

## OBJECTS FROM THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH OF THE WORLD WAR II PRISONER-OF-WAR CAMP IN BAJA (2024)

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*Following the initiative of the Hungarian Organisation of the German War Graves Commission, the MoD Military History Institute and Museum excavated and exhumed human remains on three POW burial sites next to the WW2 memorial on Vaskút Road in 2024. Simultaneously, the Military History Museum conducted a small metal detector test survey in the southern zone of the former camp on Vaskút Road. This paper overviews the finds from the 2024 campaign in light of international research and the archaeological research of the WW2 POW camp in Baja.*

**Keywords:** Baja (Bács-Kiskun County), World War 2, military archaeology, archaeology of prisoner-of-war (POW) camps and heroic burial sites, difficult heritage, painful heritage

Prisoner-of-war (POW) camps are sites of ‘difficult heritage’ or ‘painful heritage’ associated with war remembrance (MYTUM & CARR 2013b, 9; JASINSKI, SOLEIM & SEM 2012, 265–267). Their archaeological research has raised several ethical and professional questions; thus, the archaeological and heritage aspects of WW2 POW camps are worth discussing. Their research shares some issues with the archaeology of the modern and recent periods in Hungary, of which József Laszlovszky published an overview in this journal in 2023 (LASZLOVSZKY 2023).

In Hungary, archaeological research was carried out recently on the WW1 POW camp sites in Ostffyasszonyfa (Vas County) and Csót (Veszprém County) and the WW2 POW camp site in Baja (Bács-Kiskun County) (POLGÁR 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; 2022). In connection with the study of POW camps in Hungary, the survey and photo documentation of engraved or pencil inscriptions (short messages and names) related to prisoners of war on the brick walls of the Cegléd Hussar and armoured barracks’ buildings (used as a detention camp by the Soviet Red Army in 1944–1945) is considered as a unique undertaking from a methodological point of view (REZNÁK 2017; JÓJÁRT 2017).

The archaeology of POW, internment, labour, and concentration and extermination camps has a significant international history. Several case studies and syntheses have been published on this topic in recent decades. In 2013, Claudia Theune published in ‘*Historical Archaeology in Central Europe*’ a synthesis of the archaeology of WW1 POW camps and the National Socialist and WW2 concentration and extermination camps (THEUNE 2013). In 2018, she published ‘*A Shadow of War: Archaeological approaches to uncovering the darker sides of conflict from the 20th century*’, devoting a special chapter to the archaeology of the concentration and extermination, labour, POW, and internment camps of the German *Reich* and WW2 (THEUNE 2018, 67–97). For more on the camps, heritage protection, and archaeological approaches, see ‘*Archaeologies of Internment*’ edited by Adrian Myers and Gabriel Moshenska, published in 2011, and ‘*Prisoners of War. Archaeology, Memory, and Heritage of 19th- and 20th-Century Mass Internment*’ edited by Harold Mytum and Gilly Carr and published in 2013 (MYERS & MOSHENSKA 2011; MYTUM & CARR 2013a). Several papers presented at the *European Archaeological Consortium* conference in Bonn on 22–25 March 2022, summarising the state of archaeological research in Europe in the 18th–20th centuries, also focused on this issue (HALE & KERSTING 2024).

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The complex archaeological research methodology of the camps relies heavily on the analysis of aerial photographs and LiDAR surveys, geophysical and geodetic surveys, surface artefact collection and metal detector surveys, and excavation, as well as the research of written sources and archival photo records. Archaeology is essential for identifying the sites of camps which do not have built structures visible anymore, clarifying their topography, and uncovering the material remains of the detainees and detainers (PRINGLE, DOYLE & BABITS 2007; THEUNE 2013; CARR & JASINSKI 2014; GRABOWSKI *et al.* 2014; KOBIAŁKA, KOSTYRKO & KAJDA 2017; LEGENDRE 2017; KOSTYRKO & KOBIAŁKA 2020; KERSTING 2022; KERSTING 2023; KOBIAŁKA *et al.* 2023; THEUNE 2024).

