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REVIEW

György Lengyel: Jégkori vadászok. A paleolitikum öröksége Magyarországon [Ice Age hunters. The heritage of the Palaeolithic in Hungary]

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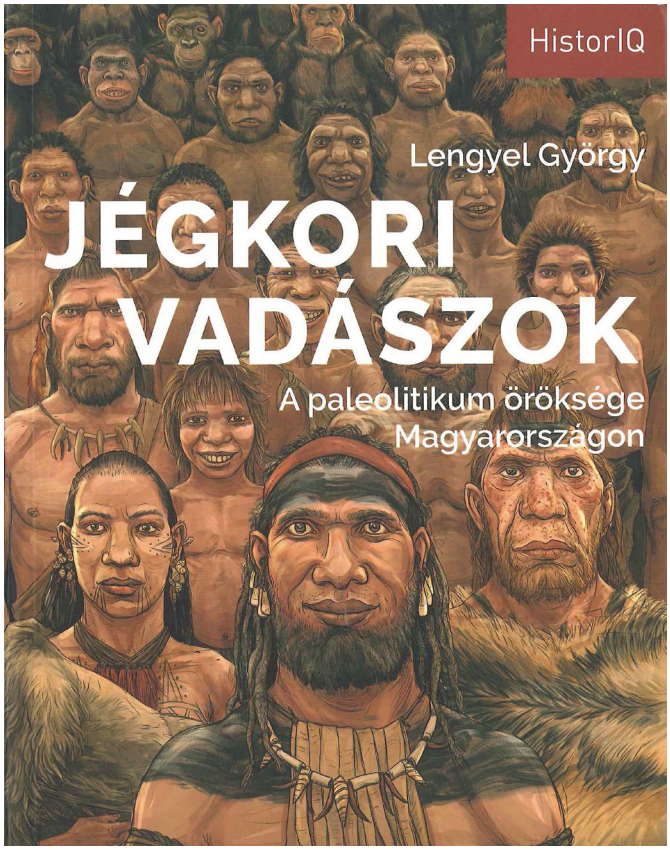
It seems to have become a tradition in Hungarian research on the Palaeolithic that every generation of researchers produces a summary for the interested public. The picture that emerged from the first decades of systematic research in Hungary, which began with the excavation of the Szeleta Cave in 1906, was presented by Jenő Hillebrand in 1935 in a archaeology series published by the National Museum. After the Second World War, new excavations and the results obtained by employing new research methods brought about a fundamental change in approach. The new general picture of the Palaeolithic in Hungary was surveyed for the public by Vera Gáboriné Csánk in her popular scientific book published by Gondolat Publishing House in 1980. In the following two decades, this summary had to be redrawn again in light of the changes in approach and methodology worldwide. The result of this work, this time focusing on North-Eastern Hungary, was published by Gyula Gyenis and his co-authors in a book published in Miskolc in 2001. The last two decades have seen such an explosive development and transformation in the study of the origins of man (human evolution) and the first great period of human history (Palaeolithic) that the time has ripened for a summary by the current generation of researchers. György Lengyel has taken on this task.



György Lengyel: Jégkori vadászok. A paleolitikum öröksége Magyarországon [Ice Age hunters. The heritage of the Palaeolithic in Hungary]. Illustrated by Áron Gauder. HistorIQ 1,

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As an archaeology student with a passion for the Palaeolithic, I was a student of Miklós Gábori. In one of our classes, he said to us something essential: studying the Palaeolithic in Hungary is only worth doing on an international level. He himself gave eloquent proof of that with his monograph published n 1976, in which he assessed the cultures and prehistoric processes of the Middle Palaeolithic on a European scale, from the Alps to the Ural Mountains. His comment means, on the one hand, that the problems of sites in the territory of today's Hungary must always be considered in a broader geographical context and in the light of the human cultural development of the period in question. On the other hand, it must be done with an eye on the results of international research, which in his time could mainly be achieved through personal contacts and by participating in international conferences and publications. Nowadays, we can also enter

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into collaborations internationally. György Lengyel's work is in every respect in line with the principle outlined and followed by Miklós Gábori.

Although the subtitle of *Ice Age Hunters* specifies that the book revolves around the Palaeolithic in Hungary, it becomes clear from the table of contents that it actually delivers much more than the basics. The brief introduction is followed by an overview of human evolution and the role of knapped stone tools in the process, as well as a summary of the biological evolution of the respective hominids and *Homo* species and the cultural development of humanity from the beginnings to the end of the Ice Age, also mentioning, as a kind of epilogue, Holocene hunter-gatherers. The main dating methods mentioned in the text are explained in an appendix; besides, notes and a bibliography help orientation. Overall, the book provides a complete picture of the earliest period of human prehistory while giving insight into the research methods underpinning our knowledge; additional information inserted in callout boxes facilitates understanding.

