GENIUS LOCI

LASZLOVSZKY 60

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Treasures of the "Lower Ten Thousand"? Hoards of Iron Objects

Thomas Kühtreiber* – Mária Vargha**

Medieval hoard finds containing jewelry and coins have attracted both academic and public interest for decades. In archaeological and art historical research these hoards play a crucial role in constructing the chronology of dress accessories and silver wares. These finds are also suitable for framing the wealth of former owners and therefore they can be used as tools for detecting social stratification and lifestyle concepts by archaeological means. In contrast, medieval hoard finds containing iron objects are rather neglected. Research on them has concentrated mainly on the technical development of tools, especially for agrarian activities; social questions related to these finds have been of less importance.

This paper addresses whether these hoard finds can be associated with different social groups in medieval society. The study focuses on possible interpretations of the hoards and presents comparative studies of hoard finds from the Hungarian Kingdom, and the Holy Roman Empire, from different time periods (thirteenth century compared to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries). The aim is to discuss whether these buried iron object collections can be interpreted in the context of rural communities, whether t a distinct value was attached to the hoards in these social groups, and whether there is evidence for other, alternative, interpretations.

From an archaeological point of view, a hoard is defined as a group of associated objects which were deposited in the same place and at the same time.[1] Not all hoards contain precious goods such as jewelry, coins or other objects made of valuable materials. There is a difference in deposition strategies with intersecting functions; storage means to put objects in a safe place with an opportunity to access them at any time. Hoards, however, can be understood as the deposition of valuable goods without the possibility of having access to them for an (intended) period. This is true for treasures as well as devotional offerings. Finally, deposition in the open can be used to accumulate objects over a longer period. This is typical for waste deposition, which, just as hoards, can also be hidden for various reasons. A complex interpretation requires close analysis of the deposition contexts, the collecting strategies before deposition, and the possible reasons why these object groups became an archaeological feature.

In German research, Stefan Hesse was the first scholar to present a synthesis on hoards with iron objects. He interpreted this rare type of assemblage as "rural hoards" because most of them in the Holy Roman Empire came to light in rural contexts. He noted, however, that hoards containing iron objects were sometimes also found in elite contexts and "classical hoards" (find groups composed mainly of valuable objects) were also present in the countryside. He raised the question of whether these two types of hoards represented different social groups or at least different socio-economic contexts.[2] This issue will be investigated here by comparing finds from the Holy Roman Empire with those from the Kingdom of Hungary. So-called "classical hoards" will be compared to hoards containing iron objects, looking at the conditions of preservation, association with coins, spatial relations, and the taphonomy of the hoard finds.

The spatial distribution of iron deposits

The 37 deposition assemblages presently available from the area of the whole Holy Roman

