

LEARN FROM THE CHARRED LOGS OF YOUR NEIGHBOUR'S HOUSE¹ Reconstruction of a unique Bronze Age building

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Excavations have been carried out on the Bronze Age tell settlement at Borsodivánka-Marhájárás-Nagyhalom since 2015. During the 2022 campaign, part of a burnt-down building was unearthed. The architectural remains, preserved by fire, let us observe and record details that allowed a partial reconstruction of the one-time house's internal structure and wall decorations. Based on the available data, the building unearthed at Borsodivánka has currently no analogies in the Bronze Age of the Carpathian Basin.

Keywords: Bronze Age, tell, building, fire, daub, wall decoration, Borsodivánka

Within the framework of the project entitled *Borsod Region Bronze Age Settlement (BORBAS)*, excavations have been carried out on a Bronze Age tell settlement at Borsodivánka-Marhájárás-Nagyhalom since 2015 (P. FISCHL, KIENLIN & PUSZTAI 2016; KIENLIN, P. FISCHL & PUSZTAI 2018; P. FISCHL, KIENLIN & PUSZTAI

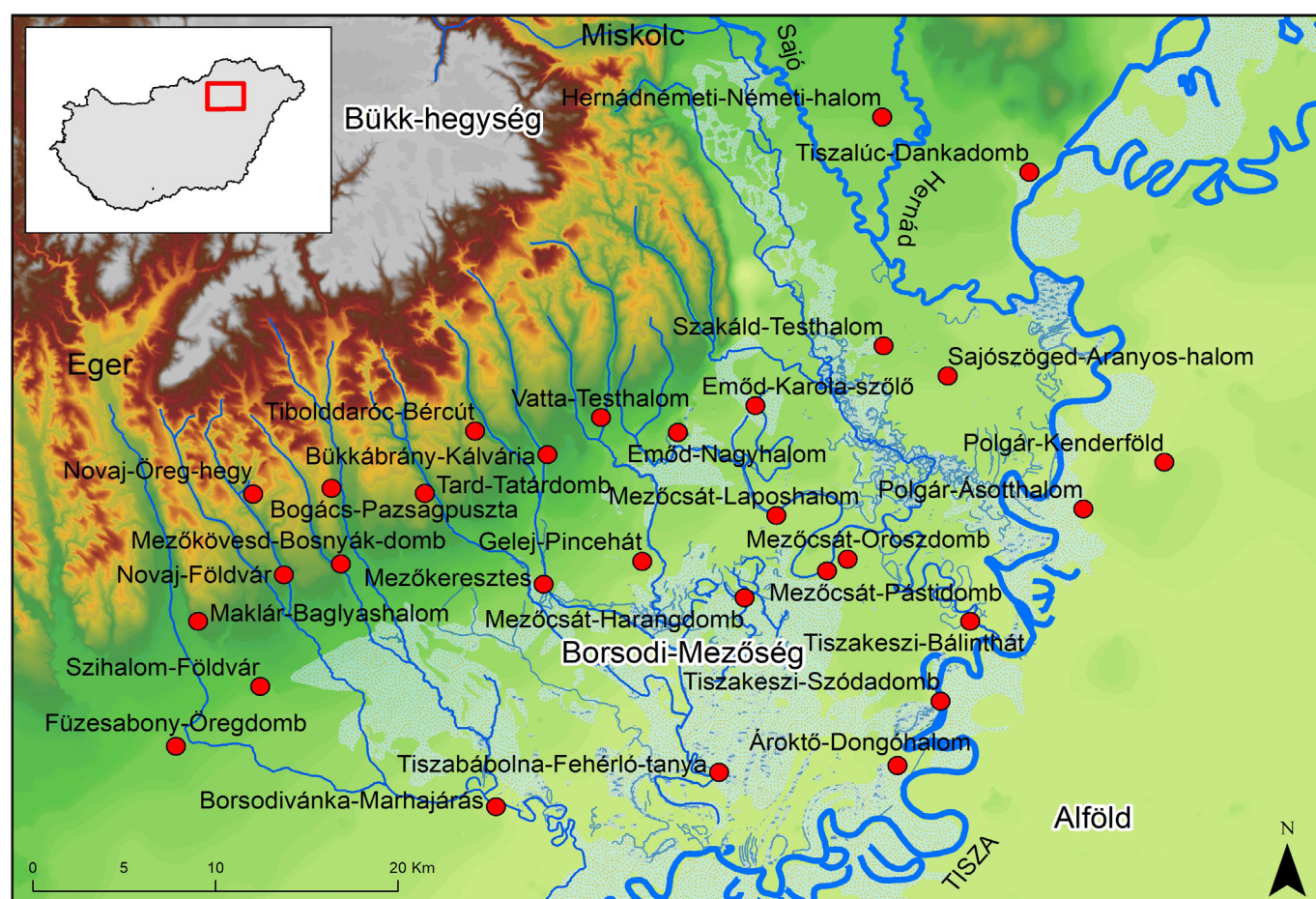


Fig. 1. Bronze Age settlement grid at the foothills of the Bükk Mountains and in Southern Borsod, in the focus of the BORBAS project