## WW2 POW CAMP AT BAJA

A unique source for the historical research of the POW camp in Baja is the recollections of surgeon Sándor Dubecz, published in 1946 (DUBECZ 1946). Endre Wallinger was the first to summarise, based on two recollections, the history of the Baja camp in *Helyzet*, a newspaper, in 1990 (WALLINGER 1990). Later, in 1992, József Gyulavári published a longer article with source documents about the POW camp in another newspaper, *Ártér* (GYULAVÁRI 1992). In 1993, Ferenc Vágvölgyi published in *Új Magyarország* an article on the WW1 and WW2 memorials in Baja, also mentioning the WW2 camp (VÁGVÖLGYI 1993). He also had a sixty-page typewritten account of the camp, accompanied by its floor plan and archival photographs, which includes a report on the exhumations in 1948; this record is held in the Data Archive of the István Türr Museum in Baja (VÁGVÖLGYI 2000). Zalán Bognár mentions the Baja camp in the discussion of diverse research aspects in his monograph on WW2 POW camps in Hungary (BOGNÁR 2017). More recently, Nóra Kordé published a detailed study about the history of the camp and the available sources in *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* in 2020 (KORDÉ 2020).

The barracks camp in Baja was built to house prisoners of war next to the border guard barracks on Vaskút Road after the war against the former Yugoslavia in 1941. It consisted of a rectangular barbed wire fence with one entrance surrounding six barracks and a guardhouse beside them (GYULAVÁRI 1992, 66–68) (*Fig. 1*). The camp and the barracks continued to be used by the Soviet Red Army as a POW transit camp from November and December 1944, respectively, until August 1945. About 15,000–20,000 people were kept simultaneously in the buildings of the camp on Vaskút Road (BOGNÁR 2017, 143–144, 185, 214), of whom an estimated 8,000 people died during these months (WALLINGER 1990, 8; VÁGVÖLGYI 1993, 16; BOGNÁR 2017, 335; KORDÉ 2020, 90). No building remains are visible on the site today, as the area has been subject to devel-

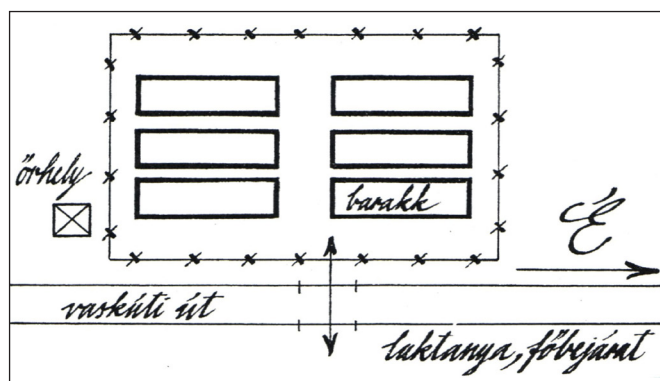


Fig. 1. Floor plan of the POW camp in Baja (GYULAVÁRI 1992, 66)



Fig. 2. Detail of an aerial photograph from 1950 featuring the area of the barracks camp in Baja (A: Vaskút Road, B: former border guard barracks, C: barracks camp, D: POW cemetery, E: WW2 memorial) (MoD Military History Institute and Museum, Military Archives and Map Collection)

opment, and the vegetation has overgrown the surroundings. An aerial photo from 1950 in the collection of the Military History Archives and Map Collection (ID L34-62-Bd-1950-47851) is key in identifying the location of the barracks camp. It features the camp buildings, clearly identifiable on the western side of Vaskút Road, opposite the former barracks (Fig. 2).

Several mass graves of the POW camp were excavated, and the human remains were exhumed in 1948. József Gyulavári published a report on the 1948 works in 1992, entitled *Report. On the exhumation in 1948 of prisoners of war who died in the Baja prisoner-of-war camps* (GYULAVÁRI 1992, 65). The document summarising the basic data of the exhumations contains columns with 'Day and date', 'Number of dead (Skulls)' and 'Notes' in the heading. The exhumation took place between 11 and 30 October 1948 next to the border guard barracks, the northern and southern barracks camps, and the gardening school. Based on the number of skulls, the remains of 1,023 persons have been found. The information in 'Notes' is limited to briefly describing the activities ('digging graves', 'arranging graves'). Only the identity marks ('identity sheet') are mentioned of the objects found next to the deceased (according to the 'Record', fifteen identity sheets were found) (GYULAVÁRI 1992, 65; see also GYULAVÁRI 1992, 64; KORDÉ 2020, 94–95).

