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Eszter Bánffy and Alexander Gramsch (Eds.), The Neolithic of the Sárköz and Adjacent Regions in Hungary: Bioarchaeological Studies

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BOOK REVIEW

Bánffy, E. and **Gramsch, A.** (Eds.) (2025). *The Neolithic of the Sárköz and adjacent regions in Hungary: Bioarchaeological studies*. Confinia et horizontes, 2. Beier und Beran, Langenweissbach. 495 p. ISBN 978-3-95741-156-3

In "The Neolithic of the Sárköz and adjacent regions in Hungary: Bioarchaeological studies", editors Eszter Bánffy and Alexander Gramsch deliver the second instalment of "Confinia et horizontes", the Römisch-Germanische Kommission's monograph series showcasing landmark projects in prehistoric archaeology. The present volume is a part of the subseries on the Sárköz wetland region in southern Hungary. The fundamental principles guiding the publications in this subseries focus on a holistic understanding of the past, encompassing archaeological findings, environmental history and landscape archaeology. This remarkable volume brings to life the Neolithic communities of Hungary – not just through their tools or pottery, but through their bones, diet, health and genetic ancestry, and the scientific collaboration that made it all visible.

The research in the Sárköz region is the result of a long-term, collaborative effort between Hungarian, and intenational institutions. The roots of the research lie in early excavations at Fajsz on the eastern Danube bank, but it was the M6 motorway construction that led to a burst of archaeological discovery – including one of Europe's most extensive Neolithic sites: Alsónyék-Bátaszék. So, what began as small excavations soon evolved into one of the most significant Neolithic research programmes in Central Europe. The research of the region was supported by a series of national and international grants, with key contributions from Hungarian institutions, German partners, and British collaborators.

Along the way, the project also nurtured a new generation of scholars – resulting in several MA and PhD theses that have grown directly from its findings. The current volume is a major outcome of this collective effort – an important milestone in our understanding of Neolithic life.

What makes this volume particularly exciting is its focus on bioarchaeology, a field that allows us to tell the stories of past people not only through what they left behind, but through their very bodies. In a sense, human remains are also included in the concept of material culture in archaeology. The skeletons are imprints of responses to mechanical and physiological stress, as well as to diseases individuals encountered during their lives, which were shaped by specific cultural and natural environments. Bioarchaeology uses skeletal biology and archaeology in combination to ask questions not about how people died, but about how they lived. It does this through focusing on the osteobiography of individuals and the biocultural adaptations of populations as viewed through the lens of archaeological context.

Despite being a relatively young subfield, bioarchaeology has achieved a remarkable level of synthesis – both globally and here in Hungary. That's somewhat unusual in the scientific world. Often, emerging disciplines begin by focusing narrowly, building foundational methods and data. Synthetic, collaborative, and holistic work tends to come later, once a field has matured. But bioarchaeology has taken a different path. It was born interdisciplinary – from the crossroads of archaeology and biological anthropology – and it has grown in dialogue with genetics, environmental sciences, history, and more.

Bioarchaeology gives a voice to people who left no written records. It restores the human dimension to prehistoric archaeology – not as abstract culture groups, but as real individuals who lived, worked, moved, and died in specific historical landscapes.

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This is exactly what this new volume accomplishes. This volume brings together the diverse, yet interconnected strands of the research carried out in the past decades. Each chapter of this volume represents a building block in a larger structure: an attempt to reconstruct what life was like in the 6th and 5th millennia BC in a region that has proven to be important for understanding the cultural and genetic formation of Neolithic Europe. These contributions range from detailed osteological and pathological analyses to archaeogenetics, and from environmental and mobility reconstructions to zooarchaeological and malacological research. Together, they offer a vivid, multilayered view of the lives of the earliest farming communities in the Carpathian Basin.

The volume opens with a detailed analysis of human osteological material by Kitti Köhler. The first chapter focuses on Early Neolithic Starčevo burials at Alsónyék. Despite the limitations of the sample size the osteological material of this site has offered a rare opportunity to study the biological and demographic profile of an early farming population in this region.

The volume then moves into the Late Neolithic period, featuring an expanded and updated version of Kitti Köhler's PhD thesis from back in 2012. This major chapter focuses on the Lengyel culture and again returns to Alsónyék, whose sheer number of burials from this phase is without parallel in Neolithic Europe. The 862 burials analyzed in this study are exceptional not only in quantity but also in the depth of data they provide – far surpassing most other Neolithic skeletal series published to date. The demographic patterns and pathological findings revealed through this analysis add significant insight into Neolithic health, lifestyle, and mortality, particularly within the context of a large, stable, and long-lasting settlement.