¹ Hungarian proverb

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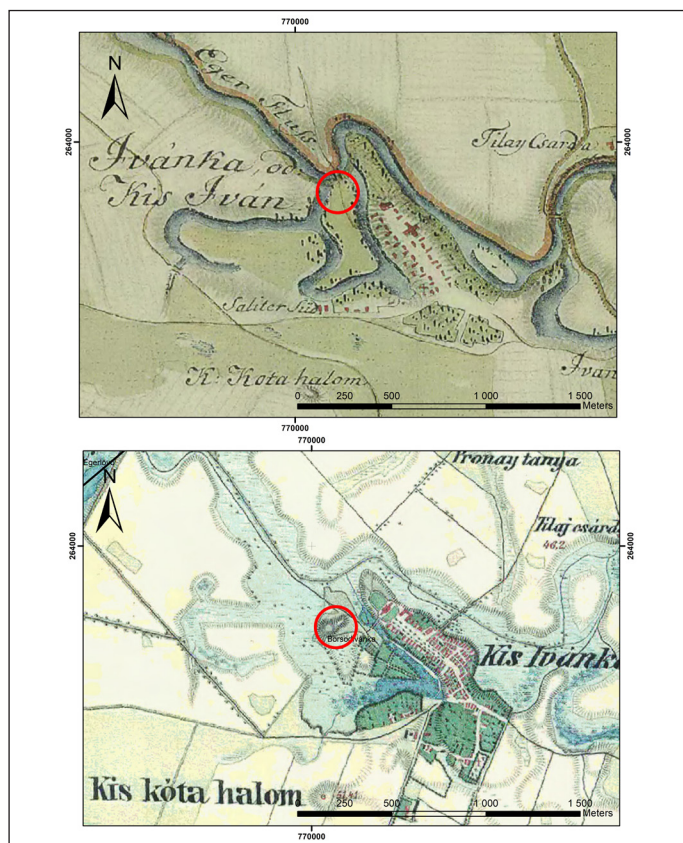


Fig. 2. The mound of Borsodivánka-Marhajárás-Nagyhalom, surrounded by water; on the maps of the First and Second Military Surveys

2022). The site fits into the strict settlement network that emerged on the South Borsod Plain during the Early and Middle Bronze Ages (Fig. 1).

The Bronze Age settlement is situated on the northern edge of a flood-free island surrounded by the Rima, Kánya, and Eger streams (Fig. 2). It comprises a central *tell* engirded by a ditch and a horizontal settlement outside of it. The ditch around the multi-layer central settlement part was connected with the one-time stream; thus, the inner area was surrounded by water (Fig. 3). Once composed into the English landscape garden of the Orczy-Prónay castle, the *tell* also served as a calvary in early modern times. The narrow footpath providing it with its current double-hill form was carved into the small mound at that time (Fig. 4). In addition, in the 1970–80s, a shooting range was cut into its south-eastern part. The site was identified based on the findings recovered from the profile wall of that now-abandoned establishment. Magdolna B. Hellebrandt reported about the site first (HELLEBRANDT 1979), while it was selected among the target sites of the BORBAS project in 2014 based on observations by a local ranger, Nándor Seres.

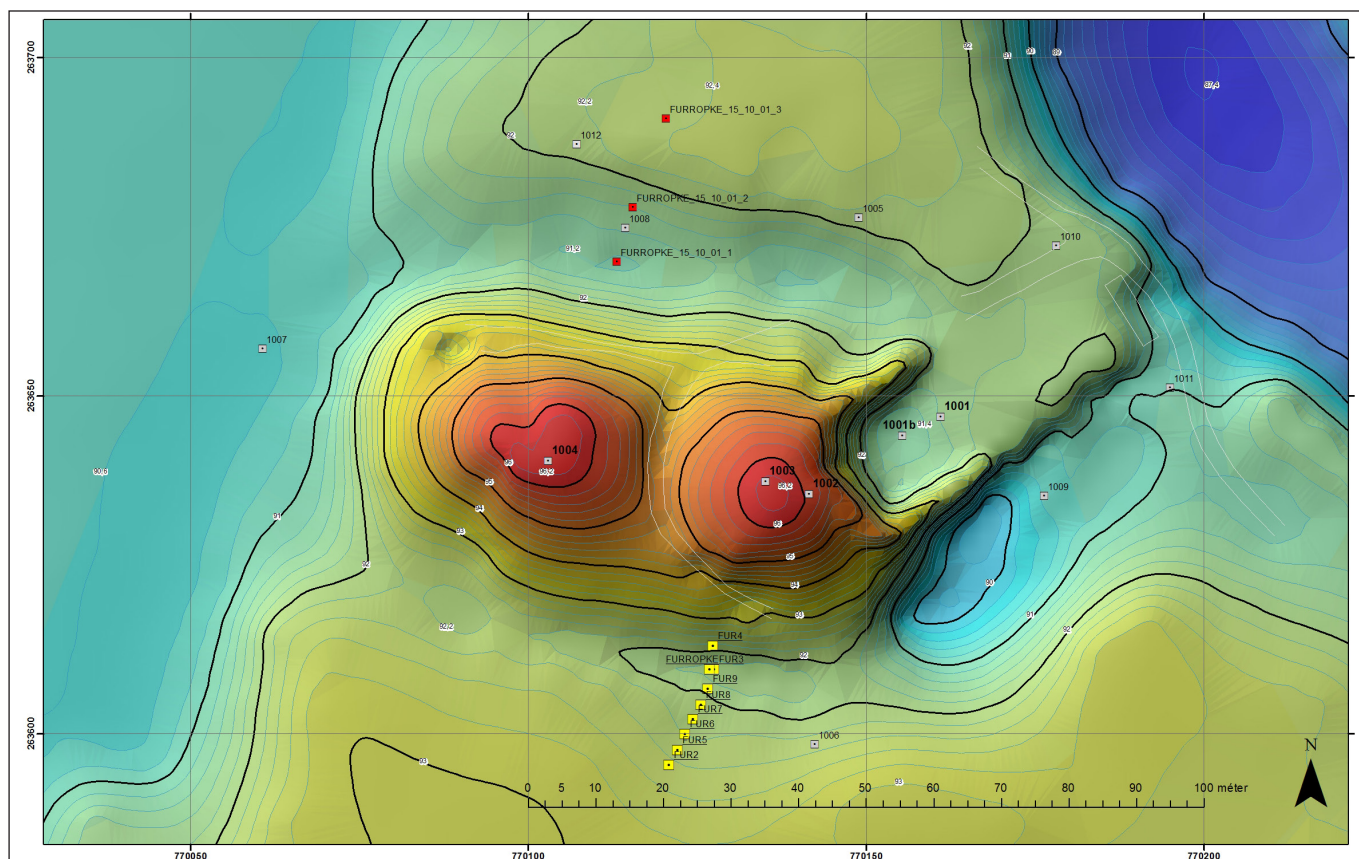


Fig. 3. Geodetic survey map of the Nagyhalom



Fig. 4. The double hill of the Nagyhalom, viewed from the south-west

The goal of the 2015 and 2016 campaigns was to excavate Section 1, created by straightening the oblique profile wall of the former shooting range. Therefore, the section's width is only 0.5 m at the top of the tell's more than two-metre-high layer sequence and 1.5 m at the bottom, while its length reached up to 5 m. We could distinguish several occupation phases; one comprised five phytolith layers with three backfill layers (comprising mainly of waste) between them. In order to investigate the extensive and relatively thick phytolith layers, a 5 x 5 m section (Section 2) was opened by the western side of Section 1 in 2017 (P. FISCHL 2021). In this second section, we discovered *House G*, the building in the present study's focus, in 2022.

Based on the layer sequence in the western profile of Section 1 and a burnt layer, SN 35 (Fig. 5), also distinguished there, we expected to discover a burnt building in Section 2 in 2022. However, as the section only covered the north-western corner and a part of the western and northern walls of the building, we cannot reconstruct its original extent at this point. A joint evaluation of the field documentation of the 2016 and 2022 campaigns enabled us to identify a short section of the foundation ditch of the eastern wall's sole plate. However, the discovered segment is very short; thus, we can only say that the former building's

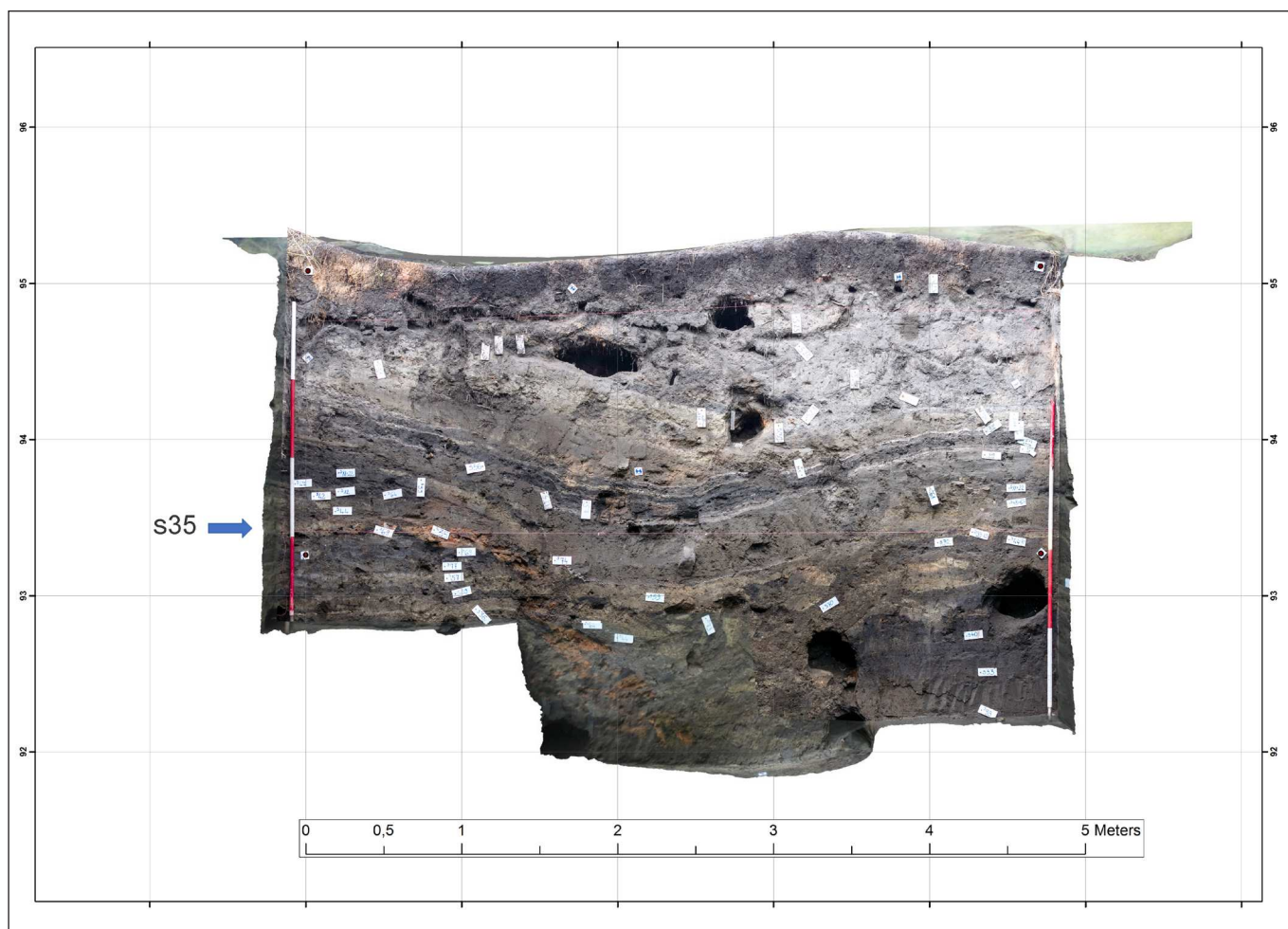


Fig. 5. Western profile of Section 1 with the layer sequence of the tell settlement

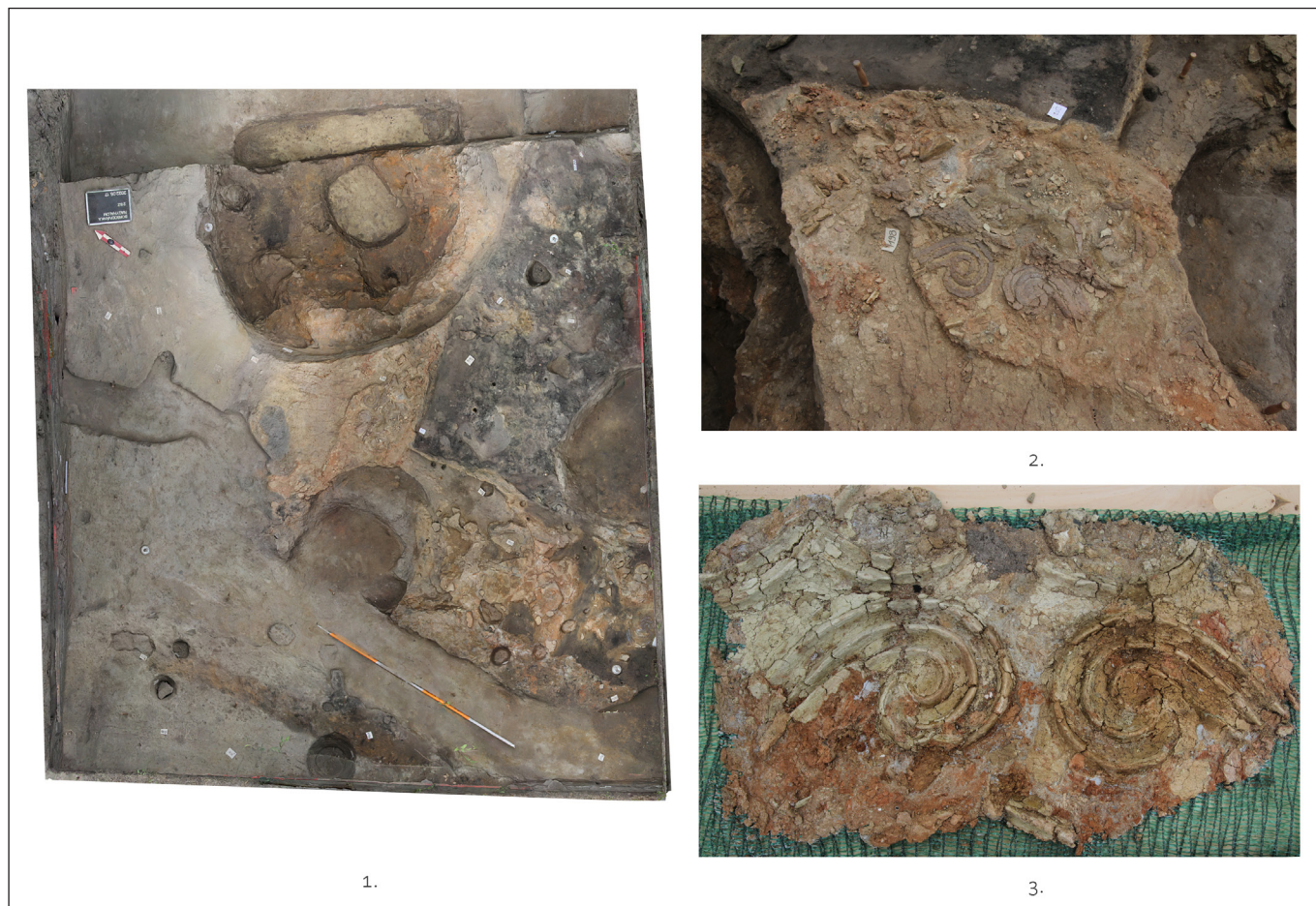


Fig. 6. 1: Orthophoto of House G, 2: photo of the *in situ* wall decorations in square C1, 3: cleaned wall decoration fragment

east-west extension was likely around 6.3 m (Fig. 9). We recorded the traces of several buildings in diverse occupation layers; their main axis was in all cases east-west directed. As for *House G*, one of its axes was east-west directed, too; but we cannot tell at this point, which.

Besides *House G*, Section 2 also comprised the small part of another building (*House H*) in the north-western corner. An 80-cm-wide alley separated the two buildings, its body comprising a phytolith layer covered by a stomped walking surface made from sandy clay (Figs. 8 and 9; “Hunyadi János” and “Arany János” Streets, see <https://bronzkor.hu/mi-is-az-az-egyedi-azonosito-%e2%88%92-utcanevadas-a-boros-divankai-asatason-video/>). While both buildings feature a sole plate, our observations suggest that their wall structures differed markedly. The architectural characteristics of *House H* will be presented in another study.

While uncovering the relics, we observed that only a small part of the persisting remains is *in situ*, as the rest became disturbed by ground levelling works still in the Bronze Age. In many cases, all the debris was removed (e.g., *Houses C* and *H*); thus, the burnt remains of *House G*, still in their original place, count as something of an exception, representing a different social practice compared to the rest of the site.

Diverse parts of the debris of *House G* indicate at least two distinct types of burning; the evaluation of the related daub fragments, mapped and collected in a grid, is still in progress. This study focuses on the recovered unique wall decorations and the internal structure of the building.

We have unearthed the external face of a fallen wall amongst the *in situ* remains of *House G* in square C1. After removing the wall itself, we discovered wall decorations lying upside down (Fig. 6.1–2). The frieze comprised double garlands and triple spiral bundles lined by straight double lines, created from applied ribs with triangular profiles (Fig. 6.3). We have discovered heavily fragmented remains of similar decorative applications at several points in the house's debris (Fig. 9). We identified a double spiral in square A2 where

the walls were only lightly burned. Another almost complete spiral was recovered from squares E1 and D1. The applications lay upside-down in squares C1 and A1 while bottom-side-up in squares D1 and E1. We also recovered a similar spiral fragment in 2016 upon removing the burnt debris of a building in Section 1. Considering the numerous discovered wall applications and the fact that most of the debris of *House G* was disturbed, we may safely state that initially, the building's internal walls were covered with an extensively applied decoration comprising garlands and spirals. Endre Dobos, professor at Miskolc University, used a special glue to fix two adjoining fragments of wall decoration in place; thus, we could turn them back (as both were lying upside-down) and clean their surfaces.

As for analogies from the territory of Hungary, a decorated house was published from Tiszaug-Kéménýtető (CSÁNYI & STANCIK 1992, Abb. 76, 7. kép). The fragmented geometric wall applications unearthed at Tiszaug once decorated the external wall of a building of the Nagyrév culture; the patterns resemble the motifs appearing on the pottery of that culture. The applied decorations unearthed in the so-called shrine in the second layer of Sălacea/Szalacs "Dealul Vida" (Romania) represent an even closer analogy: the internal walls of the tripartite building were covered with spirals (ORDENTLICH, GĂVAN & GHEMIŞ 2014, 207–230). Besides, wall decoration fragments were identified at Mošorin-Feudvar, a settlement of the Vattina culture (HÄNSEL & MEDOVIĆ 1991, 74–75, Abb. 9–10). Fragments of applied decorative elements have also been found at Vărşand/Gyulavarsánd-Laposhalom (Romania; BÓNA 1975, Taf. 146.1–7) and Tószeg-Laposhalom, where they ornated the sides of ovens built on the floor (BANNER, BÓNA & MÁRTON 1957, Abb. 41, Abb. 43, Abb. 25–24). The fragmented applications recovered from Békés-Várdomb were also interpreted as oven decoration (BÓNA 1974, Taf. VI).

Similar fragments are also known from the late Wietenberg culture (Wietenberg III/RB C): the findings discovered in the infill of a ritual pit at Felgyógy/Geoagiu de Sus (Romania) were interpreted as a wall or oven decoration (CIUGUDEAN 1999, Abb. 12–14). A unique *pythos* burial of the Tumulus culture in Ménfőcsanak comprised the remains of a frieze with spirals (ILON 2014). Unlike the present study, summarizing only Middle Bronze Age analogies, the related publication provides an extensive survey of wall and oven remains from a broad chronological sphere (ILON 2014, 22–25, Abb. 6, 13–14). Wall decorations only persist if the building burns down and the debris is left in place. Such finds are few, and their interpretation usually involves the sacral sphere. Considering the extensive ground levelling in the Bronze Age, however, one might suspect with good reason that actually a significant proportion of the houses were decorated.

Based on the recovered debris, *House G* once had a wattled, plastered, timber-framed superstructure. We did not find any postholes in the line of the walls but small foundation trenches, indicating the use of sole plates. Such foundations – sole plates set in a narrow trench – are a frequent feature of buildings on Bronze Age *tells* (Jászdózsa-Kápolnahalom: STANCIK & TÁRNOKI 1992, 126; Füzesabony-Öregdomb: SZATHMÁRI 1992, Abb. 92, 136; Túrkeve-Terehalom: CSÁNYI & TÁRNOKI 1992, Abb. 113–115, 162; Berettyóúfalu-Herpály-Földvár: MÁTHÉ 1992, 171). The foundation trench on the west side was wider (35–40 cm) than the ones on the east and north (30 cm). The beams set in these trenches supported the wall's vertical aisle posts that became then wattled and plastered. There was no trace of an oven or other fireplace in the excavated part of the building.

After removing the wall remains, we observed traces of ca. 8–9 cm wide internal "walls" dividing the building into distinct compartments (Figs. 8–9; in this study we refer to these internal units as "rooms"). The about 1–1.4 m wide rooms along the side walls surrounded a larger one in the middle (*Room A*). We could measure the length of *Room C* (1.8 m). The internal "walls" probably did not reach the roof but were, based

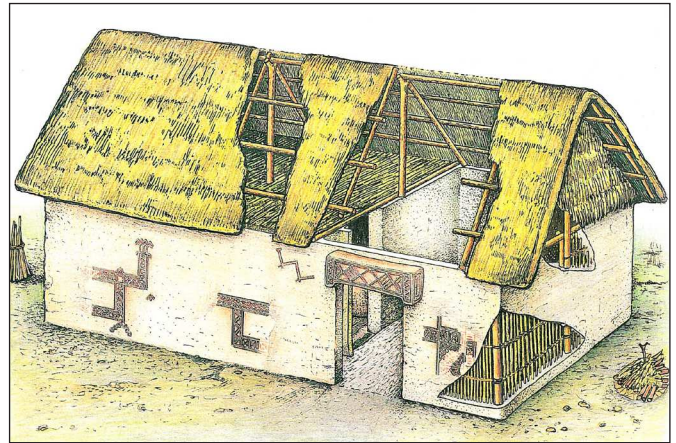


Fig. 7. Reconstruction of a decorated residential building from Tiszaug-Kéménýtető (after CSÁNYI & STANCIK 1992, Abb. 76)

