

ABOVE THE FIRE, BENEATH THE EARTH REPORT ON THE FIRST ARCHAEOGASTRONOMY FESTIVAL

ANNA PRISKIN¹ – MÁTÉ PIROS-POZDORA²

Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 14 (2025) Issue 3, pp. 33–36

The archaeological gastronomy festival named Above the Fire, Beneath the Earth was organized in Nyíregyháza in August this year in cooperation with the National Institute of Archaeology of the Hungarian National Museum Public Collection Centre and the Sóstó Open Air Museum. The aim of the event was to make archaeological heritage more accessible and attractive to the general public. The festival organizers placed great emphasis on combining the results of experimental archaeology with cultural experiences. At the event, ten reconstructed dishes from different archaeological periods, from the Neolithic to the High Middle Ages, were prepared on site using historically authentic techniques and ingredients. The dishes were accompanied by thematic presentations, traditional demonstrations, and historical reenactment.

Keywords: archaeogastronomy, show cooking, prehistory, Roman period, Early Middle Ages

Food preparation and cooking were – just as they are today – a basic activity of everyday life, regardless of the archaeological and historical epoch. In addition to the daily routine that has developed over thousands of years, the surviving evidence of food preparation and consumption habits related to special occasions can also provide an exciting insight into the distant past. There are numerous historical reenactment festivals in Hungary, some of which date back several decades. The time frame is very broad, spanning from the Celtic period to the Late Middle/Early Modern Age. Such events usually revolve around the presentation of contemporary warfare and the former lifestyle (material culture, fashion, culinary characteristics, etc.). The reconstruction of culinary culture usually appears as an additional element, i.e., the visitor is – in most cases – an external observer of food preparation and consumption. People's unwavering interest in baking and cooking and the popularity of historical festivals gave the idea of organizing one where archaeological-historical cuisine is not a sideline but the main topic.

On 24 August 2025, the archaeology and gastronomy festival named *Above Fire, Beneath the Earth* was held in the Sóstó Open Air Museum in Nyíregyháza for the first time. The joint project of the ethnographers from the Sóstó Open Air Museum, which hosted the event, and the archaeologists from the National Institute of Archaeology of the Hungarian National Museum Public Collection Centre (HNM–PCC–NIA) is a pioneering initiative. Its aim is to create an element in the assortment of heritage tourism in Eastern Hungary which, by its uniqueness, can also be attractive to people living in remote areas of the country. The programme created as a result of the collaboration featured archaeology (in the form of scientific lectures), live gastronomy (as a spectacle and tasting events), and historical reenactment (as tangible history), all placed in the ethnographic environment of a living museum village.

The basic concept relied on an archaeological approach to gastronomy, both in the case of the show cooking and the professional presentations. An important aspect in the compilation of the prepared menu was to present, based on archaeological, archaeobotanical, and archaeozoological data, historical periods characterised by new plant or animal species, novel technologies, or nutritional history innovations. The reconstructed Árpád Age village section in the Sóstó Open Air Museum village provided the main venue for the festival (Fig. 1). Historical re-enactors recreated the era in the village's buildings and squares. Fire pits and cooking areas installed between the early medieval houses created a special atmosphere. A little further away, the prehistoric and Roman show cooking took place, while pies, pasta, and cakes were made on a separate site.

¹ HNM–PCC National Institute of Archaeology; e-mail: priskin.annamaria@hnm.hu

² HNM–PCC National Institute of Archaeology; e-mail: piros.p.mate@hnm.hu



Fig. 1. Reconstructed Árpád Age house in the Nyíregyháza–Sóstó Open-Air Museum (photo by Attila Gyürky)



Fig. 2. Late Bronze Age porridge from Csanádpalota-Földvár (photo by Attila Gyürky)

Preparing the dishes selected based on the three criteria, the professors and students of the Department of Archaeology of the University of Miskolc cooked porridge reconstructed from finds from the Late Bronze Age fortified settlement of Csanádpalota (SZEVEÉNYI et al. 2015) (Fig. 2), the staff of the Nyíregyháza Regional Office of the HNM–PCC–NIA cooked vegetable mutton ragout from the Neolithic and the Hallstatt *Ritschert*, a kind of pig ragout from the Iron Age (BARTH 1999, 54–58). In addition, *Pinsa et moretum* (flatbread made with spiced cottage cheese), *tisana* (barley soup) and *Porcellum laureatum* (roast pig), prepared from the recipes of the Roman gourmet Apicius, were put on the table.

The recipe for Thorsten (József Lakatos)’s ‘Viking ragout’ came from Lejre (Denmark) (Fig. 3; SERA-TUNBERG 2017, 78–79), while archaeologists from the Jóna András Museum from the time of the Hungarian conquest demonstrated the preparation of *áldos* to those interested (GYULAI 2013).

