finds (e.g., a Bell Beaker assemblage, a set of grave finds reflecting Celtic warrior identity, and brooches from the 5th–6th centuries AD). The largest showcase along the short wall opposite the entrance of the exhibition holds the biggest selection of (mainly settlement) pottery. Its arrangement imitates an open cupboard, where the most typical and frequent items of prehistoric and Migration Period settlements—tools and vessels of food and drink preparation and serving—are lined up, in chronological order from left to right, on three shelves (Fig. 6).

The visual and digital content was designed and prepared to meet 21st-century visitors' demand while contributing to a clean, stylish, and informative exhibition spiced up with beauty, adventure, and a pinch of mystery.

Although the main idea was to leave the traditional chronological-historical exhibition structure behind, we believed it important to give space to the basic chronological order of the main historical periods and the innovations linked to each because recently, the attention paid to these in public education has decreased



Fig. 6. The staircase and the stairs leading to the exhibitions on the first floor; with the thematic showcase presenting the material of prehistoric and Migration Period settlements at the short wall in the background (photo by Nóra Szilágyi)



Fig. 7. The game entitled *Try yourself as a gatherer!* is an entertaining way to learn for any age group (photo by Farkas Márton Tóth)

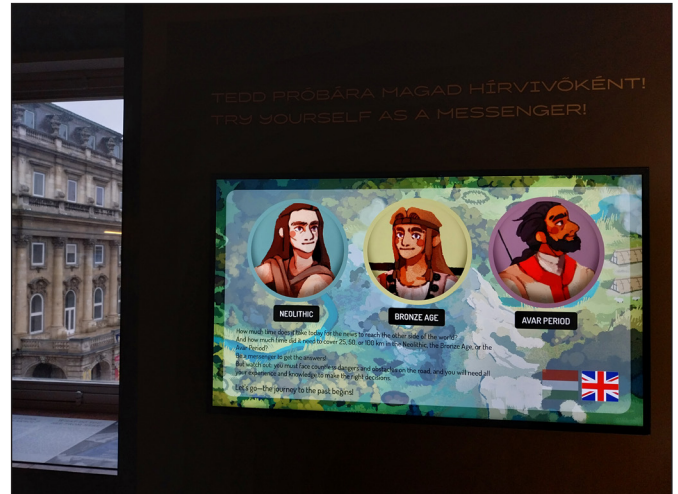


Fig. 8. Welcome screen of the game entitled *Try yourself as a messenger!* with the Lion's Courtyard of Buda Castle in the background (photo by Farkas Márton Tóth)

significantly. The animated timeline on the introductory wall is one of the elements destined to resolve this seeming contradiction. This animation not only illustrates the consecutive order of the periods in focus but also their timespans.

Whatever the topic, no exhibition can be made today without interactive elements, which are excellent tools to engage and inform visitors of the most diverse languages, ages, knowledge, and interests. The games in the exhibition were designed to meet these prerequisites and allow visitors to gain new knowledge (even subconsciously) while playing.

In the first game, '*Try to be a gatherer!*', the player goes for a food-gathering trip in a forest resembling the one-time natural environment of the territory of Budapest. The stakes are high, as the survival of the entire community depends on its success. The appearing edible, inedible, and poisonous fruits, seeds, and fungi are indigenous species that were present in the prehistoric Carpathian Basin. Pop-up info sheets containing valuable basic information help the visitors to learn about them (Fig. 7).

In the second game, entitled *Try yourself as a messenger!*, players can choose between the Neolithic, the Bronze Age, and the Avar Period and experience the challenges and dangers a messenger had to face to convey a message—in contrast to our modern world, when such a task hardly takes a few seconds. Along the journey, the 'messenger' has to choose between alternative solutions, while in some cases, pure luck decides on the success of the endeavour and the traveller's fate. The touchscreen game amalgamates the characteristics of board and role-playing games, while the visuals evoke the atmosphere of the chosen period in a fairytale-like world (Fig. 8).

