

## REVIEW: BRONZE AGE LIFE STORIES FROM HUNGARY (3RD-2ND MILLENNIA BC)

CLAUDIO CAVAZZUTI<sup>1</sup>

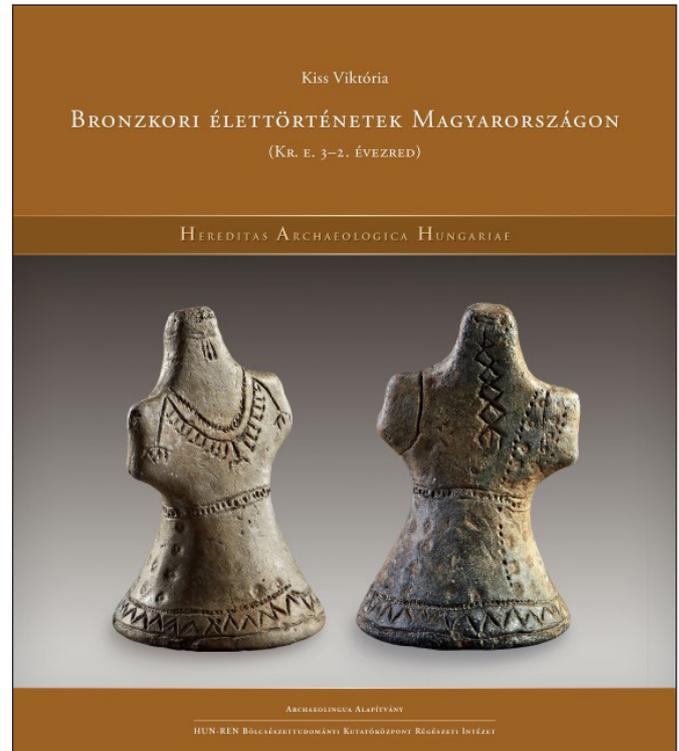
Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 14 (2025) Issue 4, pp. 41–42.

*Until a few years ago, only a small group of notable prehistoric individuals had been internationally recognized “by name.” Among them, there are the “Prince” of the Arene Candide, the Amesbury Archer, the Egtved Girl, the Skrydstrup Girl, and perhaps the most popular of all, Ötzi. Prehistoric archaeologists sought to challenge the absence of epigraphs for individuals whose names remain unknown, for three principal reasons: their exceptional preservation, the outstanding items accompanying them, and the significant potential for extracting information from the analysis of their bodies and associated artifacts, which could illuminate various aspects of their lives, relationships, and identities. Perhaps, the challenge was directed at archaeologists working on literate societies, as if to assert: “We may not know their names, but we can understand everything else.”*

Viktória Kiss’ book *Bronze Age Life Stories from Hungary (3<sup>rd</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> millennia BC)* expands the original number of these known individuals and, more importantly, broadens the social spectrum of meaningful biographies by presenting fourteen cases from Hungarian contexts, spanning the Bell Beaker period to the Late Bronze Age.

The volume is structured into five key chapters. In the Introduction, the author offers a comprehensive update on the Bronze Age of the Carpathian Basin, integrating established fieldwork and material analysis with recent advances in bioarchaeology, particularly in aDNA and isotopic studies.

Building on this general overview, in the next two chapters, Kiss focuses on the life histories of fourteen individuals. Each represents a distinct chronological phase, culture, and societal role. The subjects are presented in meticulous detail, with references to the pertinent scientific literature, illustrating what archaeology, bioanthropology, genetics, and isotopic analysis reveal about their lives within the broader context of their communities. Among the case studies presented are the war chief from Balatonakali-Sósi-földek (Kisapostag phase), the high-status woman from the Vatyá urnfield at Szigetszentmiklós-Ürgehegy (Grave 241), and the shaman/healer from the Tumulus culture cemetery at Emőd-Istvánmajor (Grave 116). The author also includes less “prestigious” individuals, such as the metalworker from the Bell Beaker cemetery at Budakalász-Csajerszke (Grave 276), the carpenter from the Gáta-Wieselburg culture at Nagycenk (Grave 55), and the commoners buried in storage pits at Sós-kút-Barátház (Feature 261/314) and Érd-Hosszúföldek (Feature 1106).