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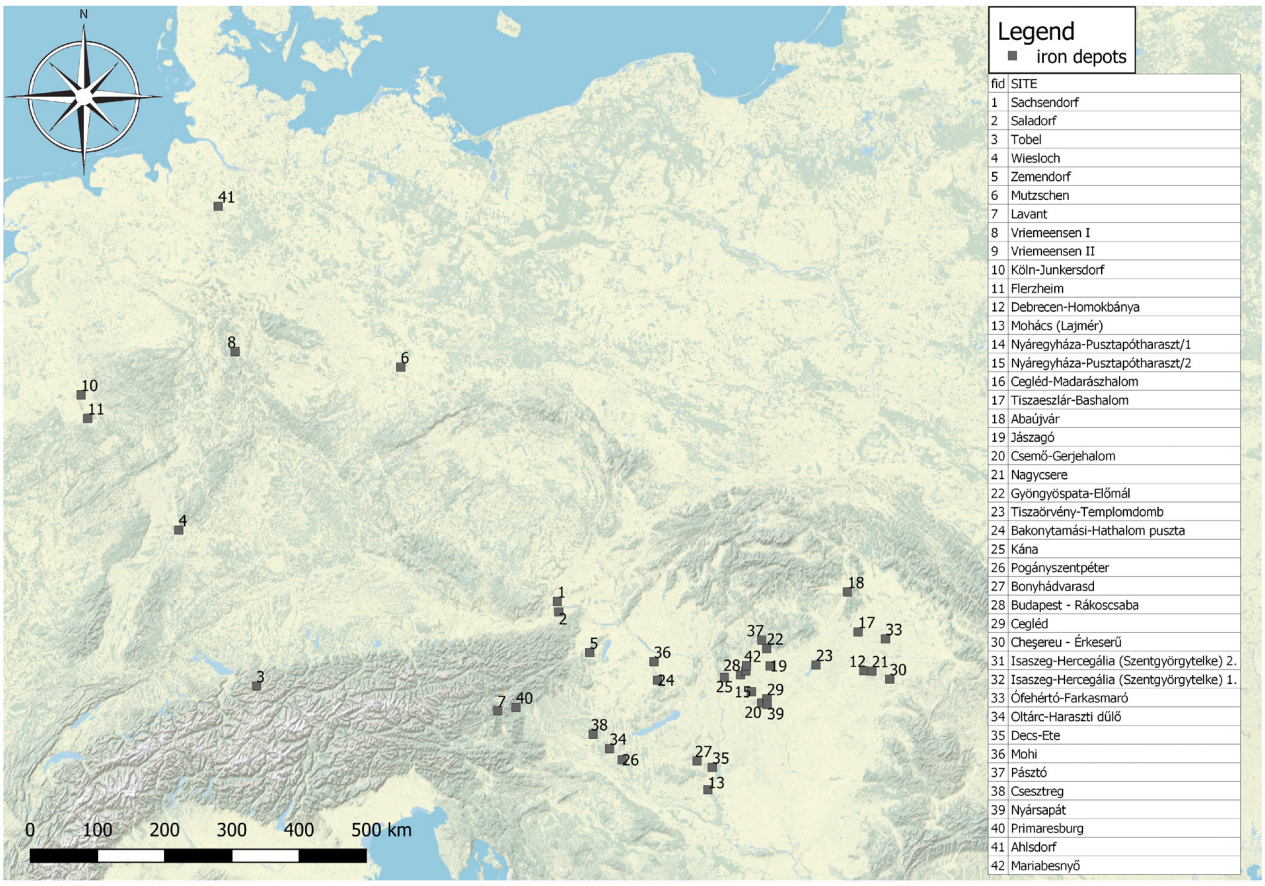
Empire and medieval Hungary dated from the eleventh to the seventeenth century is a shockingly small sample (Fig. 1). In comparison, there are 87 assemblages (mixed hoards of coins and jewelry in some cases) solely from the area of medieval Hungary dating only to the period of the Mongol invasion (1241–1242).[3] This comparison clearly demonstrates that there is a gap in evidence between coin hoards and iron deposits. The material itself, iron, may have been the reason behind the hiding, storage, treasuring, and deposition of these finds. Iron artifacts must have been present in average households just as frequently as coins, and certainly more often than jewelry. As many cases demonstrate, iron tools themselves were precious enough to be hidden in case of danger. Therefore, the number of such deposits must have been close to that of coins, precious metal, and jewelry hoards. What is different is the ratio of recovery. This factor must be considered in the present (spatial) analysis.

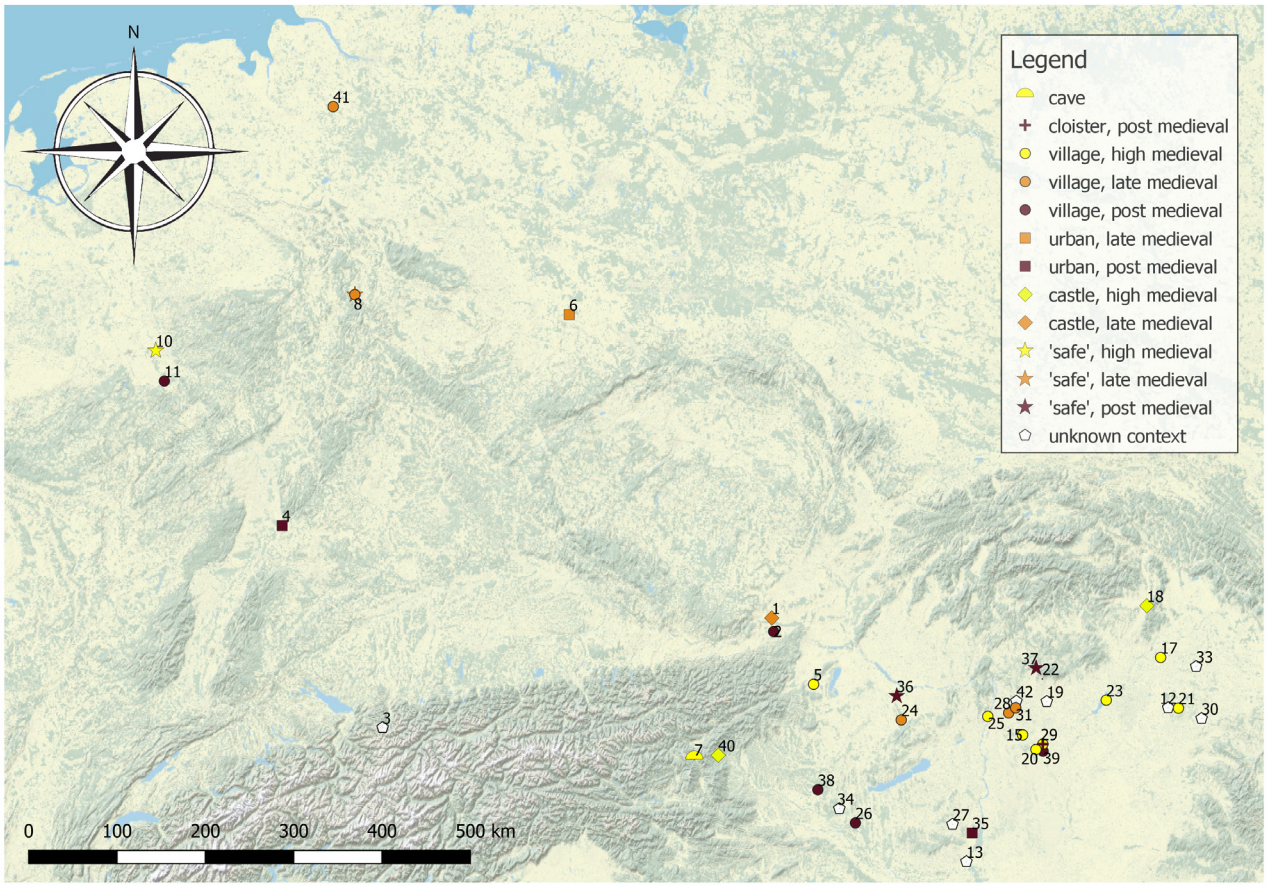
The large-scale analysis of iron deposits demonstrates two important points. First, the number of iron deposits in the area of the Holy Roman Empire (12) is notably lower than in medieval Hungary (25). This is probably rooted in the present state of research. Iron finds are rarely studied in themselves, and iron deposits of the high and late Middle Ages are neglected in particular. In Hungary, Róbert Müller collected agricultural iron finds dating from the late Iron Age to the Ottoman period and synthesized their development in his groundbreaking comprehensive study.[4] There is no comprehensive study from the Holy Roman Empire, however, most of the published material consists of individual finds often labeled as "special," typically associated with castles or urban environments. The other remarkable point revealed by spatial comparison is that even though rural hoards dominate the Hungarian picture they are absent from the Great Plain. This is especially interesting because hoards are usually found accidentally during agricultural activities, which are intensive on the Great Plain.