Following the advice of our PR colleagues, besides digital games, some mixed solutions containing both digital and mechanical parts have been integrated into the exhibition: the archery game and



Fig. 9. The game entitled *Try yourself as an archer!* merges digital and mechanical elements for a memorable experience. Players can wield an iconic weapon to gain a deeper understanding of the past (photo by Farkas Márton Tóth)



Fig. 10. Shooting of a short video for the game ‘Try yourself as a craftsman!’ with Attila Kertész and Balázs Medve in the courtyard of the Aquincum Museum (photo by Farkas Márton Tóth)

case. When the player touches the field of an object, they first have to answer various questions about its function or how it was made, and then they can watch a short video with the correct answer. The videos were made with the contribution of several reenactors, experimental archaeology specialists, and archaeologists (Fig. 10).

Besides presenting the exceptional finds of the prehistoric and Migration Period archaeological heritage of the territory of Budapest, the exhibition disseminates a vast and varied body of knowledge. The presentation of the latest finds and findings resulting from the archaeological excavations of the past few decades in the territory of Budapest involved creating a representative selection of the thousands of objects recovered from the hectares of investigated areas in hundreds of excavations, illustrating the devotion and perseverance of our archaeologist, field technician, conservator, and other colleagues.

In addition to archaeology, another key feature of this exhibition is the inclusion of the results of many closely related disciplines and professions that help us discover and understand our past. To ensure that the presented knowledge is conveyed in a variety of ways and that the exhibition remains fresh and engaging, our public relations staff has organised events, programmes, and museum education activities (Fig. 11). We hope that visitors will enjoy viewing the exhibition as much as we have enjoyed creating it. We wish that it remains open for a long time, providing many of them with a memorable experience as the previous permanent exhibition did.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank their indispensable contribution to all our colleagues within and outside the BTM, our partners, and all who helped and encouraged us. We cannot be grateful enough to them for making our dream come to life through our joint efforts.

the quiz on crafts. Tactility and physical action are key elements in both. The game entitled *Try yourself as an archer!* includes two traditional recursive bows, installed onto a digital unit at heights suitable for adults and children, respectively, and a screen with interactive 3D animation. When the player pulls the bow and releases the ‘arrow’, a rod ending in a cylinder behind the wall, the software transforms the force and direction into trajectory data and visualises it as a flying arrow on the screen. The goal is to shoot as far as one can, encouraging visitors to compete (Fig. 9).

The last interactive element, ‘Try yourself as a craftsman!’ consists of copies of diverse finds mounted on the wall around a touch screen. The finds include a knapped stone blade, a spindle with spindle whorl, a fire steel, a bronze arrow point, a clay tuyere, and a needle with thread and a needle

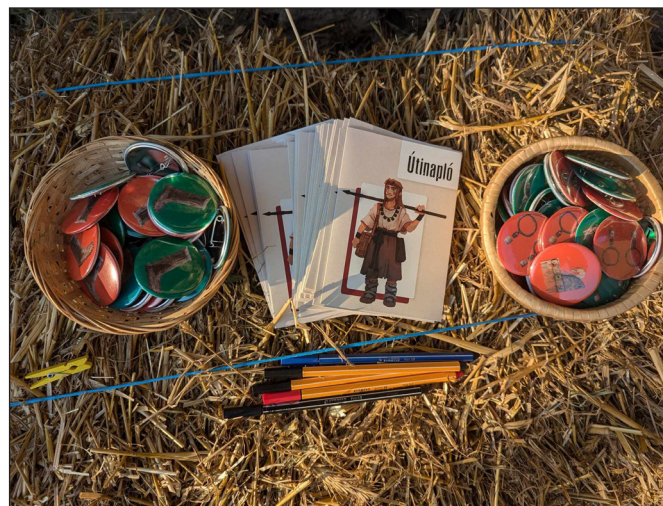


Fig. 11. Toys and merchandise made especially for the programme organised by our PR specialists for the Művészetek Völgye [Valley of Arts] festival (photo by Zsanett Abonyi)