

IDENTIFYING THE FINDSPOT OF THE EARLY AVAR ELITE BURIAL AT KUNMADARAS: EXCAVATION OF A LATE AVAR HOUSE

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Since the end of the nineteenth century, the Kunmadaras gold hoard preserved in the Hungarian National Museum has been regarded as one of the most significant assemblages of the Avar period. However, for a long time, no reliable information was available concerning its exact findspot. It was not until 1980 that István Bóna succeeded in identifying the location through archival records preserved in the museum and a verification excavation. The present paper begins with an overview of the history of research, followed by a brief summary of the available evidence relating to the hoard and the artefacts recovered from it. It then presents a concise account of the settlement features and archaeological finds uncovered during the excavation. Among these, the ceramic assemblage is of particular importance, as it provides new evidence for the distribution of certain pottery types during the Avar period.

Keywords: Avar elite burial, settlement research, Avar period house, Avar period ceramics

BACKGROUND

The objects comprising the “Madaras gold hoard” entered the collections of the Hungarian National Museum in December 1883. As the exact place of discovery was not documented at that time, it remained uncertain for many years whether the designation “Madaras” referred to Bácsmadaras in the Danube–Tisza Interfluve or to Kunmadaras in the Great Hungarian Plain (*Fig. 1*). István Bóna discovered the official



Fig. 1: Location of the confirmatory excavation within the administrative boundaries of Kunmadaras.

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Fig. 2: Excavation team photograph: archaeologists participating in the 1981 verification excavation at Kunmadaras, from left to right (front row): László Madaras, Pál Raczky, István Bóna, and Gyöngyi Kovács; excavation workers in the back row. (Photograph: Csilla Siklódi)

acquisition register in the archives of the Hungarian National Museum in 1978. Although the document did not specify the exact findspot, it contained the names of the individuals who had handed over the finds. Tracing these names clearly pointed to the Nagykunság region. This conclusion was also supported by the research of Pál Raczky, who identified a county administrative report dating to 1925 in the archives of Jász–Nagykun–Szolnok County. The report contains the following entry: “Kunmadaras. A horseman buried together with his horse was found in the northern part of the so-called Újvári Cemetery; the objects recovered from the grave are preserved in the Hungarian National Museum” (BÓNA 1982–1983, 115–116).

István Bóna and Pál Raczky started an archaeological investigation aiming to verify the findspot of the “Madaras hoard” between 17 and 20 September 1980. Therefore, they started an excavation in the northern part of the so-called Újtemető (lit. “New Cemetery”) at Kunmadaras, where traces of an Avar-period settlement were identified. Archaeological investigations continued between 7 and 10 September 1981 on the ridge situated north of the Újtemető. The research team included Pál Raczky, László Madaras, Gyöngyi Kovács, and Csilla Siklódi (Fig. 2). During this campaign, they succeeded in locating the position of the triangulation point, a stone pillar installed for geodetic surveying purposes (Fig. 3). The grave of an Avar-period elite individual was reportedly discovered during the laying of its foundation (BÓNA 1982–1983, 116–117).

THE “MADARAS” FIND

The assemblage consists of the grave goods of an Early Avar horseman burial (Figs. 4–5). The finds were first briefly described by József Hampel (HAMPEL 1894, 145. t.; 1905, III. 272. t.). Gyula László later published an almost complete account of the assemblage in 1955 (LÁSZLÓ 1955, 274–275, Pls. 65–68; BÓNA 1982–1983, 115–116). Descriptions and drawings of the objects are also included in the catalogue of Avar-period gold finds in the Hungarian National Museum (GARAM 1993, 27–30).

The weapon belt included a large strap-end with side-straps, decorated with a ribbed upper plate (Fig. 4.

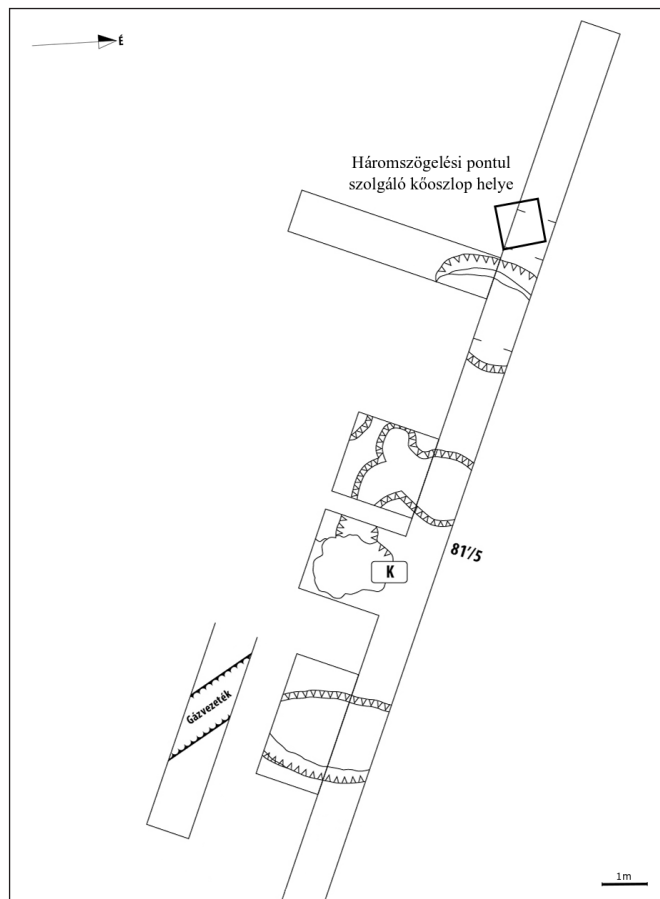


Fig. 3: Location of the stone pillar serving as a triangulation point, during the foundation work of which the Early Avar elite burial at Kunmadaras was reportedly discovered, documented during the 1981 verification excavation.



Fig. 4: Gold and gilded bronze artefacts from the Early Avar elite burial at Kunmadaras: 1. gilded bronze buckle; 2–11. gilded bronze small strap-ends; 12. oval mount; 13. shield-shaped mount; 14–16. fragments of gilded bronze small strap-ends; 17. gold sheet scabbard fitting; 18–19. gold sword suspension fittings; 20. gold large strap-end; 21–30. hemispherical bronze horse-harness mounts pressed together with gold sheet; 31–35. trilobate bronze horse-harness mounts pressed together with gold sheet.

20), which, like its parallel from the Bócsa assemblage, was made of gold. Eleven small gilded bronze strap-ends (Fig. 4. 2–11) are ornamented with a toothed interlace pattern. Gyula László compared these pieces to the belt fittings from Grave 9 of the cemetery at Kiskőrös–Város alatt (LÁSZLÓ 1955, 274; GARAM 1993, 28). The weapon belt also included a gilded bronze buckle decorated with the same toothed interlace motif (Fig. 4. 1) (DAIM 2001, 496–497). According to István Bóna, not all of these items necessarily belonged to the weapon belt; some may have been part of the horse harness, similarly to the equipment from the mounted burial at Szegvár (BÓNA 1982–1983, 116). In contrast, Gyula László and Éva Garam argued that all of these fittings belonged exclusively to the belt (LÁSZLÓ 1955, 274; GARAM 1993, 28; HEINRICH-TAMÁSKA 2006, 578). As a close parallel to the weapon belt, Garam cited the belt set from Grave 24 at Káptalanfő (GARAM 1993, 27–28).

The assemblage also contained an oval mount (Fig. 4. 12) and a shield-shaped mount (Fig. 4. 13), both attached to the leather belt by two rivets (GARAM 1993, 27–28). A gold sheet bead (Fig. 5. 16) probably served as a garment ornament. A similar example, made of silver with gold edging, is also known from the Bócsa assemblage (GARAM 1993, 28). The twisted neck-ring (Fig. 5. 9–10) finds its closest parallel in a Middle Avar burial at Ozora, while comparable twisted-wire neck-rings, bracelets, and anklets are known from sixth- and seventh-century graves in southern Russia and Azerbaijan (BÁLINT 1995, 90–91; GARAM 1993, 28–29).

Of the sword, only the gold sheet scabbard fitting (Fig. 4. 17) and the suspension fitting (Fig. 4. 18) have survived. The sword was suspended by a P-shaped suspension mount, a form characteristic of the Early



Fig.5: Gold and gilded bronze artefacts from the Early Avar elite burial at Kunmadaras: 1–8. pressed gold sheet ornaments; 9–10. twisted gold neck-rings; 11–14. pressed gold sheet ornaments; 15. gilded bronze mount; 16. gold sheet bead.

Avar period, with parallels from Csanytelek (KÜRTI 1990, Fig. 1. 18) and Grave 193 at Zamárdi (BÁRDOS 2000, Cat. 59; CSIKY 2015, 311–314). This type of sword suspension is generally dated to the early seventh century in the Carpathian Basin (BÁLINT 1995, 269 ff.). The uniqueness of both the sword suspension and the strap-ends lies in their toothed interlace decoration. Within the Trans-Tisza region, this ornamental motif is otherwise unknown on comparable artefact types. The same pattern decorates the sword belt and scabbard fittings, as well as the small strap-ends and bronze buckle belonging to the belt set described above. Its occurrence in the Trans-Tisza region is particularly noteworthy because most artefacts bearing this decoration have been recovered from Transdanubia, primarily in archaeological contexts associated with Merovingian material culture (cf. HEINRICH-TAMÁSKA 2002, 245–263; HEINRICH-TAMÁSKA 2005, 155).

The horse harness was ornamented with ten hemispherical mounts (Fig. 4. 21–30) and five trilobate mounts (Fig. 4. 31–35), each consisting of bronze pressed together with gold sheet. Trilobate, or trefoil-shaped, mounts were widespread during this period (CSUTHY 2013, 109–114). Similar to the horse harness assemblage from the Kunágota burial, the Kunmadaras set is probably also incomplete (GARAM 1993, 30).

The belt set, horse-harness fittings, and sword mounts from the Kunmadaras burial clearly indicate that the deceased was a member of the Early Avar elite who lived around the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh century. The belt fittings and sword mounts decorated with toothed interlace, together with the twisted neck-ring, are exceptional finds within the region. The individual buried with these prestigious objects was most likely a high-ranking leader who exercised authority in the Tisza region during the initial phase of Avar rule and belonged to the highest social stratum of Avar society. Other richly furnished mounted warrior burials of comparable status are known from Kunágota and Törökkánizsa in the Trans-Tisza region. Together, these graves probably represent the group of elite individuals who controlled and administered the region during this period (GARAM 1993, 30; LÖRINCZY 2019, 171).

CONFIRMATORY EXCAVATION AND AN AVAR-PERIOD HOUSE

During the excavations initiated under the direction of István Bóna in 1980, traces of an Avar-period settlement were identified. As only a single feature could be investigated within the excavation trench, the remains of a semi-subterranean building were excavated (Figs. 6–8). The building had an irregular square ground plan and was oriented northeast–southwest. The dimensions of the semi-subterranean house were $357 \times 344 \times 323 \times 340$ cm, with a floor area of approximately 11.6 m^2 . A clay oven was probably constructed in its northern corner, although its exact form could not be determined. No entrance could be identified.

Three postholes were identified within the building. Two were placed opposite one another in the centres of the shorter, northeastern and southwestern sides, while the third was located in the middle of the northwestern side. Based on this arrangement, a purlin-supported gable roof can be reconstructed for the building. In the western corner, a roughly circular, approximately 60 cm deep pit was dug into both the floor and the side wall of the building. This feature was most likely used for storage. The sunken-featured structure clearly fulfilled a residential function.

All of the building's characteristics are typical of Avar-period sunken-featured houses. Such buildings are most commonly rectangular or square in plan, as at Kunmadaras (e.g. BAJKAI 2014, 31), although nearly circular and oval examples are also known, albeit rarely (BÓNA 1973, 67). The orientation of the structure

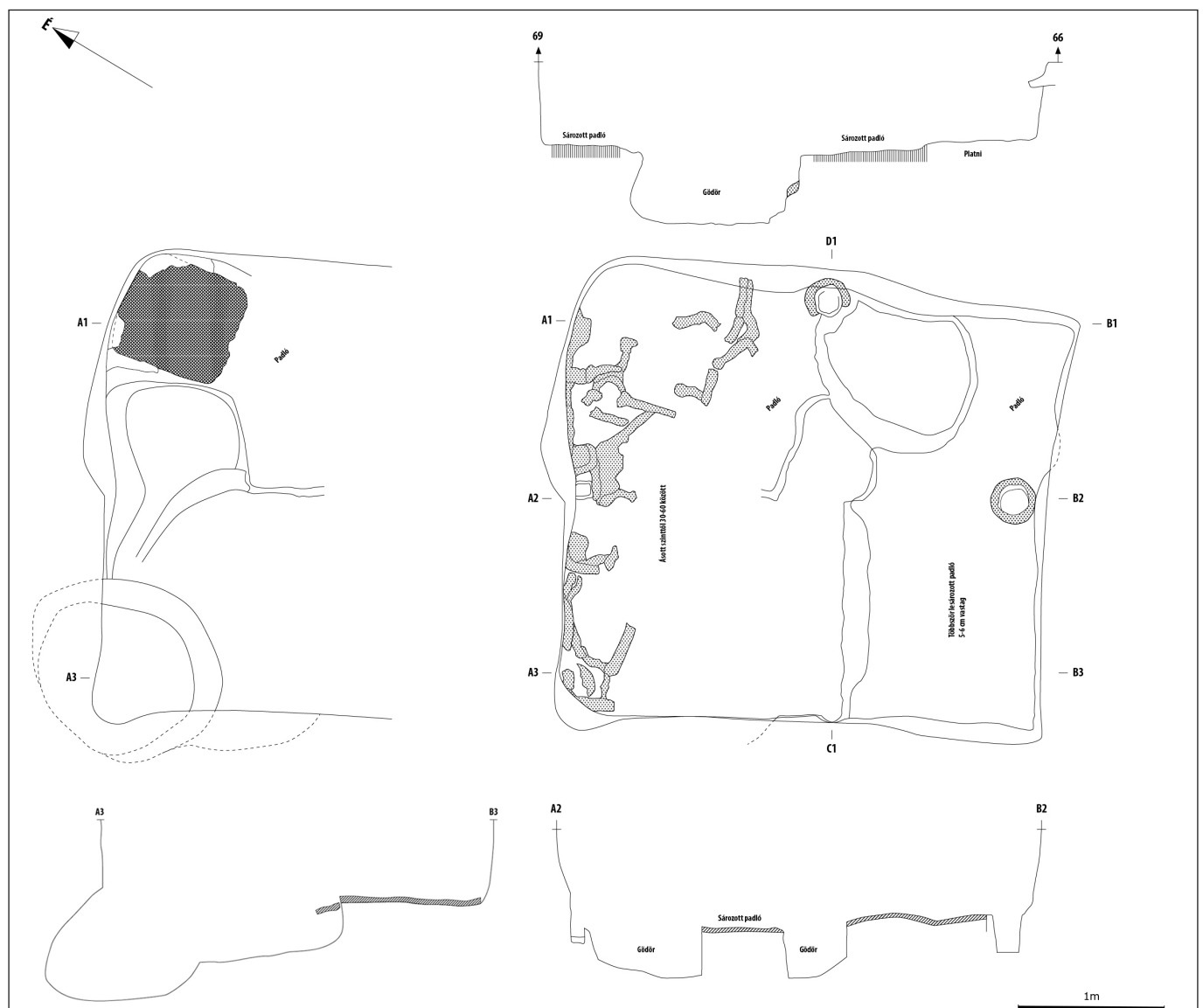


Fig. 6: Plan of the Avar-period sunken-featured building from the 1980 excavation.