The examination of site types in time and space without differentiating between the types



fid	SITE
1	Sachsendorf
2	Saladorf
3	Tobel
4	Wiesloch
5	Zemendorf
6	Mutzschen
7	Lavant
8	Vriemeensen I
9	Vriemeensen II
10	Köln-Junkersdorf
11	Flerzheim
12	Debrecen-Homokbánya
13	Mohács (Lajmér)
14	Nyáregyháza-Pusztapótharaszt/1
15	Nyáregyháza-Pusztapótharaszt/2
16	Cegléd-Madarászhalom
17	Tiszaeszlár-Bashalom
18	Abaújvár
19	Jászagó
20	Csemő-Gerjehalom
21	Nagycsere
22	Gyöngyöspata-Előmál
23	Tiszaörvény-Templomdomb
24	Bakonytamási-Hathalom puszta
25	Kána
26	Pogányszentpéter
27	Bonyhádvarasd
28	Budapest - Rákoscsaba
29	Cegléd
30	Cheşereu - Érkeserű
31	Isaszeg-Hercegália (Szentgyörgytelke) 2.
32	Isaszeg-Hercegália (Szentgyörgytelke) 1.
33	Ófehértó-Farkasmaró
34	Oltárc-Haraszti dűlő
35	Decs-Ete
36	Mohi
37	Pásztó
38	Cseszreg
39	Nyársapát
40	Primaresburg
41	Ahlsdorf
42	Mariabesnyő

► **Fig. 1.** *Iron deposits from the Holy Roman Empire and the Hungarian Kingdom, eleventh to sixteenth centuries (created by M. Vargha)*



► **Fig. 2.** *Chronological division and types of iron deposits (created by M. Vargha)*

of iron deposits shows a noteworthy difference between the two areas. Site can be village, urban, or castle-related, and one particular assemblage, Lavant, was found in a cave.[5] The difficulties of dating iron finds only makes it possible to differentiate between the high Middle Ages, late Middle Ages, and post-medieval times (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries).

Most of the deposits are dated to the high Middle Ages (Fig. 2). A total of ten such deposits were recovered from the area of present-day Hungary, nine of which were found in a village context (Nyáregyháza-Pusztapótharaszt,[6] Cegléd-Madarászhalom,[7] Tiszaeszlár-Bashalom,[8] Csemő-Gerjehalom,[9] Nagycsere-Újlak,[10] Tiszaörvény-Templomdomb,[11] Kána,[12] Bonyhádvarasd,[13] and Ófehértó-Farkasmaró[14]); one is associated with a castle (Abaújvár).[15] In contrast, only three hoards are known from the area of the Holy Roman Empire, two of which are exceptional in terms of provenience. The Lavant hoard is a unique complex of horse equipment recovered in a high alpine cave in the Tyrol. This deposit is dated to the thirteenth century and might be interpreted as looted goods.[16] The second deposit, also exceptional, is from Primaresburg castle. This is a typical rural hoard, containing sickles and a hoe, discovered by metal detectors and lacking regular documentation, at a depth of 40 cm in the debris layer of a building. The stratigraphic position suggests that it was hidden after the destruction of the building,[17] therefore, the person who hid the assemblage may have been associated with the castle or may even have been a peasant who happened to live there after the destruction of the site as a fortification. The third hoard from the Holy Roman Empire, from Köln-Junkersdorf, was recovered in a cellar during the excavation of a castle.[18]

Assemblages dated to the late Middle Ages show a different picture. Altogether eleven hoards have been recovered from this period: six from the area of present-day Hungary, all of them from rural contexts (Debrecen-Homokbánya,[19] Bakonytamási-Hathalom puszta,[20] Isaszeg-Hercegália I-II,[21] Máriabesenyő,[22] and Oltárc-Haraszti dűlő),[23]

and five from the Holy Roman Empire, one from a village (Vriemeensen II),[24] two from castles (Vriemeensen I,[25] Sachsendorf),[26] one found in an open field near a castle (Tobel),[27] and one from an urban context (Mutzschen).[28]