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON THE BAJA BARRACKS CAMP (2018–2024)

Teams from the MoD Military History Institute and Museum and the István Türr Museum carried out test excavations as part of a development project concerning the area of the POW camp on Vaskút Road in November 2018. Fieldwork brought to light, among others, the foundations of a building on the plot registered as Baja 015/44. In February and March 2019, fieldwork continued north of the POW camp at the burial site already excavated when the remains were exhumed in 1948 (on the plot registered as Baja 015/45). As the trenches were deepened, it became clear that human remains had been left behind in the mass graves in 1948. Thus, the site had to be excavated again. Altogether, 26 individual and mass graves were unearthed in an area of around 350 m<sup>2</sup>. Building remains, pieces of clothing, equipment, and utensils have been recovered from the area of the camp, but few objects have been found in the graves that had already been exhumed in 1948 (POLGÁR 2019b). (The find material was inventoried in the Military Archeology Collection of the Military History Museum under No. 2019.1.1–2019.33.1.)

In his 1993 publication, Ferenc Vágvölgyi described the location of the mass graves established in 1948: "[...] in the yard of the adjacent barracks and in its neighbourhood, they removed them (1,023 of the 8,000 deceased) from their 'graves' and buried them in three trenches next to each other in the camp" (VÁGVÖLGYI 1993, 16). A monument was erected on the newly constructed burial site in 1949 (Fig. 3); however, verifying the exact position of the graves became necessary with time. In July 2019, fieldwork carried out



Fig. 3. WW2 memorial on Vaskút Road in Baja (1949)

by the MoD Military History Institute and Museum succeeded in authenticating three mass graves of prisoners of war and civilians, exhumed and reburied in 1948, west of the WW2 memorial on Vaskút Road (on the plot registered as Baja 015/54). Archival aerial photos were pivotal in this case, too: the exact location of three mass graves, almost identical in size, could be clearly identified at the western side of the WW2 memorial on an aerial photo taken in 1950 and another from 1953, both part of the collection of the Military Archives and Map Collection (under No. L34-62-Bd-1950-47851, L34-62-Db-1953-48472) (POLGÁR 2019c).

In 2024, the German War Graves Commission (*Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, VDK*) initiated the excavation of the secondary graves cre-

ated in 1948 next to Vaskút Road (today: Szabadság Road) in Baja. Fieldwork was carried out in cooperation with the War Graves and Hero Cult Directorate of the MoD Military History Institute and Museum, the Hungarian organisation of the German War Graves Commission, the Hungarian Defence Forces, the Mayor's Office of the City of Baja, and volunteers in April and May 2024. The remains of altogether 1,058 people were exhumed (MÁTYÁSSY 2024, 116). In parallel with the excavation and exhumation, a team from the Military History Museum carried out a small-scale metal detector test survey in the southern zone of the one-time camp.

### NEW FINDS FROM THE METAL DETECTOR SURVEY IN THE AREA OF THE CAMP (2024)

In October 2024, the Military History Museum conducted a small-scale metal detector test survey in the southern zone of the camp, covering an area of approximately 200 m<sup>2</sup> (on plots registered as Baja 015/76 and 015/41) (Fig. 4). The fourteen recovered artefacts included

- building accessories (2 pcs),
- remains of clothing (5 pcs),
- utility items (3 pcs),
- coins (2 pcs), and
- weapon finds (2 pcs).

The building elements comprised the remains of a staple and a hinge. Clothing remains included two iron fittings for footwear, a cloak button from a Hungarian uniform, a coat button from a German uniform, and an undergarment button. The utensils consisted exclusively of cutlery remains (two spoon heads and a



*Fig. 4. Findspots on a Google Earth map of the 2024 metal detector survey in the southern zone of the POW camp in Baja (by Henrik Ferenc Kiss)*

handle fragment). Both recovered coins were Hungarian, one *fillér* and one *pengő* (Fig. 5).

