

THE VANISHED AVARS RETURN TO THE CIFRAPALOTA

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Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 15 (2026) Issue 1, pp. 42–46.

They called themselves Avars, and then “perished like the Avars”. The nearly 250-year history of the Avars in the Carpathian Basin can be framed by these two source references. Greek historians wrote of the Avars who came to Byzantium as envoys that these strange-looking nomads were not in fact Avars at all, but merely claimed to be so. A few centuries later, the Russian-language Primary Chronicle once again provides a character sketch of the people, and, incidentally, also brings their history to a close: “...for the Avars were tall and proud in mind; and God destroyed them, and they all died, and not a single Avar remained. And to this day there is a saying in Rus’: ‘They perished like the Avars’, for neither their clan nor their descendants remained.”

Keywords: exhibition, Avar period, graves, archaeogenetics, Kecskemét

Many centuries later, these strange-looking, tall, and proud-minded Avars have returned to the Katona József Museum in Kecskemét – and not for the first time. Perhaps there is no other museum in Hungary where Avar exhibitions are organised so often. In the past quarter-century alone, three high-quality and visually impressive exhibitions have focused on the renowned Avars of Bács-Kiskun County, not to mention the Kunbábony find, which was displayed shortly after its discovery (*The Avar Prince of Kunbábony*, curated by H. Tóth Elvira in 1972). In 2000, Erika Wicker presented the solitary grave of an elite warrior, discovered during ordnance clearance and subsequently excavated professionally, together with his finds (*Grave of an Avar Leader at Petőfiszállás*). Four years later, the gold from Kunbábony once again illuminated the museum building in another exhibition, also curated by Erika Wicker (*Kunbábony. Treasures of an Avar Prince*). It is therefore hardly surprising that the museum’s first permanent archaeological exhibition in Kecskemét (2014) also focused on the Avars. Once again curated by Erika Wicker, she truly gave it her all: the exhibition was a deliberate spectacle, centred exclusively on the splendour of the Avar elite, dazzling visitors – and naturally the professional audience as well – to this day with the gold objects of the highest and most affluent echelons of society (*Lords and Leaders. Famous Avar Finds from the Kiskunság*).

Now, ten years later, the Avars have once again taken centre stage in the Secessionist palace with the opening on 8 November 2024 of the comprehensive archaeological exhibition *In the Footsteps of a Vanished People. The Life of the Avars in the Danube–Tisza Interfluve*. The three curators – Zsófia Rácz, Gabriella Hajdrik, and Gábor Wilhelm – set themselves the goal of presenting the history and life of the Avars between the 6th and 9th centuries with the help of a growing number of newly discovered sites and finds from the past decade. The emphasis was on new results, and indeed there was plenty to choose from. The county has never lacked enviably splendid finds, and the activity and spectacular results of the current young generation of archaeologists in Kecskemét are worthy successors to the fieldwork of their distinguished predecessors, Elvira H. Tóth, Attila Horváth, and Erika Wicker. Thanks to their work, Bács-Kiskun will for a long time remain the county in Hungarian archaeology where the richest and most important Avar graves and cemeteries have been discovered – those that are indispensable in any illustrated volume and that have been continuously cited in the field for decades.

With high-quality contributions by exhibition designer Mónika Szelei and graphic designer Szabolcs Kovács, the curators present the latest Avar finds, our history, and their life in a space of 317 m² in total. The exhibition is divided into three major units. The first presents newly discovered Avar finds from 2008–2024, which is exemplary in itself, as excavation was rapidly followed by professional conservation and then by

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the publication of the finds. It is quite exceptional that the exhibition was further expanded after its opening with the double grave excavated in 2026 at Soltvadkert.

The first unit presents also finds recovered through community archaeology projects, discovered during metal detecting and field surveys. This organised form of fieldwork has now become an indispensable part of our profession, enriching scholarship with a vast quantity of finds and information. It seems that, after overcoming initial difficulties, excellent collaborations are now known nationwide, including Bács-Kiskun County.

The second major unit of the exhibition presents the largest Avar Period settlement excavated in Hungary to date, in the area of the Kecskemét–Mercedes factory. The third unit focuses on people — those anonymous Avars whom we archaeologists can only identify by a settlement name and a number.

The exhibition thus strives for completeness, seeking to present all important aspects of life and thereby to provide a comprehensive picture of Avar life.

The first unit is particularly strong, both visually and in terms of content (*Fig. 1*); it is clearly the most important part of the exhibition. The material is well structured: the origins of the Avars and their migration to the Carpathian Basin are presented very briefly. There are no complicated descriptions; visitors are given just enough information to position the centuries of Avar history in their minds.

Upon entering the exhibition, visitors are received with high honours: they meet a stern Mongolian face of one of the wealthiest Avar leaders of all time, the ruler from Kunbábony. While scholarly works still tend to be cautious in determining whether he was truly a *qagan* or not, in private conversations he is most often referred to as such. The exhibition itself does not take a position on this question, but those interested in further details can view all of his finds one floor above, in the permanent archaeological exhibition, where the sight of the 155 objects – amounting to some 2.4 kilograms of extraordinary gold – may well encourage visitors to form their own opinion. In the next room, however, the curators do offer some assistance with interpretation, drawing on the results of another discipline: genetics. It has been demonstrated that, among all known Avar Period samples, this individual possesses the highest number of distant kinship connections. Moreover, his descendants appear in large and important cemeteries, clearly confirming the distinguished and elite status of his lineage.

This example also shows how genetic results can lead research into areas that archaeology alone could never reach. Not only can family relationships within a single cemetery be identified, but populations – or segments of populations – from distant cemeteries can also be connected through these methods. This naturally opens up a wealth of exciting possibilities and new perspectives for scholarship. Curator Zsófia Rácz is involved in numerous international archaeogenetic research projects and also organises such research; if anyone is aware of the potential of this method (as well as its challenges), it is certainly her. It is therefore hardly coincidental that, following the historical background and the presentation of the Kunbábony ‘*qagan*’, the very first display case in the exhibition presents the family tree as emerging from an Avar cemetery at Kunszállás, reconstructed on the basis of genetic data. The results are impressive, and by giving this topic such prominence, the curators send a clear message to both visitors and the scholarly community: this method represents one of the important directions for future research. Fortunately, others share this view, as indicated by a caption noting that the genetic research was supported by the European Research Council, the highest-level scientific funding system of the European Union.

The remainder of the room presents material from Avar cemeteries discovered in recent decades, selected from nearly five hundred graves. It is obviously impossible to discuss them in detail here, so I would like to highlight only a few elements that I find particularly important.



Fig. 1. Dark backgrounds (photo by Szabolcs Kovács, KKJM)

Even the relative chronology of the Avar Period marvels at this No. 1: Finding artefacts in the bed of the Danube is a sensation. Finding Avar period goldsmith's tools is an even greater sensation. Finding goldsmith's tools in the bed of the Danube is, quite simply, the embodiment of the Archaeological Sensation. Besides, discoveries that may overturn a well-established relative chronology are an immense gift to scholarship. Undoubtedly one of the most exciting assemblages in the exhibition is the goldsmith's kit from Apostag, which contained pressing and casting moulds spanning nearly two centuries – indicating that the set was passed down either within a family or among members of a workshop. The fact that tools capable of producing artefacts covering almost 200 years of material culture were available at the same time suggests that it was entirely possible for a mount-decorated belt dated to the 7th century and another dated to the late 8th century to have been made in the very same hour. It is as if a car factory could simultaneously produce models from 1962 and the present day. No relative chronology, however stable, could remain unaffected by this.

Even the relative chronology of the Avar Period marvels at this No. 2: The double grave excavated at Bácsalmás, in which two men were buried with mount-decorated belts, is in a prominent position within the exhibition. The younger individual, aged 18–19, wore a cast bronze mount-decorated belt in keeping with the fashion of his time, while the belt of the approximately 50-year-old man reflects the vogue of a much earlier period – the time when he had received his belt from his community according to the fashion then prevailing. Two men in a single grave pit, with objects differing by several decades. Two generations and the material culture of two generations in one grave: a rare archaeological situation indeed.

Success, wealth, and splendour: Many may ask what the source was of the vast quantities of precious metal possessed by the Avars. The answer is disarmingly simple: it arrived from Byzantium as war tribute and ransom payments for peace. During the 53 years between their appearance in Europe and AD 626, they were in continuous conflict with Byzantium, receiving a total of approximately 4.5 million solidi (Byzantine gold coins) from successive emperors as peace payments – amounting to roughly 20,000 kilograms of gold. This quantity is difficult to grasp, but becomes more comprehensible if we consider that the largest EU-standard lorries can carry a maximum of 24–26 tonnes of goods. The Avars thus received almost a full truckload of gold from the Byzantine emperor – more than enough to finance their splendour.

The curators present nearly 600 artefacts, seven belt reconstructions, and 61 reconstruction drawings. The spatial design is striking; its organisation is simple yet highly practical. Each site is given its own distinct unit, articulated effectively by walls set at angles within the space or slightly detached from the main wall surfaces. For each site, the curators have essentially combined three main elements: a brief description of the excavation and its results, the finds themselves, and a reconstruction (either as an object or in graphic form). Graphic variety is provided by a number of grave plans and grave reconstructions (Fig. 2).

Children are guided through a high-quality museum education section with the help of a little girl nicknamed Avarka ('Little Avar'). The designers have also ensured that content is displayed at a child-friendly



Fig. 2. Colour reconstructions bring the archaeological material to life (photo by Szabolcs Kovács, KKJM)



Fig. 3. The colourful details stand out (photo by Szabolcs Kovács, KKJM)

height and generally encourages activity and play. These sections are not only intended for children but also serve as useful moments of rest, amid the wealth of material on display, for adults. One of the best ideas can be found in the presentation of the Apostal goldsmith, where visitors can shade in fine Avar motifs on a piece of paper which they can of course take home. Other excellent ideas include the dress-up wall, trying out needle cases, and braiding a plait. Particularly useful at the beginning of the exhibition is the children's glossary, which highlights the most frequently occurring terms and their meanings.

