

| The legacy of Sándor Bökönyi

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER



ABSTRACT

Sándor Bökönyi (1926–1994), the founder of contemporary archaeozoology in Hungary, was born a century ago. Originally trained in veterinary science, he devoted his entire life to archaeology. He achieved results of international importance researching the history of domestic animals in Central Europe and Southwest Asia. At the same time, he played a leading role in representing archaeology at the level of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. An entire generation's time has passed since his untimely death. It is therefore instructive to review his career within the context of research history in the late twentieth century.

KEYWORDS

archaeozoology, prehistory, domestication history, international relations, Hungarian academy of sciences

INTRODUCTION

Sándor Bökönyi, the initiator of modern archaeozoology in Hungary (Fig. 1), was born a hundred years ago, on 17 March 1926 in Vállaj, in what was then Szatmár-Ugocsa-Bereg county. His parents were schoolteachers in the small village, located on the Hungarian-Romanian border. After having graduated in the Gymnasium run by the Piarist teaching order in Debrecen in 1944, he continued his studies at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of the Hungarian University of Agricultural Sciences where he received his doctoral degree in 1950. He began his career in 1949 as an intern at the Phylaxia State Vaccine Production Institute, participating in the state-organized mass vaccination campaign to combat the fowl plague epidemic. However, his career soon took a surprising, new turn toward archaeology.

Bökönyi's legacy deserves special attention in its own right. However, beyond the usual eulogy, the circumstances surrounding the development of this legacy should also be of interest. While this article is a brief review of his life in a more-or-less chronological order, I am trying to elucidate the reasons for his relatively early international exposure in light of his special knowledge. One may safely say, that his skills were first recognized abroad, but eventually they also became relevant in Hungary. The same may be said about some of his administrative work, first manifest internationally, but indirectly contributing to Bökönyi becoming the head of the Archaeological Institute and probably influencing his prudent attitude to university education.

It seems evident, that his emergence both as scholar and top administrator was not independent of the times in which he had opportunities to realize his indisputable talent. His long journey therefore helps reflecting on some of the changes, both intellectual and political, that took place in the last half of the twentieth century as well as their lasting influence on Hungarian archaeology today.

THE EARLY YEARS

The Anthropological Collection of the National Museum of Natural History in Budapest employed Bökönyi already in 1949–1950. He soon was hired as a museologist at the

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Fig. 1. Excavation photograph of Sándor Bökönyi from the late 1970s (Photographer unknown. Courtesy: Judit Lévy)

Department of Archaeology of the Hungarian National Museum (1951–1973), where he almost immediately established the Animal Bone Collection. Initially, he only processed the assemblages of animal remains kept in the National Museum but subsequently extended his work to include the finds stored in some provincial museums. During this time, he became friends with László Vértes (1914–1968), to whom he was linked not only by the passionate interest in natural sciences by the latter, but also by the coincidence that both of them, without formal archaeological qualifications, worked their way up to the forefront of the profession through hard work (Fig. 2). During the fall of 1956, they joined the Revolutionary Committee of the Hungarian National Museum,¹ but apparently escaped any far-reaching consequences of their brief political activism.

Bökönyi was a member of the post-World War II ‘Great Generation’ of archaeozoologists who began to systematically analyse archaeological animal remains in Central Europe, primarily in the German-speaking region. Since these experts were predominantly natural scientists (palaeontologists, veterinarians, anatomists etc.), Kristian Kristiansen called this period the “Second Science Revolution” of archaeology that took place following the enviably vigorous interdisciplinary cooperation that

flourished in the late nineteenth century.² During the 1950s, on the heels of nuclear physics, absolute dating based on carbon isotope (^{14}C) measurements was developed in archaeology.³ The radiocarbon method also directed archaeologists’ attention to other natural sciences worldwide, including zoology.

Curiously, thanks to Bökönyi’s tireless efforts, archaeozoology became the only newly embraced natural science by Hungarian archaeologists after World War II. Traditionally, physical anthropology has long been linked with archaeology. However, in the early years of the post-war era, human osteology was seen as politically tainted due to its undeniable racist heritage.⁴ The application of ‘hard’ natural sciences was hindered by the high price and resulting lack of sophisticated technical equipment. In comparison, as Bökönyi himself pointed out, his service was cheap: all he needed was callipers and a notebook. In fact, some ironically remembered him as the little guy with big callipers, who used to haunt the corridors of the National Museum.