Weapon finds included the remains of an 1888 M magazine and a 1939 M 7.62 × 54 mm Mosin-Nagant rifle cartridge case. The magazine (loading frame), used originally with Austro-Hungarian Mannlicher rifles, their Hungarian version (modernised in 1931), and Hungarian 1935 M rifles used in WW2 can hypothetically be associated with the POW camp. However, it is worth noting that such repeating rifles remained in use in the Hungarian armed forces after WW2. Based on its mark, the cartridge of the Mosin-Nagant rifle was manufactured by the *Veszprémi Fémfeldolgozó Nemzeti Vállalat* [National Metal Processing Company in Veszprém], called *Bakony Fém- és Elektromoskészülék Művek* [Bakony Metal and Electrical Equipment Works] from 1968; this post-WW2 relic can be connected to a military shooting range on Vaskút Road. The Hungarian Defence Forces introduced the 7.62 mm Mosin-Nagant repeating rifle in 1948 (Soós 2012, 72–73; Poór 2012, 48–49). (Inventoried in the Military History Museum's Military Archeology Collection under No. 2024.91.1–2024.103.1.)



Fig. 5. Remains of cutlery, clothing, and coins found in the southern zone of the POW camp in 2024 (MoD Military History Institute and Museum – Military Archaeology Collection)

### ITEMS FOUND IN EXCAVATION AND EXHUMATION NEAR THE WW2 MEMORIAL ON VASKÚT ROAD (2024)

The definition of a ‘cemetery or burial place of heroes’ has been determined in the [interpretative order<sup>4</sup>](#) of Act XLIII of 1999 on Cemeteries and Burial Places (§ 3 f.) as *”In the absence of different provisions in international treaties, cemeteries and burial places of heroes shall refer to cemeteries, designated sections within cemeteries, or specific burial sites for holding the remains and ashes of, and dedicated to individuals who lost their lives in the course of fulfilling their duty to protect their country, whether through armed or unarmed service; individuals who died as a direct consequence of acts undertaken in*



Fig. 6. Clothing remains from the 2024 exhumation near the WW2 memorial in Baja. 1: Buttons from civilian clothing (MoD Military History Institute and Museum – Military Archaeology Collection)



Fig. 7. Clothing remains from the 2024 exhumation near the WW2 memorial in Baja. 2: Buttons from Hungarian and German uniforms (MoD Military History Institute and Museum – Military Archaeology Collection)

<sup>4</sup> Accessed on 09.10.2024.

the fulfilment of such duties; and individuals who were forcibly conscripted for labour during times of war and subsequently passed away as a result.” For the methodology of research on Hungarian heroic burial sites, see DUDÁS, STIER & CZIDOR 2021. Objects found in the excavation of a cemetery or burial site of heroes can be collected in a public museum collection with consideration to war memorialisation, respective aspects of museology, and artefact protection.

Following these guidelines, ninety objects from the 2024 excavation at the memorial on Vaskút Road were included in the Military Archaeology Collection of the Military History Museum and evaluated. As part of the public collection acquisition procedure, the artefacts have undergone disinfection and conservation work before having been inventoried under Nos. 2024. 1. 1 – 2024. 90. 1. The grave finds were classified as

- clothing remains (61 pcs),
- utility items (15 pcs),
- personal items (2 pcs),
- coins (10 pcs), and
- other finds (2 pcs).



Fig. 8. Clothing remains from the 2024 exhumation near the WW2 memorial in Baja. 3: Buckles from civilian and military clothing (MoD Military History Institute and Museum – Military Archaeology Collection)



Fig. 9. Utility objects from the 2024 exhumation near the WW2 memorial in Baja. 1: Remains of cutlery (MoD Military History Institute and Museum – Military Archaeology Collection)



Fig. 10. Utility objects from the 2024 exhumation near the WW2 memorial in Baja. 2: Remains of tobacco boxes (MoD Military History Institute and Museum – Military Archaeology Collection)



Fig. 11. Utility objects from the 2024 exhumation near the WW2 memorial in Baja. 3: Remains of pencils, a cigarette case, and glasses (MoD Military History Institute and Museum – Military Archaeology Collection)



