

THROUGH THICK AND THIN TO ERDŐBÉNYE: A COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT IN THE ZEMPLÉN HILLS

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In 2024, the Erdőbénye Community Archaeology Project was launched with the primary aim to identify, assess and protect archaeological sites across the SW Zemplén region with the active involvement of local communities. The programme was designed around a series of field surveys and public talks to bring the rich palimpsest of archaeological heritage close to local residents. Archaeology and cultural heritage more broadly have the potential to provide a common platform and serve as a bridge between various segments of local society by encouraging a dialogue and strengthening social cohesion.

Keywords: Community archaeology, public outreach, Iron Age, archaeology of conflict, LiDAR

INTRODUCTION

Erdőbénye is a small, picturesque village nestled in the SW corner of the Zemplén hills, surrounded by vineyards and extensive forests. The settlement flourished as a market town in the 18th–19th centuries, owing its success to viniculture, stone masonry and coopers (Fig. 1). The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, followed shortly by the *phylloxera* disease devastating 40% of the Tokaj-Hegyalja grape plantations, completely transformed the region's social and economic structure (BECK 2005; BALASSA 1991). The turmoil of the 20th century, the collectivisation and the declining popularity of sweet wines contributed to the challenges small villages of the region are facing today: falling birth rates, rapidly ageing populations, limited employment opportunities, emigration and the lack of services, etc., leading to the disintegration of local communities. Nevertheless, with the arrival of wealthy urbanites (pensioners, entrepreneurs), similarly to many other places in the broader Tokaj region, Erdőbénye is now firmly on the path of being gentrified. Many old, dilapidated buildings and wineries benefited from the financial investments of newcomers. However, their integration into the local community has been a limited success: the daily activities and interests of the local inhabitants and those recently arrived occupy very different social and economic spheres (KOVÁCS 2023). The Erdőbénye Community Archaeology Project was set up with the idea that archaeology, and cultural heritage more broadly, could provide a common platform and serve as a bridge between these two social segments by encouraging a dialogue that could transgress into other realms of daily life, and, by this, strengthen social cohesion.



Fig. 1. Bird's-eye view of Erdőbénye
(photo by József Hlavács)

AIMS AND METHODOLOGIES OF THE PROJECT

In May 2024, the Erdőbénye Community Archaeology Project was launched by the National Institute of Archaeology, under the auspices of the Hungarian National Museum and Public Collection Centre. The

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primary aim of the project was to identify, assess and protect archaeological sites across the SW Zemplén region with the active involvement of local communities. As the coordinators of the programme, we designed an action plan involving a series of field surveys, public talks and a provisional, small-scale sampling of a nearby archaeological site to bring local archaeology closer to the wider public.

The project's methodology adheres to the approach described widely as Public Archaeology. There are many definitions of the term currently in circulation depending on where in the world such a project is taking place (MOSHENSKA 2017; SKEATES, McDAVID & CARMAN 2012). The inclusive definition of public archaeology refers to both the practice and the scholarship of archaeology, and its interaction with the public sphere. According to the narrower definition, public archaeology is practically synonymous with a wide range of outreach activities conducted by professional archaeologists (MOSHENSKA 2017, 5). Recognising the complex nature of the subject, Gabriel Moshenska developed a useful eight-part “typology” (Fig. 2). Moshenska's first category “archaeologists working with the public” describes best what the Erdőbénye Community Archaeology Project is set out to achieve, however, given the fuzzy boundaries, some facets of the programme overlap with categories of “archaeology by the public” (BAKOS 2020a; THOMAS 2012) and “archaeological education” (CORBISHLEY 2014; GALANIDOU & DOMMASNES 2007). Fortunately, such approaches are not unknown in the context of Hungary. Several similar initiatives already exist where archaeologists, heritage professionals and the public work together, e.g. Hungarian Community Archaeology Association, Community Archaeology Group of the National Institute of Archaeology (by the Hungarian National Museum), Floralia at Aquincum, “Over fire, under ground” – Archaeological Gastronomy Festival, Friends of Hungarian Castles, to mention just a few of whose activities the present journal regularly covers.