INTERNATIONAL EXPOSURE

The Ford Foundation, a non-governmental organization based in the United States of America, contacted the Hungarian authorities in 1963 and launched a scholarship program in the country a year later. In 1964, 25 Hungarian researchers were granted permission to spend a year at various universities in the USA.⁵ Among them was Bökönyi, who could visit the University of California in Los Angeles, during 1966–1967.⁶ His host was the Lithuanian-born prehistoric archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1921–1994), who cultivated a valuable research cooperation with her colleagues in Yugoslavia (Fig. 3).

At that time, the government of the USA invested in ‘soft power’. They supported programs that sought to build friendly relations around the world. The high quality of the large-scale excavations in Yugoslavia⁷ was guaranteed by the fact that they were financed by the Blocked Funds Program and professionally managed by the Smithsonian Institution.⁸ While the Hungarian government would have preferred acquiring western know-how in the realm of applied hard sciences to boost industrial production, within this program invitations were decided by the partners in the USA. Gimbutas had met Bökönyi in 1962, whose first official trip abroad led to Yugoslavia. She soon recognized the value of his expertise for archaeological projects aimed at investigating the Neolithic in Southeast Europe. The emergence of

²Kristiansen (2014) 15.

³Libby (1946).

⁴Bartosiewicz (2023) 555.

⁵Somlai (2009) 290.

⁶Bartosiewicz and Choyke (2002) 120.

⁷e.g. McPherron and Srejić (1988) xiii.

⁸Rasson (2025) 201.

¹Anonymous (2026).