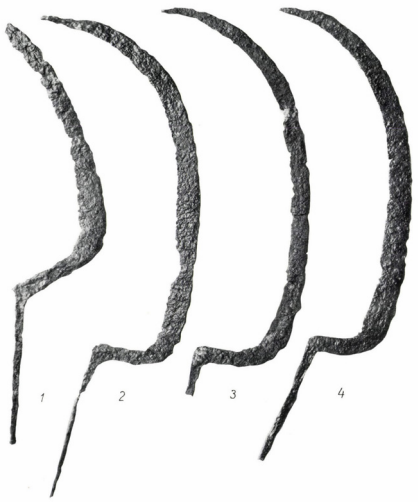
More finds are dated to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. From Hungary, seven such assemblages were recovered, three connected to rural contexts (Mohács-Lajmér,[29] Gyöngyöspata-Előmál,[30] and Pogányszentpéter),[31] one from a manorial complex of the sisters of Saint Claire (Cegléd-Gubodi u.),[32] and three associated with the market towns of Ete,[33] Mohi,[34] and Pásztó.[35] In the Holy Roman Empire, in contrast, two of the three known sites were rural contexts (Saladorf,[36] Flerzheim[37]), and only one is connected to an urban site: the find of Wiesloch (Fig. 3) was recovered in a millstream outside the town.[38]

To sum up, clear differences are present in the two areas which cannot be explained only by the present state of research. While in Hungary rural sites dominate the picture in all time periods and urban or semi-urban contexts appear only in the latest phase, in the Holy Roman Empire the exact opposite is seen. Rural sites are present in high numbers in post-medieval times, while in the medieval period most of the assemblages are connected with castles. Therefore, the social context of the iron finds in the two areas seems different. This question can be addressed by investigating the exact proveniences of the finds, their quality and quantity.

► **Fig. 3.** *A large deposit: Wiesloch. Source: Uwe Gross and Ludwig H. Hildebrandt, "Der Wieslocher Schmiedefund," in Schmiedehandwerk in Mittelalter und Neuzeit. Beiträge des 6. Kolloquiums des Arbeitskreises zur archäologischen Erforschung des mittelalterlichen Handwerks, ed. Walter Merzel (Soest: Mocker & Jahn, 2004), 106.*

Objects representing different social, functional or cultural contexts

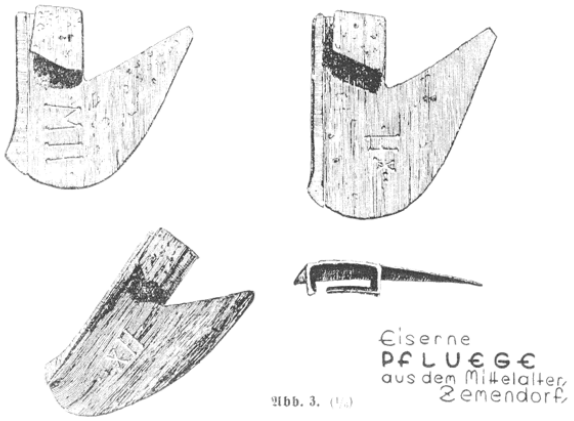
The composition of the assemblages provides additional insight into these hoards. The term "iron hoard" is not always entirely appropriate: 25 of the 37 hoard finds contain iron objects only. Most of these finds were found in the Hungarian Kingdom (19 of 24 hoards consist solely of iron objects), whereas in the Holy Roman Empire the situation seems different (5 of 12). In three cases, bronze bowls were used as containers, in another two cases, ceramic vessels were used. Two assemblages featured horse pendants, one each, but no iron assemblage was mixed with a noteworthy amount of jewelry. The case of Nyáregyháza-Pusztapótharaszt (Fig. 4) is significant from this point of view. Here, two hoards were discovered four meters from each other. Hoard I consisted only of iron objects, while Hoard II also included jewelry and coins.[39]



► **Fig. 4.** *A typical iron hoard: Nyáregyháza-Pusztapótharaszt. Source: Parádi Nándor, "A Nyáregyháza-pusztapótharaszti sarlólelet" [The sickle find from Nyáregyháza-Pusztapótharaszt], Folia Archeologica 27 (1976), 173.*