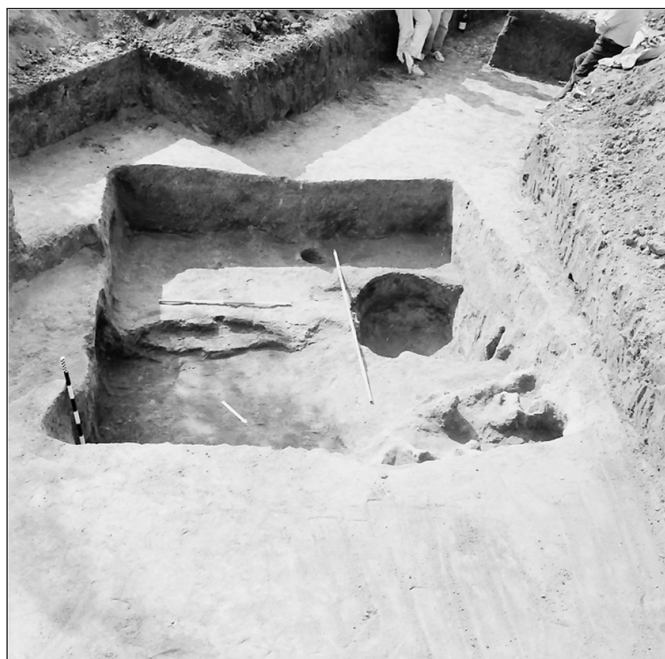


Fig. 7: Photograph of the building pit taken during the 1980 excavation, viewed from the northeastern side.



Fig. 8: Photograph of the building pit taken during the 1980 excavation, viewed from the southeastern side.

likewise falls within the usual range in the period. A northwest–southeast orientation is the most common, although north–south and west–east alignments also occur (CSEH 1989, 35; BAJKAI 2014, 31). Ovens were generally situated in one of the corners of the building or partly recessed into the wall adjacent to a corner (CSEH 1989, 36; MADARAS 1989, 25–27; KONDE 2015, 73; BAJKAI 2014, 34).

The arrangement of the postholes at Kunmadaras suggests a roof construction supported by two forked posts carrying a purlin, which is the most common reconstruction for Avar-period buildings. Nevertheless, such reconstructions remain hypothetical in most cases (CSEH 1989, 35–36; BALOGH 2018, 14–19). Excavations of Avar-period settlements at Rákóczifalva–Bagi-földek have demonstrated that the considerable variation in post arrangements, the number of posts, and pit morphology suggests several different roof reconstructions. If posts are either asymmetrically arranged or missing, the possibility of an external supporting framework has also been proposed. In the case of structures with numerous posts positioned at regular intervals along the walls, a wattle-and-daub structure may be assumed. Such buildings might have had a hipped roof supported by a wall plate (KONDE 2015, 73–83).

POTTERY

The ceramic assemblage is dominated by hand-built pottery, although a smaller number of slow wheel-thrown and fast wheel-thrown vessel fragments were also recovered (Fig. 9). Of the 160 sherds, 132 (82.5%) are hand-formed. The majority are heavily tempered with coarse grog and correspond well to the ceramic tradition documented at Avar-period settlements across the Great Hungarian Plain (LISKA 1999, 68; BENEDEK–PÓPITY 2010, 197; PÓPITY 2014, 233; PÓPITY 2015, 103–104; BAJKAI 2015, 15).

Among the 23 fragments of slow wheel-thrown pottery, 20 (86.95%) were decorated. The most characteristic motifs are bundles of straight and/or wavy lines (Fig. 9. 4–6), both of which are common decorative elements on slow wheel-thrown pottery from Avar-period settlements (BAJKAI 2014, 40; BAJKAI 2015, 19). The fragmentary nature of the assemblage makes reconstructing vessel forms and functions difficult.

Particularly noteworthy is the presence of two categories of fast wheel-thrown pottery in the house: Avar black ware (VIDA 1999, 63–74) (Fig. 9. 1–2), or a local variant, and yellowish-red ware characteristic of the Danube–Tisza Interfluvium (VIDA 1999, 83–88) (Fig. 9. 3). The black ware's fabric is slightly gritty and tempered with sand and fine gravel. It was fired with a reduced atmosphere, producing a dark grey surface