By only briefly mentioning the discovery and the subsequent debate in France that marked the dawn of the research into the Palaeolithic in Europe in the 19th century but discussing in detail the events of similar significance in Hungary (the discovery of the 'handaxes' under the Bársony House in Miskolc and the debate on the one-time presence of archaic humans in the territory of Hungary), the *Introduction* chapter clearly outlines the scope implied in the subtitle of the book. This focus remains consistent throughout the whole book and is one of its main values because it allows the reader to get a comprehensive picture of the prehistoric world, even though the finds from Hungary only make up a small part. Hungarian finds are skilfully used to present periods with no record in the territory of the country. For example, the 350,000-year-old knapped stones from Vértesszőlős double as the simple pebble tools made by *Homo habilis* in the early Palaeolithic, 2.6–1.5 million years ago. György Lengyel is able to tell the fascinating tale of human evolution in the Palaolithic in a way that the focus always remains, almost imperceptibly, on the Hungarian record, and blends its elements into the story so smoothly that the reader does not realise how incompletely they represent the whole picture. In this respect, the book is a perfect manifestation of Miklós Gábori's principle.

The Palaeolithic stretches from the appearance of the first knapped stone tools (as we know it today) 3.3 million years ago to the end of the Pleistocene 11,700 years ago. It is no easy task to tell a coherent story about such a long period. Three parallel stories intertwine in time during these millions of years: The first is the evolution of the Earth's climate, with cooling and warming phases in the Ice Age. The second is the diverse evolution of the primates into, amongst other species, modern humans. The third is the unfolding and spectacular development of man's ability to create culture. All three stories are fascinating in their own right; however, the most exciting is their interaction, which, naturally, cannot be reconstructed in all detail—a characteristic of any science dealing with the past, be it prehistory or the history of the Earth or of the universe. This is a source of uncertainty, that some details always remain subject to debate, and that the way we reconstruct the stories is in an almost continuous change. This has been a fundamental characteristic of knowledge based on human cognition since prehistoric times, and gives the person telling the story two choices: either to present an incomplete narrative, focusing on our current level of knowledge and indicating the various kinds of uncertainties, or a complete one, reconstructed from our current knowledge, indicating only the most important points of uncertainty and knowing while that professional readers value the former, interested outsiders would prefer the latter. György Lengyel has chosen the latter, and this makes the book an enjoyable read for the general public, albeit professionals might find it wanting at some points.

Each chapter discusses the events a specific historical period, where the three threads mentioned above appear with different significance. The chapter entitled *Human evolution and knapped tools* unfolds the beginnings. Accordingly, most of the discussion is about the various prehumans and the morphological changes taking place from the split in the evolution of hominids and apes to the disappearance of the *Australopithecus* species. An important development in this period is the increase in brain size, its causes and consequences, and the emergence of stone knapping and its circumstances. Naturally, the role of each in the development of the other is also highlighted; for example, how the simplest stone tools promoted brain size increase by providing access to more meat, which in turn contributed to the appearance of increasingly

advanced stone tools. The following chapters revolve around humans, i.e. the *Homo genus*, and the Palaeolithic cultural evolution. Each chapter starts with a characterisation of the pre- and archaic humans of the period in focus, followed by an overview of the archaeological cultural units of the period, including the types and uses of tools used and the related technology, food production techniques, housing, and traces of adaptation to the environment. Phenomena related to climate change are only mentioned where they are relevant to the turns and events of human history.

The chapter on the *Early Palaeolithic* covers the beginnings in Africa. It discusses mainly human evolution since cultural changes occurred so slowly that the archaeological material of the whole period can be considered almost uniform. Being the first to leave the African cradle and appear on the Eurasian continent, *Homo erectus* represents the biggest step in human evolution. The *Lower Palaeolithic* chapter begins with the spread of humans throughout Europe, outlining the process, which took place in several waves from Africa and Asia, through the earliest human remains and the most important archaeological sites. The Acheulian complex emerging in the western and southern parts of the continent represents an advanced technology with handaxes, the crafting of which required more sophisticated knapping techniques and designs than ever before. This industry can be linked to the *Homo heidelbergiensis* together with the coeval microlithic industries in Central Europe. The latter is illustrated with Vértesszőlős, the oldest Palaeolithic site in Hungary, presented in detail in the book with the discovered animal and plant remains (that give clues on the one-time environment), stone tools, and Samuel, the oldest archaic human relic in Hungary.