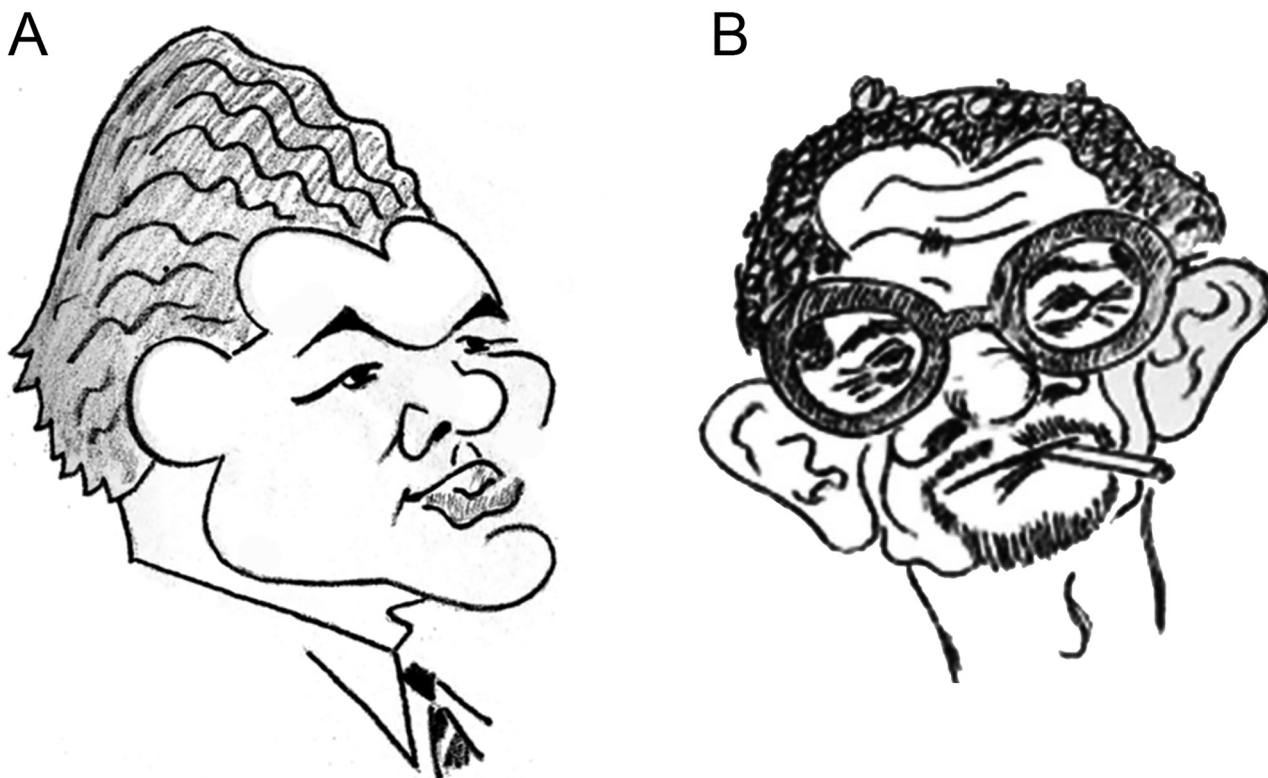


Fig. 2. A: László Vértes' caricature of Sándor Bökönyi (Vértes, 1953). A hand-written comment under the portrait says: "My profession is truly reflected in the picture: my jawline looks perfectly horse-like"; B: Caricature of László Vértes in the same publication. His comment under the portrait says: "My wife's work. In this regard, I would suggest that caricature artists be prosecuted by law"

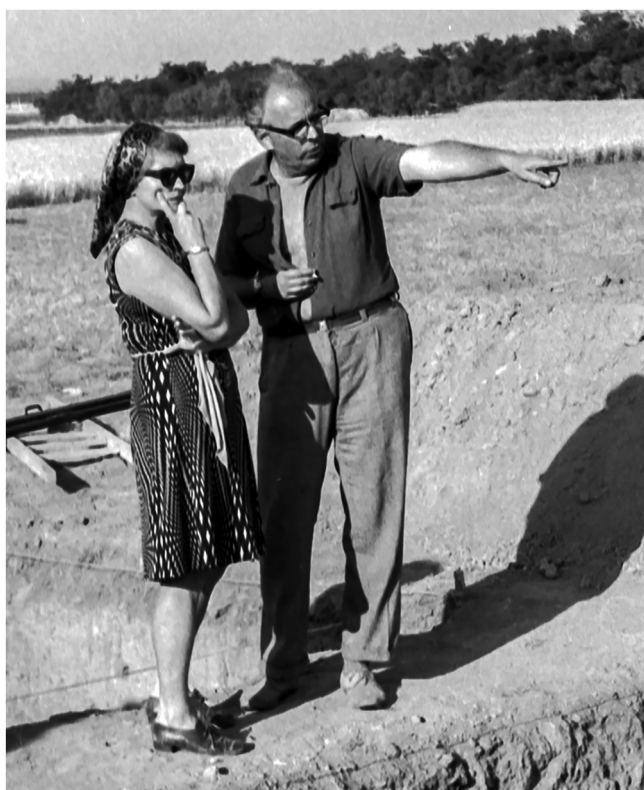


Fig. 3. Marija Gimbutas and Milutin Garašanin at Anzabegovo, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (1970) (Photo: Judith A. Rasson)

'New Archaeology' in the United States of America, a trend which emphasized a natural scientific approach,⁹ aroused interest in Bökönyi's regional expertise among American and then British research groups working in politically non-aligned Yugoslavia.¹⁰

Coincidentally, as the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party established political relations with Hungary, Bökönyi was able to also spend six months in Iraq in 1969.¹¹ As a result of these developments, he soon had chances to co-operate with the flourishing cosmopolitan community of Middle Eastern archaeologists. Before the Islamic Revolution, he developed contacts with the Iranian ruling family through the American-born Iranian horse breeder Louise Firouz, who helped preserve the Caspian horse, a breed considered by some to be the ancestor of the Arabian horse.¹² Thanks to this collaboration, he received assignments in Iran until the 1979 revolution, and profited from this experience even in his research in Hungary.¹³

⁹Binford and Binford (1968).

¹⁰However, "[t]he radical epistemological changes brought about in American and Western European archaeology by the scientific methods, which led there by the late 1960s to the unfolding of processual archaeology ('New Archaeology'), did not reach Hungarian archaeology" at the time: Török (2010) 21.

¹¹Bartosiewicz (2010).

¹²Bökönyi (1972).

¹³Bökönyi (1978).

It is of anecdotic relevance here, that while Bökönyi regretted that his internationally successful 1974 book on the history of domestic mammals¹⁴ never had a second edition, he was pleased to see originals reappearing in the bookshops of Budapest around 1980. They were returned to the KULTURA Foreign Trade Company of Hungary from Teheran as the budding Iranian theocracy had but limited interest in the subject of archaeozoology.

Archaeozoology became the ‘convertible currency’ of Hungarian archaeology. It was a service offered for exchange within the international network of national academies in Eastern Europe in Bulgaria, the German Democratic Republic, as well as the former Yugoslav republics of Serbia and Slovenia.

SPECIAL SKILLS

Bökönyi’s working method followed the inductive research school of countries influenced by the German academic tradition: with exemplary meticulousness, he recorded masses of animal remains by hand, in large, spiral-bound notebooks. Some contained tens of thousands of entries, each describing a single bone specimen. The consistent format of his work is demonstrated by the fact that such handwritten notes were relatively easy to convert posthumously into digital databases. The only bottleneck in transcription was the fact that he used an admixture of Latin *termini technici* as well as Hungarian and English terminology, which required trained archaeozoologists who understood all three, to convert the text-based notes into digital databases.

Bökönyi’s versatile language skills were undoubtedly an important factor, indeed a key to his international exposure and success. Through his school education, he spoke German excellently, and of course he also studied Latin. For

this reason, he could also make himself understood in Italian and French, and over time he learned to master English on a high level. This was an unusual, if not suspicious activity in the early 1950s. At the same time, in his personal accounts he recalled with gentle irony how desperate employees were pressed to learn Russian in a crash course held outside working hours in the National Museum.

Arranging his scientific publications chronologically by language (Fig. 4), the mid-1960s reflect an important linguistic shift that took place throughout Europe, in all areas of life.¹⁵ Alongside the regularly published Hungarian articles, publications in English, rather than German or French, became dominant in Bökönyi’s *oeuvre* as well. The ‘other’ category in the figure primarily covers various Slavic languages (Russian, Serbian, Slovenian, Bulgarian) used but sporadically in disseminating his results.

RELEVANCE IN HUNGARY

Research connections with the Balkans, the Aegean Sea and the Near East are of key importance for Hungarian prehistory.¹⁶ By the 1970s, Bökönyi’s research had not only gained him international recognition but also a new position in Hungary. In 1973, he was invited to become a senior research fellow at the Archaeological Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS), established by Decree 4/1967 (A. K. 4.) of the President of the HAS.¹⁷ Its founding director became the renowned art historian and medieval archaeologist, László Gerevich, immortalized on the mural in a newly renovated former Clarissan convent in the Buda Castle district (Fig. 5). Such historic buildings housed institutions in social sciences and humanities of the HAS.

Bökönyi was employed in the interdisciplinary research group led by Ida Bognárné Kutzián, who pioneered studies of

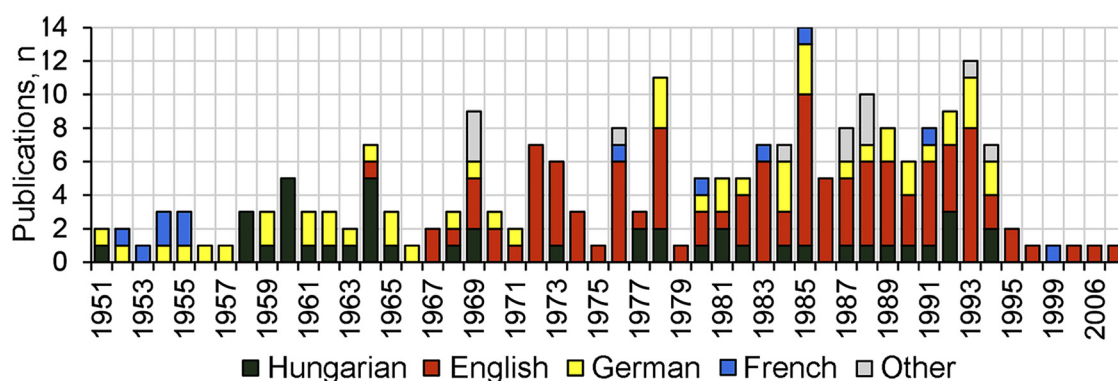


Fig. 4. The diachronic distribution of Sándor Bökönyi’s publications by language

¹⁴Bökönyi (1974). This book is regarded his *magnum opus* to be detailed later.

¹⁵Nádasdy (2025) 101–103.

¹⁶Laszlovsky and Siklódi (1991) 284.

¹⁷Bartosiewicz (2017) 211.