The visual design is elegant, modern, and centred on the artefacts. The spaces are predominantly black, against which the archaeological content stands out in sharp relief. The display cases are simple, with neutral backgrounds (dark grey and blue), and the lighting of the objects works particularly well for metal. Fortunately, the explanations corresponding to the numbers next to the artefacts are placed beside the cases rather than inside them, so those deciphering them do not obstruct the view for others. The descriptions of the objects are concise and to the point, containing only the essential information. The black base, the grey and blue backgrounds of the cases, and the cool lighting are excellently counterbalanced by regularly used warm tones: the brownish-red hues of the graphics (for example, the goldsmith illustration), the striking red trim of Avarka's *kaftan* and brown hair (Fig. 3), the yellowish-brown of the settlement names on the site panels, and the colour of Avarka's speech bubbles – not to mention the refined sheen of the parquet floor – all serve to enliven the space.

Halfway through the exhibition, a thematic shift occurs, accompanied by a change in colour scheme. In the sections presenting settlements and in the bioarchaeological space, black is replaced by warmer tones. From this point onwards, the space becomes lighter and more open, which also alters visitor behaviour. Up to this point, one was directed from showcase to showcase, admiring the remarkable finds of this remarkable people; here, however, visitors can sit down, watch videos of excavations, and study excellent and informative panels on everyday activities (grain grinding, bread-making, the use of baking bells, the processing of wool and flax). They can even play nine men's morris, inspired by the eight game boards scratched into the floor discovered in one of the houses at the Mercedes site (Fig. 4). This section of the exhibition also encourages movement: visitors can walk along the large ditch system and the adjacent pit system uncovered at the settlement, represented on the floor – a model example of creating an effective illusion (Fig. 5).

One of the key tasks of contemporary exhibition design is to engage visitors. On the one hand, this means encouraging their active participation, which the curators have achieved through skilful tools and methods. Another possible form of engagement is the creation of an emotional connection. One obvious means of this is through awe, simply marvelling at the richness and beauty of the extraordinary finds. The other path is when the exhibition steps beyond the strict framework of presenting objects and brings forth the human being behind them – the Avar individual, who can be just as intriguing to us as their artefacts.



Fig. 4. The light section of the exhibition, with a reconstructed house and a nine men's morris board on the floor (photo by Szabolcs Kovács, KKJM)



Fig. 5. The ancient ditch shows the path (photo by Szabolcs Kovács, KKJM)



Fig. 6. The anthropology section
(photo by Szabolcs Kovács, KKJM)

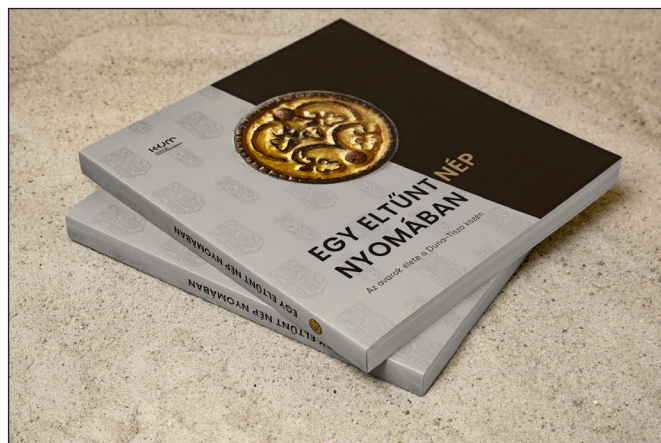


Fig. 7. Study volume published for the exhibition
(photo by Szabolcs Kovács, KKJM)

The final unit of the exhibition is devoted to bioarchaeology, where visitors encounter even the hastily arranged grave of victims of a brutal double murder, and learn about Avar lifestyle and diseases (Fig. 6). All this leads to a profound realisation: those who once shone in gold and elaborate garments struggled with the same ailments as people today. Everything is present here – fractures, dislocations, physical disabilities, tuberculosis, leprosy, childhood illnesses – just as in a modern trauma or rheumatology clinic... In this section, Avars are made human: one can see pain, families, bodies cast into pits and humiliated, alongside an elite shining in glory, and a ruler – figures who step out of books and display cases, making us realise that they were ‘only’ just like us.

It is a particular pleasure that, alongside the visual experience, visitors can also take home three publications. The volume bearing the title of the exhibition (Fig. 7), published in 2024 and edited by Zsófia Rácz, contains 18 high-quality studies across its 307 pages, addressing the material on display. This exceptionally elegant volume, produced to an outstanding printing standard, features a total of 451 Avar period objects. The organisers have also thought of children, publishing two activity booklets entitled *Avarka és népe* [*Avarka and Her People*] for younger and slightly older audiences.

The highly elegant, multi-layered, and high-quality exhibition is open to visitors at the Cifrapalota in Kecskemét until 28 June 2026. The exhibition deservedly won the Grand Prize of the Exhibition of the Year Award 2025 in the category of exhibitions with a budget exceeding 10 million forints.