The chapter on the *Middle Palaeolithic* takes the reader to the time of Neanderthals and the archaic *Homo sapiens*. Despite their anatomical differences, the cultural manifestations of the two species are fairly similar throughout the period. In the absence of anthropological and archaeological finds from the closed contexts of the tools, it is impossible to tell which culture belongs to which species—not a real surprise since they have a common ancestor. More than one distinct archaeological culture can be outlined in this period. The most important advance in tool making is the emergence of the flake tool production, especially the Levallois technology, which involves pre-planning. The lithic record of the period is more varied than the previous one; the Hungarian finds are presented through the sites of Subalyuk, Tata, Jankovich Cave, and Érd. The Neanderthal man left behind the richest palaeoanthropological material in the territory of the country. The three teeth found in the Remete-Felső-barlang [Upper Cave] are less well known, but the remains of two individuals, an adult female and a child, found in the Subalyuk Cave are among the most significant in Central Europe. The latter also raises the possibility of burial, although the records of old excavations do not now allow us to establish this with absolute certainty. In any case, the most recent dating suggests that they were among the last Neanderthals in the region. Although the bones from Subalyuk Cave have not been submitted to palaeogenetic analysis, the method plays a major role in understanding the people of the Middle Palaeolithic today. For example, palaeogenetics is the only reason why we know of the existence of the Denisova hominins, whose skeletal remains so far consist of only a tooth and a phalanx but whose specific patterns in the *Homo sapiens* genome reveal the complex history of their geographical spread and interbreeding with other human species.

The chapter on *Upper Palaeolithic* tells the story of how the first anatomically modern humans, today's *Homo sapiens*, conquered the world. With advanced blade tools and bone points for technology, specialised hunting for subsistence, and jewellery and art for culture, mankind reached the pinnacle of evolution in the Palaeolithic. How modern humans replaced Neanderthals in Europe and Denisovan man in Asia at the outset of the period is an interesting question. Assigning people to archaeological cultures poses many problems for research into this era, too, as modern humans arrived on the continent in several waves. In Hungary, the record of the Szeleta Cave represents this period. In the advanced phase of the Upper Palaeolithic, Europe witnessed a gradual cultural unification manifesting in the lithic record of the Aurignacian and Gravettian complexes, represented by the sites Istállóskő Cave and Bodrogkeresztúr-Henye in Hungary. The climate change and the accompanying changes in the natural environment and the fauna during the last glaciation played a major role in the process. Changes in hunting habits are clearly reflected in the development of hunting techniques and weapons. The most significant change, however, was triggered by

the last cold peak, when cultural evolution took different paths in Western and Central and Eastern Europe. The Gravettien, followed by the Epigravettien, emerged in the latter area; the Epigravettien complex in the territory of Hungary is represented by Ságvár with huts and a perforated baton and a somewhat younger site (used after the cold peak) at Esztergom-Gyurgyalag with tools made of flint brought from outside the Carpathians.

The chapter on *The end of the Ice Age and the end of the Palaeolithic* reveals that the retreat of the Scandinavian ice sheet caused the Epigravettian hunters to leave the Carpathian Basin in the wake of their prey animals moving northwards. Humans inhabiting the areas freed from the ice and the onset of warming brought about a never-before-seen cultural diversity in Northern Europe. The most important relic of this period in our country is an ochre quarry with spectacular but dazzling finds at Lovas. The chapter on *Holocene hunter-gatherers* discusses the archaeological record of the groups inhabiting the territory of Hungary during the warming period in the Holocene. Climatic and environmental changes fundamentally transformed the subsistence strategies of human communities. This period is called the Mesolithic, when the processes that determined the further history of the Carpathian Basin—the emergence of food production and a settled lifestyle—took place in the Middle East and the Balkans.

György Lengyel's book tells the long and complex story of the Ice Age hunter-gatherers in a very readable, accessible style, illustrated with objects from the rich archaeological collection of the Hungarian National Museum. The high quality of the photographs and the imagery of the volume deserve special praise. The excellent graphics and reconstructed scenes, also a feast for the eyes, are the work of Áron Gauder, the creator of *A kőbaltás ember* [*The man with the stone axe*], a popular video series presenting the major Palaeolithic sites in Hungary.

The book has been published as the first volume of the *HistorIQ* series. In the foreword to the new series, Gábor Virágos, editor-in-chief, states the aim of the series brought to life to fill a gap: "The Hungarian National Museum aims to present the history of the Carpathian Basin in a targeted way by summarising research trends and current results from around the world and incorporating examples from its own collections. We will describe the development of human civilisation, including the history of our country and its wider geographical area, by archaeological cultures and historical periods." The first volume does this perfectly, and one can only hope that this series will not end up like the *Hungarian Archaeology Handbook*, the first volume of which on the Palaeolithic and the Mesolithic (written by László Vértes) was published in 1965, but the second has still yet to come. It would be good to read works of the same high quality about other periods; the possibility is there, as the knowledge and the collections are available.

Recommended literature

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