Kiss, Viktória (2025). *Bronze Age Life Stories from Hungary*. *Hereditas Archaeologica Hungariae* 5. Budapest: Archaeolingua, 208 pp. ISBN 978-615-5766-79-4

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor of Prehistory and Protohistory, Department of History and Culture, Alma Mater Studiorum - Università di Bologna. E-mail: [claudio.cavazzuti3@unibo.it](mailto:claudio.cavazzuti3@unibo.it)

In the fourth chapter, Kiss describes the process and results of two facial reconstructions based on bio-anthropological and phenotypic analysis. The reconstructions serve to offer a more tangible and realistic visualization of these individuals.

The fifth chapter shifts focus back to the broader societal context, exploring the reintegration of these individuals into the Bronze Age chiefdoms, villages, and households to which they belonged, and examining the organization and hierarchies that defined their social environments. Kiss' use of specific biographical narratives, in the form of *histoire événementielle*, to construct a more generalized history (*histoire structurelle* in the Braudelian sense), proves both effective and intellectually provocative. It also invites further refinement and exploration. For example, in the cases outlined by the author, bioanthropology plays a foundational role, as biological identity—particularly sex and age at death—forms the initial step in reconstructing individual biographies. This emphasis reflects the longstanding tradition of physical anthropology within Hungarian archaeology, dating back to scholars such as Acsádi and Nemeskéri, and is further complemented by recent contributions from national laboratories specializing in archaeogenetics and biogeochemistry. However, a constructive critique of Kiss' work might be that a more comprehensive examination of object biographies could maximise individual life stories (cf. HARDING 2021). Most of the subjects discussed were interred with significant grave goods, particularly metal objects, amber, or shells. For example, while the grave goods of the Balatonakali-Sósi-földek war chief were subjected to lead isotope analysis for tracking copper provenance, the results remain unpublished. Amber is analysed in only one case, that of the woman from Grave 1 at the Sükösd-Árpád-dűlő cemetery. I would argue that the individuals and their grave goods, especially weapons and ornaments, were often so closely intertwined—both symbolically and relationally—that it is difficult to separate the material culture from their identity.

I was recently involved in a study analysing human and metal samples from Early Bronze Age burials in the area surrounding the Vesuvius (Campania, Italy), some of which predate and others postdate the 'Avellino' eruption (DE FALCO et al. 2025). Despite a predominance of indigenous individuals based on  $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$  data, the grave goods (daggers and pins) were of distinctive Central European types, and the copper originated from multiple sources, notably Tuscany, the Balkans, and Iberia/Sardinia. This corroborates the idea that, during the period covered in Kiss' book, the cultural identity of people was also strongly shaped by the network they were involved in, the journeys they made, the exchanges they contributed to, and the ideas and symbols they incorporated from their preferential connections. Therefore, the integration of more quantitative data from material analyses is crucial for providing even greater depth and nuance to the individuals' biographies.

Prehistoric archaeology has long excelled in studying phenomena over the *long durée*, particularly since absolute chronology cannot achieve a calendar resolution. As a result, archaeologists have become adept at understanding long-term historical processes. The current challenge, however, is to complement this broad framework with the inclusion of individual stories. This includes investigating catastrophic events (e.g., Vesuvius, Thera), battlefields (e.g., Tollense), shipwrecks (e.g., Ulu-Burun), and potentially even the spread of virulent diseases (e.g., the recent identification of *Yersinia pestis* in graves dating from 2900–1800 BC). It is precisely this focus on individual biographies, as exemplified by Kiss' volume, that holds the potential to enrich our understanding of the Bronze Age. This work not only serves to engage the scientific community but also has the potential to resonate with a broader audience, inviting greater public interest in prehistoric archaeology.

## REFERENCES

De Falco, M., Aurino, P., Cavazzuti, C., Lucarelli, C., Canovaro, C., Lugli, F., et al. (2025). A multi-analytical approach to unveil Early Bronze Age population dynamics and metal exchange networks at the foot of Mount Vesuvius. *Scientific Reports*, 1–15.

Harding, A. (2021). *Bronze Age Lives*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter.