

COMMUNITY-ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION OF AN EARLY ÁRPÁDIAN-AGE CEMETERY AT KISBÁRKÁNY, KUKELY TANYA

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A volunteer of the Hungarian National Museum (HNM) from Nógrád County, János Nágel, reported on the evening of 17 August 2021 that he had discovered a large amount of human bones in the ploughed field near Kisbárkány. After notifying the government agency and the Dornyay Béla Museum, we first carried out an on-site survey on 19 August, and then used metal detectors to search the archaeological site located on the top and the eastern slope of a prominent, perfectly rounded hill. From the part of the HNM István Vida, while from the Várkapitányság PLC Judit Szigeti and Zoltán Rózsa participated in the research. The latter two replaced archaeologists of the HNM with a specialisation in the Árpadian Age who were unavailable at the time due to excavation and a trip abroad. The management of both organisations supported the collaboration in the hope that learning about each other's different work methods will prove useful for the archaeologists when the two institutions merge. This article focuses on introducing the system of community archaeology that helped researching the archaeological site.

We have identified human bones at nearly 30 points on the freshly ploughed field but, based on the scattered remains, the number of graves might have been even higher. We have also collected scattered prehistoric pottery fragments on the same spot. The prehistoric finds partly covered the area of the former cemetery, although their distribution seems to extend far beyond that in the direction of Kisbárkány, even past the hill. Unfortunately, we did not have enough time to determine the boundaries of the prehistoric settlement part.

We started a metal detector survey in the area of the presumed cemetery in order to determine its dating and the level of risk it is exposed to. Among the skull bones of a skeleton discovered in a deeper plough-mark we have found grave goods that helped us to date the site. The jewellery was most likely from around the skull and the neck area, as we found a bronze wire S-terminalled and a penannular lockring. One of the grave goods, a plaited silver wire ring indicated the destruction of the arm and hand bones (*Figs. 1–2*).



Fig. 1. Kisbárkány, Kukely-tanya, position of Grave 1 (photo by Zoltán Rózsa)



Fig. 2. Grave goods from Grave 1 (photo by Szulamit Emma Horváth)

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After the metal detector survey, we conducted a rescue excavation, during which we unearthed the heavily disturbed grave in the deep ploughmark. Among the grave goods, a prism shaped polygonal rock crystal bead confirmed our theory that the objects found with the metal detectors are from the middle third of the 11th century AD.

During our one-day investigation at the archaeological site, we could only outline the assumed area of the cemetery and determine its extent approximately. There were no signs of a church built on the grounds of the cemetery; we did not find any stones, bricks, or larger patches without graves.

Based on the results of this investigation, we have identified a previously unknown archaeological site at Kisbárkány, Kukely tanya. We did not know at that time (as there was no evidence of it in the public register) that in January 2019 the Dornyay Béla Museum, while in October 2019 the Association for Community Archaeology had already conducted archaeological field surveys there.

Since agricultural cultivation poses a serious threat to the site, we deemed it necessary to excavate the entire cemetery. Besides professional aspects, we also wanted to convey an important message to the volunteers of the HNM Community Archaeology Programme, who all (not only those who make the reports) followed the situation closely after a notification, wondering whether “it was worth to inform the museum.” The HNM financed the excavation from its own budget.

We contacted the municipality, but contrary to our previous positive experiences in Nógrád county, they were quite reluctant and dismissive. We asked for the name of the landowner, but we did not get an answer (despite that, as it turned out later, they knew the landowner in person, which is not at all surprising in a small village with only 143 inhabitants) and they suggested instead that we ask the Land Office. They only cared about the identity of the person who informed us.

Fortunately, our volunteer, János Nágel, was truly dedicated, for he not only tracked down the owner but also found out his phone number with the help of an earlier small advertisement. In addition, he with his mother helped organizing the catering— we wanted to ensure that our volunteers at the excavation get a hot meal every day; moreover, he also searched for accommodation nearby.

From the very beginning, we planned to involve volunteers in the excavation, therefore we planned the nine-day-long excavation session to cover two weekends, so that people with a fixed work schedule during the week could join us as well. A good number of people volunteered from the team of the HNM Community Archaeology Programme but we decided on advertising the opportunity on the HNM’s Facebook page as well, since numerous people reached out to us on previous occasions who wished to take part in the excavations. In the end, 60 volunteers applied, including students of both the Eötvös Loránd University and the Pázmány Péter Catholic University, and they spent 196 workdays over this short period on the excavation. The volunteers came mainly from nearby settlements but we also had several from across the country, for example, from Pécs.



Fig. 3. Ágota Madai and Enikő Szvák give an anthropology lecture to volunteers (photo by Krisztián Tóth)



Fig. 4. Volunteers removing the topsoil layer (photo by Krisztián Tóth)



Fig. 5. Map of the cemetery (by Krisztián Tóth)

It was also great to witness the cooperation between archaeologists: we received a great deal of help from the colleagues working for the Nógrád County Government Office of the Prime Minister's Office. The Hungarian Natural History Museum provided materials needed for packing the skeletal remains, and its two anthropologists, Enikő Szvák and Ágota Madai, systematically collected them. Many archaeologists of the Várkapitányság PLC, the HNM, the Dornay Béla Museum and the Kubinyi Ferenc Museum came to help at the excavation in their free time (Figs. 3–6).

From 9 to 17 October 2021, we excavated 24 Early Árpáadian-age burials arranged in eight rows on the hilltop. Every skeleton was oriented east-west, laid on the stony subsoil or its grave sunk shallowly into it. The unsuitable soil conditions of the hilltop made our work more difficult. After removing 30–40 centimetres of humus, we already found human bones. We only noticed a few grave-shaped soil marks showing the gravepits, as those were mainly in the stony subsoil or the lower layer of humus. Agricultural activities destroyed most of the skeletons, therefore a significant amount of human bones we documented and collected were found in the topsoil layer. These fragments were mainly in the central and northeastern parts of the hilltop. The cemetery started in the hill's northwestern part, with four child graves next to each other in the first row (Graves 4, 11, 15, 24; Fig. 7).

At the southern end of the row with the child graves, we have excavated the skeleton of a reburied person (Grave 2). The bones were arranged in layers in a relatively deep, circular pit, their relative positions (intact joints) suggesting partial skele-



Fig. 6. Systematic collection of the grave goods from Grave 13 (photo by Judit Szigeti)

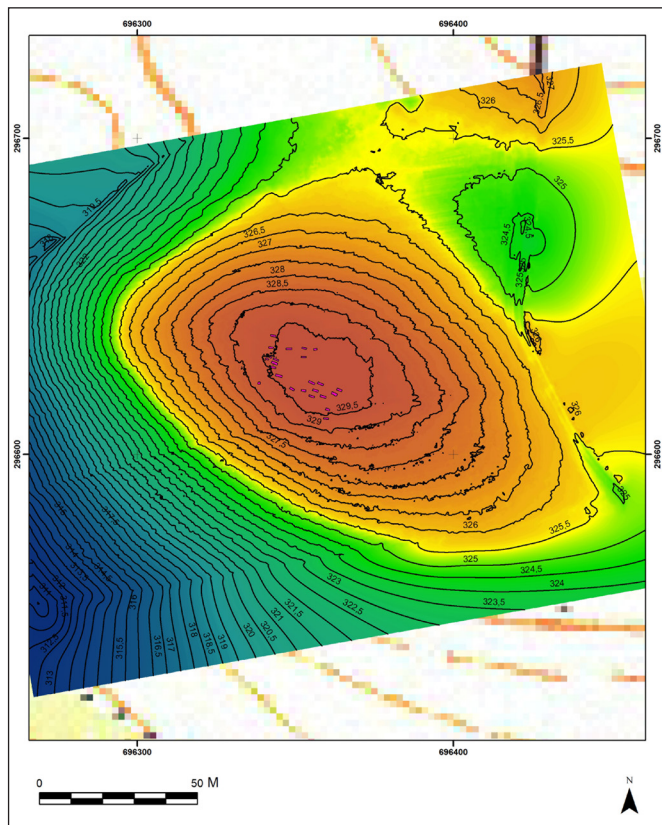


Fig. 7. Contour map of the cemetery (by Krisztián Tóth)

tons. The skull was placed on top of the pit, with the face oriented in the opposite direction as that of the other skeletons. The 40–50-year-old man suffered from joint problems because of his age, and lost all his teeth during his life. His advanced age and jaw cyst both contributed to the loss of his teeth. On his right shinbone there were traces of inflammation, suggesting that he might had some kind of infection before he died (expert opinion of Ágota Madai and Enikő Szvák).

The four burials on the western edge formed most likely the first grave row of the cemetery, dating back to the time of (Saint) Stephen I. We discovered the king's coins used as *obols* in three of the four child graves. Ploughing destroyed the following rows, with the exception of the burials on the ends (Graves 5–7). In the last row, we have found a few denars of King Coloman and two of King Béla II, suggesting that the cemetery was used for an unusually long period, while the central area contained several coins from the time of (St.) Ladislaus I. The skeletons lay half to three metres apart, suggesting a cemetery with nearly 100 graves. We did not find any trace of a church in the excavated area.

We have documented rather special burial practices in the remaining graves. In two of them, we observed the frames of coffins, and managed to take a sample of the remnants of thin, 3–4-cm-thick planks around the skeleton. In one of the first child graves, the bronze rings under the right palm preserved the remnants of the bottom plank. The mourners had dug narrow, maximum 10–15 cm deep pits into the stony subsoil for the deceased. Some of them were probably buried tightly wrapped, since their left hands were twisted under the pelvis. It is important to highlight the practice of *obol*-giving as well. In all cases the (complete or halved) coins of (St.) Stephen I or (St.) Ladislaus I were placed in the mouth of the dead. The children in the first row of the cemetery received their rings most likely from their adult relatives as burial gifts. We found the rings generally on their fingers but also on other parts of their body (chest, thrown into the grave; Fig. 8). A deltoïd-shaped arrowhead with long edges was placed next to a child's hand, on the thighbone, probably as a special burial practice.

Besides coins (*obols*), the finds of the cemetery included jewellery from the graves and the objects discovered on the hill with metal detectors



Fig. 8. Grave 11 unearthened (photo by Judit Szigeti)



Fig. 9. Semi-precious stone (fluorite). A finding from Grave 6 (photo by Szulamit Emma Horváth)

between summer 2016 and the excavation. Currently, the objects are on display in the Dornyay Béla Museum and the Hungarian National Museum. Their findspots cover the entire hilltop, and some of them appear on its northeastern side. The jewels and the coins confirm that the cemetery was used in the 11–12th centuries AD. The collection consists mostly of ring jewellery (S-terminalled lockenrings, rings, bracelets) and beads (glass, semiprecious stone and silver beads) and also includes a lead cross; all pieces are considered to be grave goods (*Fig. 9*). Amongst the various types of head jewellery, we have found almost a dozen S-terminalled lockring versions. The earliest versions, were made of a thin bronze wire; all recovered items were stray finds but a single grave find (from Grave 1). Most of the lockrings were made of silver or lead wire. At first, the S-shaped end was of the same width as the wires, but around the last third of the 11th century AD it was hammered wider and became decorated by a ribbed pattern. The cemetery contained more of this younger version, and we could observe them in wearing position in seven graves.

On the eastern slope of the hill, we have excavated a Scythian-period (6th century BC) building with a floor area of 4 by 4.5 metres. After the building had burned down, two large storage pits were dug in its place. We have found a third pit in row with the others but outside the building's area to the west. Large amounts of ceramics, a few animal bones and stone tools made were unearthed. We have discovered more than a dozen spindle whorls and a ceramic horse figurine (*Fig. 10*, analysis by Zita Hrabák).

The greater the light, the bigger the shadow it casts. This is also true in the case of our Kisbárkány project. Unfortunately, during our work we encountered earlier traces of plunder by metal detecting, which is a large part of community archaeology: however hard we tried, we could not find our way through the mazes of this case. Still, far be it from us to focus only on the shadow, as then we could not appreciate our achievements.

However, doing so would prove to be a terrible mistake, as nearly seventy people helped our excavation, taking part in an extraordinary project during which we discovered plenty of archaeological finds and phenomena. Working together, we were able to carry out the rescue excavation and save the graves on the hilltop from further destruction. We have involved our helpers in all stages of the excavation, and tried our best to provide them with a rewarding and unusual opportunity, while also highlighting and raising awareness of their own value. The volunteers were enthusiastic because they were received with sincere enthusiasm.

Since the excavation, we presented the results at the community archaeology conference held in Szentendre and wrote an annual account for the local museum in addition to the usual media appearances. The



Fig. 10. Animal figurine from the Late Bronze Age (photo by László Kovács)

Hungarian National Museum has launched its new exhibition on community archaeology in March (“Kin-cset érő közösség” / “*A community worth gold*”, open between 7 March and 4 September in the HNM), which covers the excavation in Kisbárkány as well; moreover, a compilation of research papers will be published in May with the involvement of enthusiasts from Kisbárkány.

Now it is up to us to decide how we want to continue. It depends on what we demand during our work, to what extent can we persuade laymen who are interested in and committed to archaeology to support our cause. How could we motivate those who are addicted to metal detecting to see the bigger picture? Ultimately, it comes down to the kind of community we can build. Of course, we learn from our mistakes, strive to step out of our own shadow, and will pay even more attention to detail on our excavations in the future. That will be the case in August in Alsótold as well, where we will conduct an excavation of another perishing cemetery from the 11–12th centuries AD within the framework of community archaeology.