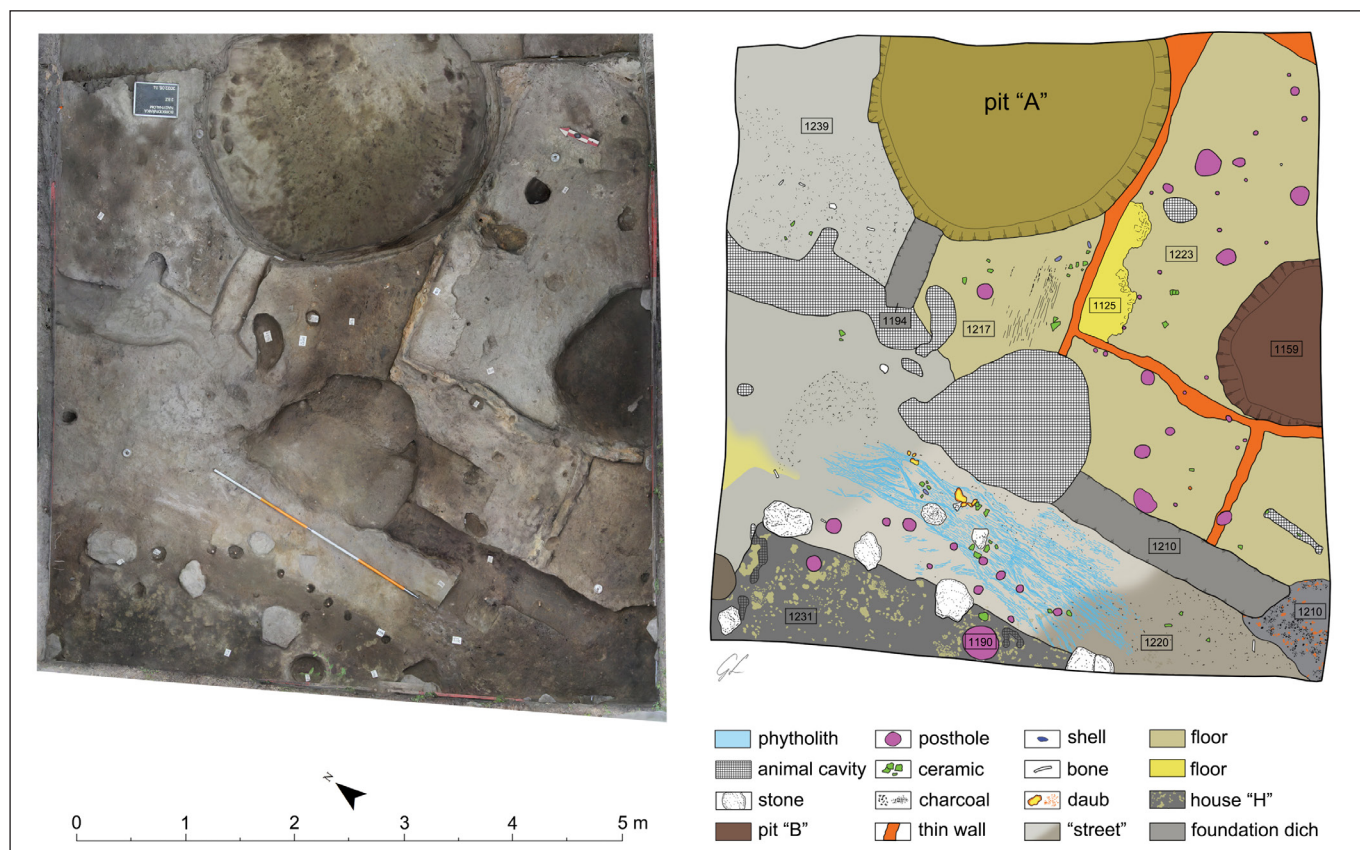


Fig. 8. Orthophoto and survey map of the floor of House G

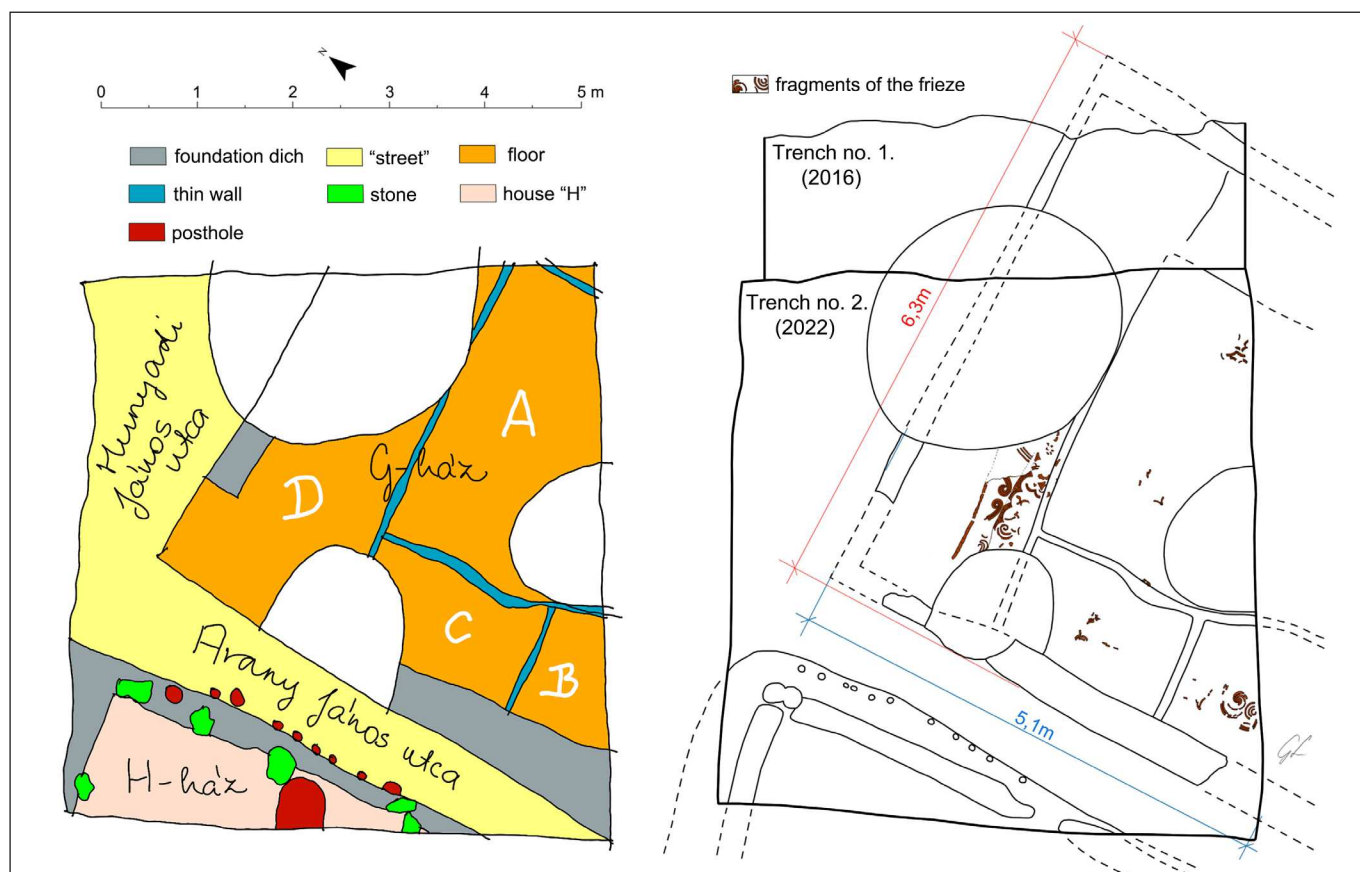


Fig. 9. Interpreted survey map of House G and its surroundings, and a reconstruction of the excavated part of House G based on the survey maps of Sections 1 and 2 (2016 and 2022)

on the thickness of their foundation and the lack of additional supporting structures, merely half-high partition walls or room dividers. *Rooms B* and *C* contained the *in situ* remains of large container vessels. We did not find pottery under the wall decoration fragments in *Room D* but discovered some, mainly sherds of small drinking vessels, in the eastern part of *Room A*. As the conservation and processing of the find material are currently in progress, evaluating and interpreting the finds related to the house's furnishing remains a task for the future.

We know of large bins from buildings dated to the Neolithic and the Copper Age; however, these are built-in elements (examples from the Late Neolithic in the territory of Hungary: RACZKY, ANDERS & SEBŐK 2005, 42; from the Precucuteni-Cucuteni period: MONAH ET AL. 2003, 34–35, 97, 105). There are two house models from the Cucuteni-Tripolye culture featuring a separated container by a side wall (e.g., Popudnya and Shushovka: BURDO 2011; PALAGUTA & STARKOVA 2017), and a third one from Ovčarovo (TRENNER 2010, Kat. 41).

Based on these analogies, and especially in the light of the containers discovered in *Rooms B* and *C*, we believe that the smaller rooms or compartments along the side walls in *House G* in Borsodivánka were used for storage. Their relative position inside the house – surrounding a central room – is a unique phenomenon that, for the time being, raises more questions than can be answered. Is this still a “normal” building used by an individual family or household? Or are we looking at some kind of special building instead, with a primarily communal function? In any case, under the building's burnt debris, we discovered an ashy black layer (SN 69) and several plastered floor renewals underneath (SN 1225, the base layer of the internal dividing walls, SN 1223 and 1228). Hence, whatever its precise function was, there is evidence of a more prolonged use, diminishing the possibility that it was built and burnt down in a single act.