Following the osteological chapters, the volume shifts into the realm of biomolecular science. These chapters present the results of stable isotope and aDNA analyses that have been instrumental in reconstructing mobility patterns, diet, and population history. The chapter, authored by Michael Kempf, Margaux Depaermentier and and their colleagues, lays the groundwork by establishing the environmental and geological baseline necessary for interpreting strontium isotope data. Without such context, interpretations of mobility would remain more biased or speculative. Importantly, this work has significance that reaches beyond the Neolithic. The environmental model and strontium baseline developed here provide a robust framework that can be applied to other chronological periods and archaeological sites in the region, enhancing future studies on human movement and land use throughout prehistory.

The next chapter, by Margaux Depaermentier and colleagues, presents one of the largest Neolithic datasets of its kind in Europe, combining strontium and oxygen isotope data with preliminary results of carbon and nitrogen isotope analyses. This extensive study spans approximately two millennia and covers both Transdanubia and the Great Hungarian Plain. It enables the identification of different mobility patterns across time and revealing regional variation as well as differences shaped by geography, time, and social structure.

The next chapter turns to some of the most intimate and personal data that can be recovered from the past: genetic ancestry. Drawing on the work of Anna Szécsényi-Nagy, Victoria Keerl, and a wider team of collaborators, this chapter presents the results of extensive ancient DNA research conducted on Neolithic individuals from both Transdanubia and the Great Hungarian Plain. The results reveal deep connections between these regions, pointing to a shared ancestral origin likely rooted in an Anatolian or Anatolian-related source, with only minimal contributions from local hunter-gatherers. What makes this chapter especially significant is its holistic approach: it does not treat genetics in isolation but brings together biological, cultural, and demographic evidence. Through this integration, it highlights the close relationship between genetic structures and social organisation, offering clues about patterns of kinship, residence, and community interaction.

Together, the isotopic and genetic studies allow for a far more nuanced picture of Neolithic life than either could produce alone. They reveal both continuity and change, migration and rootedness, shared traditions and evolving identities. Importantly, they also help move us toward more human-centered, dynamic understandings of the past.

The volume also includes an important chapter on zooarchaeology by Anna Zsófia Biller, offering key insights into the subsistence strategies of the Early Neolithic population at Alsónyék. Based on over 16,000 animal bone fragments – the largest assemblage from a Transdanubian Starčevo site to date – her study reveals a clear focus on domestic livestock, especially cattle, sheep, and goats. Wild animals, fish, and other aquatic resources played a secondary role, though their presence indicates a diversified economy that made use of the region's wetland resources. The assemblage also points to on-site butchery and secondary product use, including milk and wool, as well as tool production from bone and antler. Together, these findings reflect a highly adaptive farming society, deeply engaged in domestic food production and capable of exploiting a mosaic environment.

Complementing the zooarchaeological study, the volume also includes a malacological analysis by Balázs Nagy and his colleagues, focusing on the role of molluscs in the subsistence and environmental context of Early Neolithic Alsónyék. The Sárköz, being a riverine wetland region, provided abundant access to freshwater mussels. While often overlooked in broader subsistence models, these remains may reflect not just opportunistic gathering but also seasonal practices or even ritual behaviour. The presence of such aquatic species and also the presence of aquatic vertebrates further supports the idea of a community well-adapted to its floodplain environment. The archaeozoological data contributes to a growing picture of Neolithic lifeways that balanced domesticated food production with the strategic use of wild and aquatic resources, reflecting both the ecological richness of the Sárköz region and the versatility of its early farming societies.

As the volume draws to a close, it is clear that its structure reflects the logic of bioarchaeological inquiry itself – starting from the bones of the dead, moving through biochemical traces of life, and ultimately returning to the broader ecosystems in which those lives were lived. In this way, the chapters move from the individual to the collective, from the body to the landscape, from the grave to the wider world.

Importantly, not all the studies in this volume are complete – and that is intentional. The editors have chosen not to wait for every detail to be finished or every dataset to be fully processed. Instead, they have presented what is ready, in order to make the results available and to encourage further discussion and collaboration. This openness to process, to partial answers, and to future work is actually, one of the volume's strengths. It reminds us that scientific research is an ongoing conversation, not a closed book.

In conclusion, this second volume of Confinia et horizontes, offers an extraordinary contribution to the bioarchaeology of Neolithic Europe. It demonstrates how interdisciplinary, multinational research – grounded in both fieldwork and laboratory analysis – can produce not just new data, but new ways of thinking about the past. It also serves as a model for future projects – highlighting the value of long-term investment, and a commitment to methodological diversity. The volume stands not only as a summary of what has been achieved, but as a foundation for what is yet to come. There is much more to discover – and we look forward to what comes next.