Fig. 5. László Gerevich in the center of the artist's canvas in the lower right corner of Aurél Bernáth's 1967 mural titled 'History', decorating the main staircase of the former building of the institute of archaeology in the prestigious Buda Castle district (Photo: Erika Gál)

the early Neolithic Körös culture in Hungary.¹⁸ Since the wild ancestors of sheep and goats did not occur in Europe, Bökönyi's research provided decisive archaeozoological evidence that these domestic animals of the Körös culture arrived from Southwest Asia via the Balkans to present-day eastern Hungary. Based on the phenotypic size difference between the bones of locally available wild aurochs and Neolithic domestic cattle,¹⁹ Bökönyi hypothesized that cattle were locally domesticated on a large scale in the Carpathian Basin.²⁰ However, ancient DNA studies that became available well over a decade after his death have shown, that even domestic cattle were imported along with sheep and goats from the same, south-eastern direction.²¹ Indirectly, this confirmed the hypothesis that the 'Neolithic package' of five domestic animals (cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and dog) reached the territory of present-day Hungary through demic diffusion rather than the adoption of know-how by local human populations.

Thanks to his ground-breaking research and staunch dedication Bökönyi's academic career was unbroken. He obtained a so-called candidate of biological sciences degree

(comparable to a present-day PhD) in 1960 and received the prestigious Doctor of Science degree of the HAS in 1970. Already in his candidate's thesis, he analysed 20,510 animal remains from 38 sites.²² In the next decade he recorded an additional 94,163 specimens from 275 archaeological contexts, 22 of which contained over 1,000 remains. The resulting world-famous book served as the basis for his academy doctorate.²³ In this work, he was the first to summarize the historical development of animal husbandry in Central and Eastern Europe both by archaeological periods and by the evolution of domestic animals. The core of this work was his own hands-on research in both Hungary and in adjacent areas in Austria and Yugoslavia.

Already in 1974, the largest assemblage in the book originated from the Roman Period urban site of TÁC-Gorsium in Pannonia province (first to third century CE). In ten years Bökönyi doubled the number of animal remains identified (47,941 specimens) from there and published a significant monograph on this site alone. In hindsight, the book has been criticized for its content not being broken down by the archaeological phasing acknowledged in its introduction.²⁴ The technical reason, however, is understandable: Bökönyi processed the data *en masse* by hand since in the 1970s computers were not yet available to sort and compare various combinations of fifty thousand individual finds by century.

ADMINISTRATIVE ACHIEVEMENTS

The acquisition of academic degrees was followed by the corresponding (1985) and then full membership (1990) in the HAS at the age of 64.²⁵ In his inaugural lecture to the HAS, Bökönyi discussed environmental and cultural influences shaping the composition and characteristics of animal bone assemblages from Late Neolithic sites in the Carpathian Basin and the Balkans.²⁶

He became a member of the Presidium of the HAS (1993–1994) and served as chair of the Archaeological Committee as well as the Committee on Art History, Architectural History and Archaeology. He also served on the Scientific Qualification Committee of the HAS, that held the privilege of granting degrees from candidate (ca PhD) level and above. He was a member of the Hungarian Prehistoric Complex Committee and the Interdepartmental Committee on Palaeontology of the HAS.

Bökönyi was one of the founders and later a member of the Executive Committee of the International Council for Archaeozoology (ICAZ). The first-ever major international

²²Vörös (2002) 125.

²³Bökönyi (1974).

²⁴Bökönyi (1984) 15.

²⁵After World War II, the average age of becoming a member significantly increased in comparison with the earlier history of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences: Tigyi (2006) 347.

²⁶Bökönyi (1988).

¹⁸Kutzián (1944).

¹⁹Bökönyi (1995).

²⁰Bökönyi (1988).

²¹Edwards et al. (2007).

conference of archaeozoologists, entitled “Domestication and History of Domestic Animals” (Fig. 6), took place in Budapest in 1971 as Section IV of the Third International Congress of Agricultural Museums. The venue was chosen to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Hungarian Agricultural Museum (Fig. 7), and the host of the meeting was János Matolcsi, a former Minister of Agriculture turned archaeozoologist, who worked in the museum.²⁷ He mobilized his organizational experience and local administrative contacts during the preparations. In the meantime, Bökönyi, largely through his personal acquaintances, secured a wide range of international participants. The meeting represented the best of the post-World War II ‘Great Generation’ of archaeozoologists, mustering 75 participants from 18 countries.²⁸ The majority came from Europe but, importantly, from both sides of the ‘Iron Curtain’. This was a remarkable development at a time when Budapest was becoming accessible to both Eastern European archaeozoologists and their colleagues from the ‘Western World’. The organization

established at this conference had the declared goal of fostering East-West relations in archaeozoological research. To this end, international conferences would be organized every four years, alternating between the so-called ‘socialist’ and ‘capitalist’ countries in Europe.²⁹ This pattern lost significance after political polarization faded away by 1990, when the meeting was held in Washington DC with the participation of numerous delegates from Eastern Europe.