A little further away from the Árpád Age village, the so-called ‘Anarcsi porta’ was transformed into a bakery for the day. Here, pies flavored with a spice mixture compiled based on prehistoric plant finds from the Carpathian Basin (supplied by Dorka’s Spice House, Derekegyház) were baked, together with *libum*, a sacrificial cake described by M. Porcius Cato, and early medieval (originally Bavarian) *pretzel*.

Scientific and popular-scientific lectures about food production and food preparation were held during the day. The archaeological aspects of animal foods were presented by Márta Daróczi-Szabó and László Daróczi-Szabó (*Archaeozoology, the feral side of archaeology*). Vajk Szeveényi summarised the possibilities of research on dietary habits from the Neolithic to the Iron Age (*Eating culture in prehistoric Europe*). Anna Priskin held a presentation on the main characteristics of Roman gastronomy (*Roman Gastronomy through the eyes of an archaeologist*), while Máté Piros-Pozdora’s contributions enabled the audience to



Fig. 3. Preparation of Viking porridge at the Camp of the Eastern Alliance (Foedus Orientalis Cultural Association) (photo by Zsolt Sipos)



Fig. 4. Guided tour in the Árpád Age village (photo by Edvárd Janka)



Fig. 5. A battle with visitors
(photo by Attila Gyürky)



Fig. 6. 'Héttorony Hangászok', a medieval music band
(photo by Attila Gyürky)

get a glimpse at the world of Roman feasts (*From Lucullus to Apicius – antique feasts*) and the food supply of the Hallstatt site (*How does a pig get into the salt mine?*). Following Anna Priskin's presentation on the history of confectionery dating back to archaeological times (*Archaeocukrász [Archaeo-baker] – Pastry culture from below the ground*), the reconstruction of the charred 'strawberry cake' (GYULAI 1996, 169–196) found at the Late Bronze Age site of Balatonmagyaród–Hídvégpuszta was also discussed (*Archaeocukrász*).

The living history event included a guided tour led by an archaeologist József Lukács in the Árpád Age village (MNMKK–NRI) (Fig. 4), joined by members of the 10th–11th century Eastern Alliance (*Foedus Orientalis* Cultural Association) and the Árpád Vezér Archery Association, as well as the 14th-century *Societas Filii Bihariensis* and the Sárospatak Knights Association historical reenactment teams. The traditional groups created a real camp-life atmosphere; in addition to cooking using authentic methods, there was also time for combat demonstrations. Even the youngest visitors could try out what it was like to stand up against a shield wall (Fig. 5). The medieval atmosphere was enriched by authentic music, played on period instruments by the *Héttorony Hangászok* (Fig. 6).

The Open Air Museum, where the traditional crafts of archaeological eras live on, provided a welcoming environment for the festival. The central part of the museum became a venue of blacksmiths, basket weavers, felters, wood carvers, and potters.

SUMMARY

The primary aim of the festival was to create a niche-filling professional and cultural event that, hopefully, grows into a tradition with time. We only had two months to prepare, and we used this time perfectly. The final numbers are promising: thanks to the dedicated work of nearly fifty enthusiastic archaeologists, field technicians, ethnographers, professors, university students, and volunteers from the HNM–PCC–NIA, Nyíregyháza–Sóstó Museum Village, and the Department of Archaeology of the University of Miskolc, soups, main courses, and pastries evoking six archaeological periods were prepared. Nearly 550 people visited in the event, and we received a lot of positive feedback, which encourages us to continue (Fig. 7).

The museum village is a suitable venue for such a festival, and the event will be built around a predetermined archaeological and historical period each year. In addition to presenting culinary delights from the selected period, our aim is to explore themes that span archaeological, historical, and ethnographic periods. We plan to invite archaeological and historical departments of Hungarian museums, archae-