Fig. 2. Some common types of public archaeology (MOSHENSKA 2017, CC BY-NC)

FROM THE BOTTOM UP

When the idea of the Erdőbénye Community Archaeology was first conceived, we were faced with the task of how to get the project off the ground and how to keep the local community interested. Therefore we devised a plan of building a community archaeology programme from the bottom-up, small, and approaching the public through entertaining educational activities. We organised an archaeology-themed day at the local primary school in April, 2024, with the support of our colleagues from the National Institute of Archaeology. The programme included an indoor presentation and a series of outdoor activities: a mock-excavation, a metal-detecting activity, a glimpse into archaeological documentation and a drone demonstration. Since the event was well-received by the local community, we thought it might be worthwhile broadening this concept by reaching out to adult audiences as well. In this respect, Erdőbénye turned out to be a particularly convenient location: the local *Bor, Mámor, Bénye* wine festival has been held here since 2009. Together with our volunteers, we set up a series of outreach programmes taking place within the bounds of the so-called Gordiusz udvar (yard), a masonry workshop and a piece of Erdőbénye's surviving heritage. In the mornings, a variety of role-play, educational games and craft activities are offered, followed by metal-detecting, mock-excavation and object-handling sessions in the afternoons. In the evenings, archaeology-themed public talks are held for the grown-up audience (Figs 3–4).



Fig. 3. Kids' activities led by members of the NRI in the Gordiusz udvar during the Bor, Mámor, Bénye festival (photo by László György, NRI)



Fig. 4. Public talk given by Balázs Gusztáv Mende (HUN-REN) in the Gordiusz udvar in 2025 (photo by László György, NRI)

The other, equally important leg of the project is represented by archaeological fieldwalking surveys in the form of weekend walks. In the autumn of 2024, our team visited the site of Erdőbénye–Nagy-Rakottyás, where the detailed survey of an 18th–19th century quernstone quarry was carried out. In the spring of 2025, we explored the Late Bronze Age – Iron Age fortification of Tállya–Mekecsvár, followed by the impressive location of Tállya–Óvár in the spring of 2026. Our fieldwalking group primarily consists of local participants and is regularly joined by a team of volunteer metal detectorists coordinated by Gábor Bakos, who are not only involved in the field operation side, but also take part in behind-the-scenes finds processing and documentation (BAKOS 2020a).

THE SITE OF TÁLLYA-MEKECSVÁR

The Mekecsvár site is located approximately 3 km SW of Erdőbénye but already within the administrative boundaries of the neighbouring Tállya. The site forms a geographical unit with a series of hilltops (Tállya–Óvár, Szokolya, Faragványos and Aszas) within a 2 km radius. In the 1990s Gyula Nováki and György Sándorfi completed a comprehensive topographic survey of the site (MATUZ & NOVÁKI 2002, 8), later incorporated into the documentation entry for the Hungarian National Online Site Directory by Magdolna Hellebrandt. The site description included the two key, still recognisable features of the site: 1) the 19 m wide ditch separating the settlement from the rest of the 400 m long N–S ridge, 2) 1–1.5 m high stone fortification wall particularly observable on the E side of the plateau. In 2020, the “Bronze Hoard Project” of the Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, spearheaded by Gábor V. Szabó, conducted an intensive metal detection survey at the site. In this instance, substantial amounts of struck flint and metal artefacts (iron tools, brooches, arrowheads) were collected (BARCSI et al. 2022, 23–24). These find assemblages indicate that the site was utilised in the Middle Neolithic (Bükk) and the Late Iron Age (La Tène D). Furthermore, since the arrowheads concentrated around the fortification, it is reasonable to assume that local residents suffered an attack from beyond the boundaries of their settlement at some point during the Late Iron Age (BARCSI et al. 2022, 24).

The volunteers of the Erdőbénye Community Archaeology Project visited the site in the spring of 2025, where – within the course of an hour – over 150 metal finds were collected. The majority of these (~ 100 pcs) represented typical Late Iron Age single-barbed arrowheads, which were concentrated along the stone wall and inside the residential zone of the settlement. This seems to support the presumption of violent conflict happening in the past at least once, or even perhaps multiple times (Fig. 5). The preliminary research carried out on this newly retrieved assemblage implies that the single-barbed arrowheads can be associated with Late La Tène communities (Cotini?), described in the archaeological literature as the Púchov culture which has a distribution coinciding with present day Slovakia, NW Moravia and the SE parts of Poland



Fig. 5. Late Iron Age arrowheads from Mekecsvár
(photo by László György, NRI)



Fig. 6. In situ grinding stone brought to light by a fallen tree
(photo by Borbála Nyíri)

(PIETA 2010). This population preferred settlement locations on hilltops and ridges, where defence and proximity to iron ore sources likely played a significant role. The presence of other finds (like a bronze wine strainer ladle and an intaglio ring – BAKOS 2020b, 64–77) originally from the territories of the Roman Empire provides evidence for intensive communication between these regions during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. Another, more recent group of metal artefacts was related to forestry and perhaps to pig herding (pannage) activities in the Late Medieval – Early Modern period. Prehistoric and Late Medieval – Early Modern finds identified at Mekecsvár reflect the situation documented at other sites across the SW Zemplén, where predominantly these two archaeological components are represented.