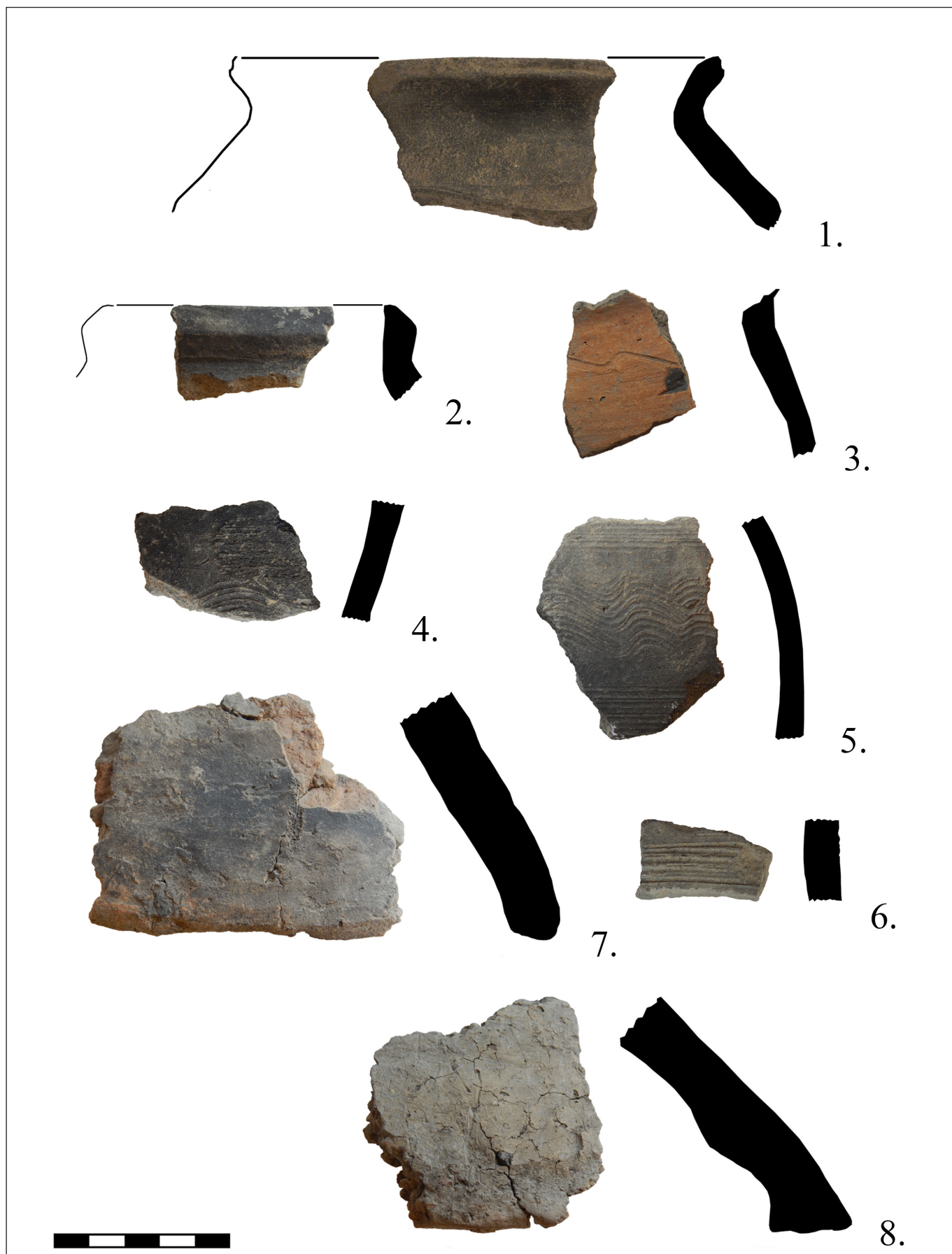


Fig. 9: 1–2. fast wheel-thrown Avar black ware; 3. fast wheel-thrown yellowish-red ware from the Danube–Tisza Interfluve; 4–6. slow wheel-thrown pottery decorated with incised bundles of straight and wavy lines; 7–8. hand-built baking bells.