Bökönyi actively participated in running this progressive organization until his death.³⁰ The establishment of ICAZ in Budapest was possible thanks to the effective cooperation between Bökönyi and Matolcsi. This is a shining example of how two professionals with completely different habits, life experiences, and even worldviews were able to unite forces for a common goal. Since then, ICAZ has developed into a global alliance, with several hundred paying members (Fig. 8), who represent exemplary diversity. Most of the proceeds are spent on supporting disadvantaged members (students or those representing less affluent countries), facilitating their personal participation in quadrennial meetings, comparable to the ‘Olympic games’ of the profession.

HEAD OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL INSTITUTE

Bökönyi was appointed director of the Archaeological Institute of the HAS in 1981. This was a recognition of his academic achievements and international prestige, but it also distracted him from his full-time research work. Capitalizing on his training as a veterinarian, one of his ambitions was to write a book on animal diseases in archaeology. However, right before his appointment, such a handbook was published by his British colleagues.³¹ As he himself put it, this took the wind out the sails of his plan for at least thirty years; the paleopathology project was put on the back burner. While Bökönyi maintained his participation in large international projects, he could devote considerable time to his new administrative responsibilities.

It may not seem like the most original insight, but it was his decisive personal experience that “financing is one of the foremost conditions for academic performance, and archaeology is also one of the most expensive branches of the social sciences”.³² After his appointment, Bökönyi transformed the rigid, chronologically determined departmental structure of the Archaeological Institute into target-oriented research teams formed to carry out specific research tasks. Well ahead of his time, Bökönyi accustomed his colleagues to a work routine that was a precursor to the project-based research organization that recently has become the norm in Hungary as well.

In terms of content, he tried to open up previously unknown perspectives in Hungarian archaeology. “His declared



Fig. 6. Cover of the proceedings of the 1971 symposium (Matolcsi, 1973)

²⁷Bartosiewicz (2015).

²⁸Matolcsi (1972) 96.

²⁹Bartosiewicz (2020).

³⁰I joined ICAZ during its London conference: Iregren (1982).

³¹Baker and Brothwell (1980).

³²Bökönyi (1991) 842.



Fig. 7. Vajdahunyad Castle, home the Hungarian Agricultural Museum in 1969 (Photo: Thomas T. Hammond. Source: Hammond Slides Budapest 08.jpg - Wikimedia Commons)