In three cases coins were found together with iron tools. In Tobel (Lower Austria) an axe blade was discovered together with 64 coins, small *nomina* dated around 1486.[40] Conceivably, the axe was used to mark the site. The mention of a (non-preserved) "rusty object" as part of the "Wiener Neustadt hoard" might point in the same direction.[41] In Mutzschen (Germany) hidden vessels containing over 4,900 coins (*Meißner Groschen*, dated to and earlier than 1428/29) were covered by two plowshares, one colter, and one hoe under a stratum of carbonized grain in a destruction layer of a house.[42] A similar situation was documented in Zemendorf/Zemenye (Austria) (Fig. 5); one hidden ceramic jug with approximately 1900 coins (*Wiener Pfennige*, dated to and earlier than around 1230) found in a cellar on a farmstead, was covered with two plowshares. Although previously the plowshares were dated on the basis of the coins to the thirteenth century, a comparison with dated tools and the marks on the blade allow a dating to the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries.[43] In these examples "less valuable" objects covered hoards that contained precious goods or coins, and thus, the iron objects might be interpreted not as part of the hidden goods but rather as part of the hiding strategy. The presence of carbonized grain was also observed in the abandoned village of Vriemeensen (Germany): in the church, grain was stored along with the armor of local landlords and everything was lost during a violent attack on the village.[44]

The "typical" iron hoard is rather small and contains two to a maximum of twelve objects, mainly tools for agriculture and wood working, such as sickles, axes, adzes, hoes, spades, scuffles, plough shares, drills or knives, in addition to mountings and nails. Only seven of the hoards discussed here include significantly more objects, from 15 to hundreds, reflecting a wider range of social, functional or cultural contexts and/or object functions. They can be compared with preserved inventories of rural households revealed by catastrophy horizons. An example is the site of Csesztreg (Mihon, Hungary) with more than 20 iron objects including household items, tools, mountings for chests, parts of wagons and doors.[45] Sizable hoards seem to represent "complete" household inventories, whereas the smaller ones consist of objects of special value, agricultural



► **Fig. 5.** *Iron finds associated with coins: Zemendorf. Source: Fritz Dworschak, "Der Münzfund von Zemendorf," Burgenländische Heimatblätter, Ser. 2, no. 3 (1934), 25.*

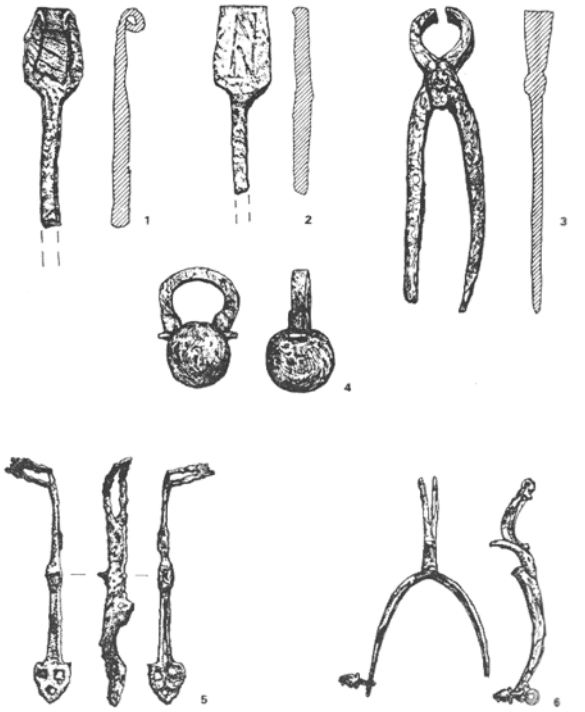
and handcraft tools in particular, which were indispensable for continuing economic activities after a crisis.

Few assemblages show a large amount of fragmentation. Five of the seven large hoards, and four of the 18 small hoards show this pattern. The intentional destruction of tools and the practice of collecting unusable objects as raw material are two options that suggest a form of recycling. This has also been observed in "classical hoards," such as the Wiener Neustadt or Fuchsenhof hoards, which included silver objects in varying states of fragmentation.[46]

The fact that some of the iron hoards with fragmented objects included blacksmith tools and slag led to their interpretation as the property of blacksmiths.[47] Comparing these assemblages with finds from burned forges makes it evident that these hoards only represent a tiny fraction of a typical set of objects used by blacksmiths, although fragmented objects are also part of their inventories.[48]