Fig. 13. Personal items from the 2024 exhumation near the WW2 memorial in Baja. Remains of a rosary (MoD Military History Institute and Museum – Military Archaeology Collection)



Fig. 12. Utility objects from the 2024 exhumation near the WW2 memorial in Baja. 4: Remains of shaving brushes, combs, and pocket mirrors (MoD Military History Institute and Museum – Military Archaeology Collection)



Fig. 14. Utility objects from the 2024 exhumation near the WW2 memorial in Baja. 5: Remains of keys (MoD Military History Institute and Museum – Military Archaeology Collection)

Clothing remains typically consisted of buttons from civilian under- and overgarments and German and Hungarian uniforms and buckles from military and civilian clothing (Figs. 6–8). The raw materials of the ‘civilian’ buttons varied widely, including pieces made of plastic, metal, mother-of-pearl, leather, and wood. The flagship types of utensils were cutlery, objects related to smoking and personal hygiene (tobacco boxes, cigarette cases, as well as pocket mirrors, shaving brushes, and combs), with the remains of some pencils and glasses amongst them (Fig. 9–12). The most remarkable mirror fragment features the picture of a lady powdering her face. One of the most exceptional pieces in the assemblage is the remains of a rosary with a corpus and 42 glass beads (Fig. 13). The remains of the two keys are difficult to interpret (Fig. 14), as in theory, they can be linked to both POWs and civilians detained in the camp. Money finds included Soviet (*kopejka*, copeck), Polish (*groszy*) and Hungarian (*pengő*, *fillér*) coins (Fig. 15). From the rest, a lesser cable bundle and a small metal plate may also be mentioned; these were perhaps re-used. No artefact in the assemblage features a name or monogram; an important aspect for their interpretation is that all have been recovered from a secondary burial site, where they got after previous exhumation and reburial.



Fig. 15. Soviet, Polish, and Hungarian coins from the 2024 exhumation near the WW2 memorial in Baja (MoD Military History Institute and Museum – Military Archaeology Collection)

## SUMMARY

Sándor Biczók gives a valuable account of the POW camp in Baja in his memoir *‘Hadifogságban. 1944 december 26–1947 július 20’* [‘Being a prisoner of war. 26 December 1944–20 July 1947’]: “[...] the procession set off through the deserted town to the barracks on Vaskúti Road. Finally, we could use the abandoned and previously unnecessary mess tin and spoon again. After a week of starvation, you can imagine how the people who were freezing to death enjoyed the warm, thick bean soup cooked by the volunteer women of Baja. [...] The barracks were already full when we arrived, and the search for a place was a matter of pushing, swearing, and cursing. Thus, the night passed, and at dawn, the people of Baja were already at the gate, ready to join the parties heading to the town to work. [...] Soon, the people of Baja, looking for relatives and acquaintances, began to approach [...], and the guard in the tower was shouting at them in Russian, shaking his gun, to keep them away. In the meantime, the people of the barracks were called to the courtyard for a line-up. We could not imagine where and what kind of work may be ahead of us that requires everyone to be lined up; it was even stranger as the nurses and nuns had also to be there. After a short time, the procession set off under heavy guard, winding through small streets to a train waiting on a side track on the outskirts of the town, where they locked the doors on us, cramming us into cattle wagons that had no furnishing at all” (BICZÓK 2015, 34–35). In his paper published in 1946, Sándor Dubecz, a surgeon, identified combat wounds and epidemic diseases as the leading causes of death in the Baja camp: “Most patients in the hospital, about 80%, had gunshot wounds; one in every ten had clean shots, the rest were injured by shrapnels” (DUBECZ 1946, 855). Among the infectious diseases, Dubecz identified enteritis, dysentery, typhoid fever, and diphtheria as the main causes of death (DUBECZ 1946, 856). Archaeological observations show that in more than one case, the dead were buried with their lower and upper clothing, thus also had several utensils and personal objects important to their owners in their pockets with them. There are still many artefacts from the time of WW2 to be found in the area of the one-time camp on Vaskút Road. The museological value of these relics, which are also linked to personal fates, is that they provide a representative insight into the everyday life of the POW camp, as do the finds from the excavations of burial sites of heroes (see KERSTING 2023, 409).



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