Similarly, another feature, possibly pertaining to *House G* raises more questions. The remains of the north-western corner of the building were disturbed by a foxhole, while the north wall and part of *Room D* had sunken into *Pit A*. This feature was already discernible in the original profile (see *Fig. 5* above), and, upon further excavation, we discovered the burnt remains of *House G* on the bottom in the southern part of *Pit A*, about 1.5 m below the house's level but precisely in line with the rest of the north wall (*Fig. 6*). At the same time, the pit's northern part did not yield wall remains. This begs the question how and why *House G* should have been built on top of a previous pit, only loosely backfilled and prone to sag? Or alternatively, could *Pit A* have been in use parallel to *House G*, being partly or entirely empty when the building burnt down? If it really was coeval with the house, it is hard to explain why it is only halfway in the building and how it related to its north wall. But if it had been dug before the house was erected, why and how was the house built on top of it? We have yet to clarify their exact relationship.

Based on the available data about *House G* in Borsodivánka, the building differs from known Bronze Age constructions in many respects. The seeming lack of a fireplace inside the house is perhaps due only to the fact that it has not yet been fully excavated. The smaller rooms along the side walls, the wall decorations, the only partially levelled debris, and the unique relative position of *Pit A* are all features that set apart this building from other Bronze Age ones. Its exact function, however, can only be clarified in the light of the results of some currently ongoing analyses. The spirals decorating the internal walls of *House G* at Borsodivánka recur on pottery vessels and metal artefacts of the Füzesabony culture. They often appear repeated, suggesting a symbolic function in the period – concentric circles may be observed in the related archaeological record as decorative elements and as a space organizing principle. These symbols on the walls might indicate a special function for *House G* in Borsodivánka.

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