The stone fortification and traces of terracing, levelling undertaken at the site are still evident today (Fig. 6). Standing on the northern crest of the Mekecsvár, the peak of the Szokolya, the slopes of the Nagy-Rakottás (with evidence of Iron Age habitation) and the large, fortified settlement of Tállya–Óvár (Late Bronze Age – Iron Age) are all visible along with the so-called Deákkút Valley that splits into two smaller branches skirting the Mekecsvár from either side before both running towards the

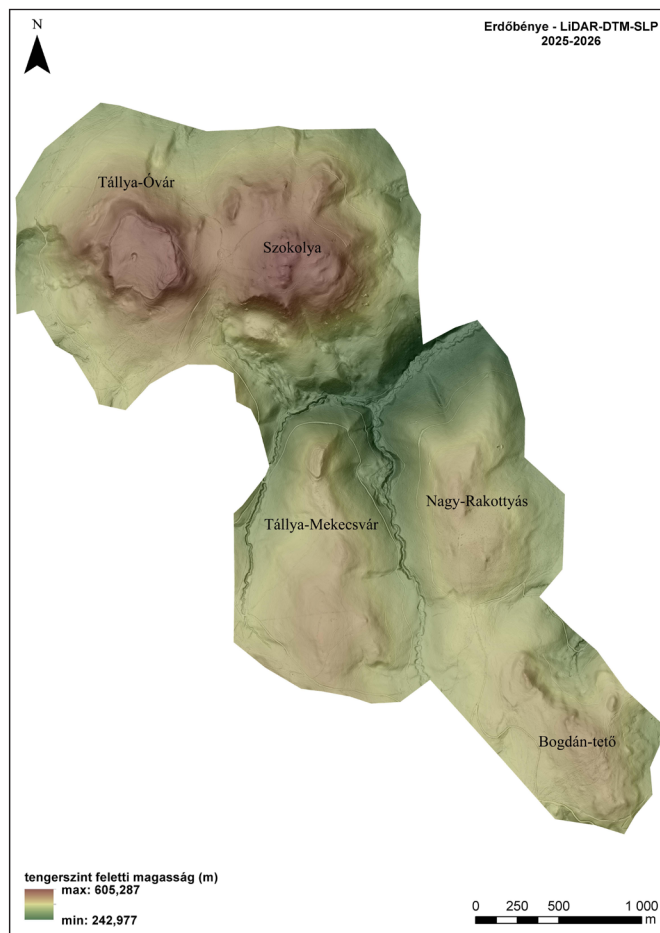


Fig. 7. LiDAR image of Tállya–Mekecsvár, Tállya–Óvár, Szokolya, Nagy-Rakottás and Bogdán-tető
(image by Tamás Látos and Zsolt Zsiga, NRI)

Tállya Basin. Could it be that inhabitants of the site desired not only to observe but to control the movement of people and their possessions along these valleys?

In the next stage of research, we intend to consider the role of Mekecsvár within the context of already investigated contemporary sites of Óvár, Aszas-tető, and Bánya-hegyi-nyereg, as well as the recently identified site of Bogdán-tető. Was there a certain hierarchy (or heterarchy) between these settlements? As a first step – relying on non-destructive or minimally invasive investigation methods, which, given the topography and the dense vegetation of the SW Zemplén, proved to be most fruitful – Tamás Látos and Zsolt Zsiga completed the LiDAR survey of a large area including the fortified site of the neighbouring Tállya–Óvár in 2025–2026 (Fig. 7).³ The assessment of the images and the identification of potential features, sites or burials are still ongoing. These data will be the key to the understanding of these sites within a holistic network as previously articulated by Gábor V. Szabó and his colleagues (BARCSI et al. 2022, 26). To this aim, in the near future we are planning – with the involvement of local volunteers – the grid-based sampling of the Mekecsvár (a method employed also during the investigation of Tállya–Óvár) in order to compare and contrast the two (seemingly major) sites of the region.

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³ The LiDAR survey was carried out using a CHC BB4 mini drone, fitted with a CHC AA450 sensor. The processing of the imagery was conducted by CoPre2, CloudCompare, QGIS and ArcGIS software.

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