Fig. 7. Official logo of the Above the Fire, Beneath the Earth Festival

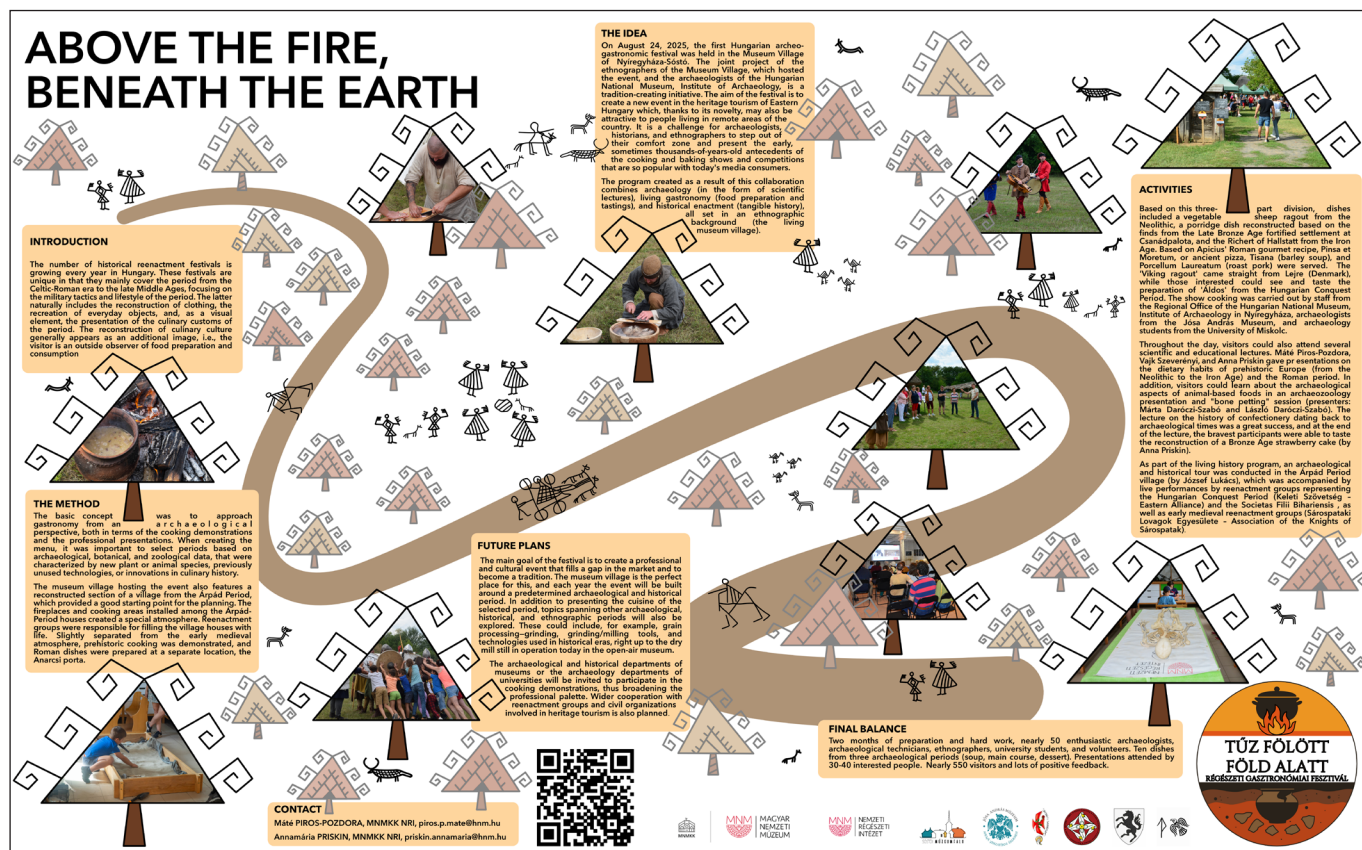


Fig. 8. Poster presentation prepared for the IADRA conference held in October 2025 in Szombathely

ological departments of universities, and institutes for show cooking, thus diversifying the professional palette. We also count on the contribution of historical reenactment groups to revive the highlighted periods, and we also plan to cooperate with heritage tourism NGOs. In this initial phase, we also try to increase awareness for the programme in professional forums; part of this effort was a poster presentation at the IADRA conference in Szombathely (Fig. 8).

REFERENCES

- Barth, F. E. (1999). Das Ritschert, eine urzeitliche Reminiszenz. *Archäologie Österreich* 10:2, 54–58.
- Gyulai, F. (1996). Balatonmagyaród-Hídvépuszta késő bronzkori település növényleletei és élelmiszer-maradványai. *Zalai Múzeum* 6, 169–196.
- Gyulai, F. (2013). Újabb eredmények a honfoglaló magyarság étkezési kultúrájának feltárásában : *Edelény-Borsodi földvár ételmaradványainak vizsgálata*. In Révész L. & Wolf M. (szerk.), *A honfoglalás kor kutatásának legújabb eredményei : tanulmányok Kovács László 70. születésnapjára*. Szeged: Szegedi Tudományegyetem Régészeti Tanszék, 715–734.
- Serra, D. & Tunberg, H. (2017). *An Early Meal – A Viking Age Cookbook & Culinary Odyssey*. Furulund: ChronoCopia Publishing AB.
- Szeverényi, V., Priskin, A., Czukor, P., Torma, A. & Tóth A. (2015). Élelmiszertermelés, település és társadalom a késő bronzkorban Délkelet-Magyarországon: esettanulmány Csanádpalota–Földvár erődített település alapján. *Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve Új folyam* 2, 41–66.