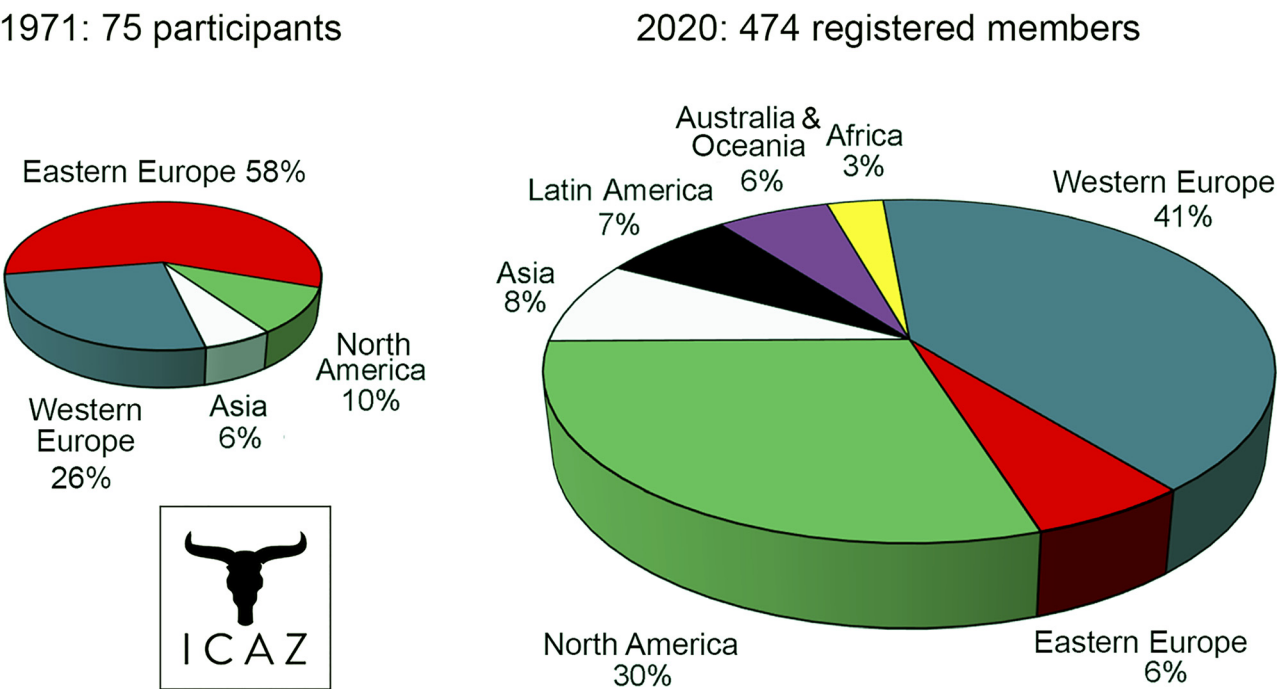


Fig. 8. ICAZ membership and diversity during the first fifty years. The terms “Eastern” and “Western” Europe are to be understood in terms of geopolitical designation before 1990, rather than geographical location

aim was to place man, i.e., past behaviours, and not material culture, at the centre of archaeological research”,³³ which in fact reflects the holistic anthropological approach of French and Anglo-Saxon scholarship³⁴ instead of the antiquarian/art historian attitude based on the typological classification of finds prevalent in Central and Eastern Europe. In the meantime, he was careful not to impose ‘New Archaeology’ on his Hungarian colleagues.

The influence of this intellectual current began reaching Hungary by the mid-1970s, occasionally sparking theoretical debates, especially among prehistorians who did not feel it was relevant to local research tradition. Although leading scholars were aware of its benefits, even they questioned the novelty of ‘New Archaeology’ and its related methodologies.³⁵ Some Hungarian archaeologists reacted to the initial mistakes of radiocarbon dating with skepticism, showing a mistrust towards the processual approach in general. In the meantime, the “negative attitude of ‘New Archaeology’ towards positivist typochronology [was] similarly evident”.³⁶ To make matters worse, ‘New Archaeology’ was a striking example of exclusion by language; its wording of Stygian opacity posed a challenge even to native English speakers. As Glyn Daniel complained, it was “bedevilled by jargon and by people who, apparently unable to speak and write in clear English, use such phrases as the ‘logico-deductive-evolutionary systems paradigm’”.³⁷

Last but not least, interdisciplinary research requires *bona fide* teamwork, a concept that was also rather alien in Hungarian archaeology, typically performed as a ‘one-man show’.³⁸ All too often, zoological identifications were delegated to footnotes. Over time, they merited their own appendices. Finally, major archaeozoological monographs could also be published, but these remained typically isolated from archaeological evaluation.³⁹ It is only recently that animal bone studies have begun to be integrated with archaeological results in the form of multi-authored articles. The combination of these factors would have impeded the rapid introduction of ‘New Archaeology’ into Hungarian archaeological tradition.

Bökönyi tried his best to mobilize his international network to benefit the Archaeological Institute. Thanks to his own research on behalf of American and Italian projects in Turkey and Iran, he established excellent professional relationships in Italy (Fig. 9), which he was able to utilize in this endeavour. Under his direction in 1983, the Institute was given the opportunity to begin the first ever Hungarian



Fig. 9. Sándor Bökönyi working in Metaponto, southern Italy, on behalf of the University of Texas (Photo: Chris Williams)

excavation in Italy excavating a Roman period villa.⁴⁰ In turn, experts from the *Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente* (Italian Institute for the Near and Far East) in Naples were invited to participate in the Békés County Microregion Project during the late 1980s.⁴¹

Already during his directorship in the 1980s, Bökönyi supported those working to bring the Institute in line with the European practice of increasing computer use, even if he considered himself, in his own words, “too old” to start dealing with new technology. His goal was served by supporting the research team organized under the name “Computer Applications in Archaeology”, which pioneered the introduction of GIS and digital word processing systems at the Institute.⁴² These developments were hampered not only by ever-shrinking financial support, but also by the multilateral trade embargo implemented in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979–1989), which prohibited the sale of key computer components to the countries of the Eastern Bloc. As the situation eased, in 1991 Bökönyi established the Archaeolingua Foundation in cooperation with Wolfgang Meid (University of Innsbruck, Austria), and dedicated members of the “Computer Applications in Archaeology” team, Erzsébet Jerem and Ferenc Redő. Since then, the foundation has evolved into using

³³Török (2010) 37.