The taphonomy of iron deposits

The taphonomy of iron deposits is still important in the division of the diverse assemblages. "Safes" are perhaps the rarest category. Because of their function, they mostly remain within archaeological features and have a better chance of proper recovery. Such depositions, however, were meant only for a short time and remained hidden only because of an unexpected catastrophic event. Hoards in the "blacksmith's assemblage" category



► **Fig. 6.** *Iron finds associated with blacksmith's tools: Ahlsdorf. Source: Wolf-Dieter Tempel, "Ein Alteisen-Depot aus dem ehemaligen Dorf Ahlsdorf bei Rotenburg. Ergebnisse einer kleinflächigen archäologischen Untersuchung," Rotenburger Schriften 82-83 (1995), 63–71.*

(Fig. 6) have a moderate chance of a proper excavation, given the proximity of possible original sites, especially because of the quantity of objects: large assemblages are easier to find and recognize, but this is still quite a rare situation. Iron hoards must have been hidden rather frequently due to expected (but threatening) events; these finds are usually discovered by accident, and in most cases, not by experts. Because of the present low market value of iron, civilians and professional treasure hunters alike usually do not recognize these objects as worthy artifacts, not just in an academic sense but also in financial terms. Those who find such objects during agricultural work may even think that they have found some modern but rusty pieces of iron and so they are discarded and never reach a museum. And even if they are brought to a museum collection, the lack of academic interest in them, mostly because of the difficulties of dating and the lack of variability in forms, results in a perceived lower scientific value for iron objects. Thus, the taphonomic loss of iron tools is significantly heavier than that of artifacts made of precious metals; this may explain the low number of such finds.

Conclusions

This discussion demonstrates that even with a small sample significant results concerning the social agency of iron tools can be achieved despite taphonomic loss. Iron tools in themselves are not suitable for distinguishing among socioeconomic groups, mostly because of the functionality and small diversity among the artifacts. Combined with the examination of deposition circumstances, however, analysis has the potential to reveal differences among types of iron hoards.

Notes

1 Oscar Montelius, *Die älteren Kulturperioden im Orient und Europa*, vol. 1 (Stockholm: Selbstverlag des verfassers. In commission bei A. Asher & co., 1903), 1-14; Helmut Geißlinger, "Depotfund, Hortfund" in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 5, ed. Heinrich Beck, Detlev Ellmers, and Johannes Hoops (Berlin – New York: de Gruyter, 1984), 320-338; Stefan Krabath, "Der Pritzwalker Silberfund im Vergleich zu ausgewählten Schatzfunden des Mittelalters," in *Der Pritzwalker Silberfund. Schmuck des späten Mittelalters. Katalog zur Ausstellung 2006*, ed. Stefan Krabath and Lothar Lambacher (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2006), 24; Stefan Krabath, "Aussagemöglichkeiten spätmittelalterlicher Schatzfunde mit Edelmetallschmuck," in *Vom Umgang mit Schätzen*, ed. Elisabeth Vavra, Kornelia Holzner-Tobisch, and Thomas Kühtreiber (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007), 115.

2 Stefan Hesse, "Der Schatz im Dorf – Bemerkungen zu Randphänomenen," in *Vom Umgang mit Schätzen*, 246-268.

3 Csaba Tóth, "A tatárjárás korának pénzzel keltezett kincsleletei" [Treasure hoards from the age of the Mongol invasion, dated by coins], in *A tatárjárás*, ed. Ágnes Ritoók and Éva Garam (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, 2007), 79, footnote 1. The author notes, however, that this number of finds should be considered a first stage of research since there are other fragmented finds which may be dated to the same period. Some researchers mention additional hoards. According to György V. Székely there are more than 150 hoards from the period, although a detailed catalog of the hoards has not yet been compiled. György V. Székely, "Megjegyzések a késő Árpád-kori éremleletek keltezéséhez" [Notes on the dating of late Árpád period coin finds], in *A numizmatika és a társtudományok*, ed. Ádám Nagy (Szeged: Móra Ferenc Múzeum, 1994), 118.