with a generally smooth surface, although that of one sherd (*Fig. 9. 1*) is slightly rough. Four carinated rim fragments belong to this ware, one of which was decorated with a band of wavy lines. This fragment belonged to a vessel with a strongly everted, flat-topped rim, a short neck, and a sharply defined shoulder. Another black-grey rim appears to belong to a similar vessel lacking a distinct neck but with a bevelled shoulder. A third fragment can be reconstructed as belonging to a vessel with an obliquely cut rim and an abruptly widening shoulder. A further rim fragment displays a shallow groove running along the moderately everted rim (*Fig. 9. 1*). Below its short neck, the vessel expands into a markedly globular body. The single fragment of yellowish-red ware (*Fig. 9. 3*) is a body sherd decorated with a flat wavy line. The fabric, fired with an oxidised atmosphere, has a brick-red colour and is finely tempered with sand. It probably belonged to a storage vessel for liquids.

The occurrence of Avar black ware at Kunmadaras is particularly remarkable, since this ceramic type has previously been found almost exclusively in Transdanubia and along the left bank of the Danube (VIDA 1999, 63–74; SKRIBA 2017, 24–25). Its appearance at Kunmadaras may indicate the presence of a community in the central Great Hungarian Plain that possessed the technological knowledge to produce such high-quality pottery, had access to a source from which to acquire it, or maintained contacts with communities in Transdanubia during the Avar period (VIDA 1999, 63–74).

Based on technological characteristics, four production groups can be distinguished among the slow wheel-thrown vessels and nine among the hand-formed pottery. Eight different vessel types could be identified by function. These include fragments of a shallow, rounded bowl and a thick strap handle that probably belonged to a jug. A circular knob and a rim fragment can be assigned to vessel lids. Three handle fragments were identified as belonging to hand-formed cauldrons, all of which represent examples with internally attached handles. Cooking equipment is represented by a relatively large number of baking bell fragments (40 specimens) and by a single flat, rectangular fragment interpreted as part of a baking plate. These two vessel types were used together for baking bread, flatbreads, dough products, and meat over an open fire (VIDA 2011, 712, 737–738). At Kunmadaras, the smaller baking bells have rim diameters of 15–30 cm, while the larger ones range from 30 to 50 cm (*Fig. 9. 7–8*). Similar variability has been observed at other Avar-period settlements, for example at Felgyő–Kettőshalmi-dűlő (30–60 cm; BALOGH 2018, 30) and Kompolt (26–48 cm; VADAY 1999, 243).

On the basis of the hand-formed pottery types—particularly the baking bells (HAJNAL 2008, 284–285; VIDA 2011, 726) and cauldrons (HAJNAL 2008, 280)—together with the slow wheel-thrown pottery decorated with bundles of straight and wavy lines (VIDA 1991, 391; MADARAS 2012, 729), as well as the small quantity of Avar black ware (VIDA 1999, 63–74) and yellowish-red ware from the Danube–Tisza Interfluve (VIDA 1999, 86), the excavated settlement area can be dated to the transition between the Middle and Late Avar periods, approximately from the late seventh century to the first half of the eighth century.

In addition to the pottery, several other artefacts were recovered, such as fragments of daub, slag, and stone finds. The assemblage also included a spindle whorl decorated with a zigzag pattern, a fragment of a flat whetstone, a shell fragment, and seven heavily corroded elongated iron strips. A total of 69 animal bones were found. Most belonged to small ruminants or cattle, although horse and pig bones were likewise represented.²

Even this single excavated house at Kunmadaras yielded a technologically and morphologically diverse ceramic assemblage representing a wide range of vessel types and functions, thus providing valuable evidence for both the economic and social aspects of the settlement. The presence of vessels for cooking, baking, serving, and the storage of liquids offers insights into the dietary practices of its inhabitants. At the same time, the coexistence of pottery produced using different manufacturing techniques not only reflects the functional diversity of ceramic production and use but also suggests a community whose material requirements and economic resources exceeded those of an average Avar-period settlement on the Great Hungarian Plain. From a settlement-historical perspective, these observations underline the exceptional

² I am indebted to Péter Csippán for identifying the archaeozoological remains.

character of the site within the region, a status further reinforced by the discovery of the richly furnished elite burial at Kunmadaras.

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