4 Róbert Müller, *A mezőgazdasági vaseszközök fejlődése Magyarországon a késővaskortól a törökkor végéig* [The development of agricultural tools in Hungary from the late Iron Age to the end of the Ottoman period] (Zalaegerszeg: Balatoni Múzeum, Göcseji Múzeum, Thury György Múzeum, Zala Megyei Könyvtár, Zala Megyei Levéltár, 1982).

5 As the dating and the provenance of the finds is not always entirely clear, here only those sites that are not debated will be considered.

6 Nándor Parádi, "A Nyáregyháza-pusztapótharaszti sarlólelet" [The sickle find from Nyáregyháza-Pusztapótharaszt], *Folia Archeologica* 27 (1976): 171–186.

7 Judit Topál, "Árpád-kori temető és templom Cegléd-Madarászhalmon" [Árpád period church and churchyard at Cegléd-Madarászhalom], *Studia Comitatensia* 1 (1972): 53-97. Müller revised the dating of the complex in Topál's work, see Müller, *A mezőgazdasági vaseszközök*, 49.

8 Júlia Kovalovszki, *Településásatások Tiszaeszlár-Bashalmon* [Settlement excavations at Tiszaeszlár-Bashalom] (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1980), 35–36.

9 Róbert Müller, "Csemő-Gerjehalom," *Régészeti Füzetek* 28, no. 1 (1974): 91–92.

10 László Szolnoki, "A nagycseri vaseszközlelet" [The iron tool find from Nagycser], *A Debreceni Déri Múzeum Évkönyve* 2005 [2006]: 216–237.

11 Béla Horváth, "Előzetes jelentés az 1965-68. évi tiszaörvényi feltárásokról" [Preliminary report on the excavations at Tiszaörvény, 1965-1968], *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 97 (1970): 126–133.

12 György Terei and Antónia Horváth, "Az Árpád-kori Kána falu vasleletei I" [Iron finds from the Árpád period village of Kána], *Communicationes Archaeologicae Hungariae* 2007, 215–245; György Terei and Antónia Horváth, "Az Árpád-kori Kána falu vasleletei II" [Iron finds from the Árpád period village of Kána], *Budapest Régiségei* 41 (2007): 153–192.

13 Müller, *A mezőgazdasági vaseszközök*, 236–237.

14 Müller, *A mezőgazdasági vaseszközök*, 284–285.

15 Judit Gádor and Gyula Nováki, "Ausgrabung in der Erdburg von Abaújvár," *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 28 (1976): 425–434; Müller, *A mezőgazdasági vaseszközök*, 25.

16 Michael Schick, Cornelia Klocker, Christoph Hussl, and Harald Stadler, "Katastralgemeinde Lavant, Orstgemeinde Lavant, Verwaltungsbezirk Lienz," *Fundberichte aus Österreich* 44 (2005): 623 and fig. 403.

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19 Attila Kiss, "A Debreceni későközépkori vaseszköz-lelet" [The late medieval iron tool find of Debrecen], *A Debreceni Déri Múzeum Évkönyve* 1960-1961 [1962]: 29–37.

20 Sándor Mithay, "Bronz-, avar és középkori leletek Bakonytamási-Hathalom-pusztáról" [Bronze Age, Avar and medieval finds form Bakonytamási-Hathalom puszta], *Pápai Múzeumi Értesítő* 5 (1995): 169–189.

21 Müller, *A mezőgazdasági vaseszközök*, 256–266.

22 Müller, *A mezőgazdasági vaseszközök*, 270–271.

23 Müller, *A mezőgazdasági vaseszközök*, 285–286.

24 Stefan Hesse, *Die mittelalterliche Siedlung Vriemeensen im Rahmen der südniedersächsischen Wüstungsforschung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Problematik von Kleinadelssitzen* (Neumünster: Wachtholtz, 2003), 181.

25 Hesse, *Die mittelalterliche Siedlung Vriemeensen*, 182.

26 Thomas Kühtreiber and Matthias Misar, „Schmiededepotfund von Burg Sachsendorf," in *Sein&Sinn, Burg&Mensch*, ed. Falko Daim and Thomas Kühtreiber (St. Pölten: Niederösterreichisches Landesmuseum, 2001), 496, Kat. Nr. II. 7.6.

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