³⁴Binford (1962).

³⁵Kalicz and Raczky (1977).

³⁶Török (2010) 23, 37.

³⁷Quoted by Rice (1985), 127.

³⁸Parkinson and Gyucha (2022) 551.

³⁹cf. the aforementioned example of Tác-Gorsium.

⁴⁰Gabler and Redő (1986).

⁴¹Bökönyi (1992b).

⁴²Török (2010) 37.

computer expertise to publish high-profile academic books in archaeology, linguistics and related subjects such as Egyptology, history and art history.⁴³

HIGHER EDUCATION

Bökönyi often voiced his conviction that true science, by definition, needs to be international and interdisciplinary. Shortly before his death, referring to the ground-breaking multidisciplinary nature of the study of prehistoric shell middens in Denmark,⁴⁴ he exclaimed: “In the early 1850s, a prehistoric archaeologist, a geologist and a zoologist joined forces to study some strange formation... It is incredible that after 140 years the usefulness of such cooperation has to be emphasized again and again.”⁴⁵

From 1984 onwards, he taught archaeozoology as an honorary professor at the Faculty of Humanities of Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest (Fig. 10). But perhaps based on the above realization, he gave only plenary lectures to archaeology students on the history of domestication. He was cautious enough not to engage in the university training of specialists. For his generation, a firm background in natural sciences was a prerequisite to becoming a true archaeozoologist. (The subtle difference to zooarchaeologists lay in the fact that the latter are primarily trained as archaeologists, then specializing in animal remains. This distinction of strategic significance began only crystallizing by the end of the previous millennium).⁴⁶

Therefore, his training of specialists was focused on individual mentoring, a thorough but rather inefficient way of education. In his time, Bökönyi would gladly and quickly identify any animal bones brought to him; he could be counted on for free advice or work, just as he could be counted on to readily identify the bones.⁴⁷ However, Bökönyi (as well as myself) had stable institutional employment that made such impromptu work possible free of charge. After 1990, a quantum leap in development-driven, large-scale preventive excavations,⁴⁸ literally producing tons of animal remains, would have also required the professionalization of archaeozoology.

Two decades after his death, life proved Bökönyi's prudent insight: the mass training of archaeozoological students as zooarchaeologists in Hungary yielded mixed results as supply surpassed effective demand.⁴⁹ Faced with massive rescue projects, Hungarian archaeology had neither the institutional nor the financial capacity for the permanent employment of even the most outstanding



Fig. 10. Sándor Bökönyi in the 1980s lecturing in the old faculty building of Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest (Photographer unknown)

young specialists in archaeozoology. Although during the 32 years that have passed since Bökönyi's death the number of employed archaeozoologists apparently doubled (rose from 4 to 8 nationwide), this is not in proportion with the exponential increase of finds awaiting analysis around the country.

Following disillusionment with natural sciences in archaeology during the 1990s,⁵⁰ the ‘Third Science Revolution’ more-or-less began with the next generation sequencing of ancient DNA allowing the production of genomic data first and foremost for humans.⁵¹ Such interdisciplinary cooperation has been facilitated by the 2007 formation of the European Research Council⁵² which, for the first time, has supported basic research on a large scale, even in humanities and social sciences.⁵³ Recently, these

⁴³Bartosiewicz (2022) 1.

⁴⁴Forchhammer et al. (1851–1856).

⁴⁵Bökönyi (1992a) 400.

⁴⁶Bartosiewicz (2001).

⁴⁷Bálint (1995) 481.

⁴⁸Wollák and Raczky (2012).

⁴⁹Bartosiewicz (2012).

⁵⁰Especially manifest in the British archaeological literature: Bartosiewicz (2019) 30, Fig. 2.

⁵¹e. g. Rasmussen et al. (2014); Skoglund et al. (2014).

⁵²www.erc.europa.eu.

⁵³Kristiansen (2014) 15.

developments have begun stimulating interest in archaeozoological analyses in Hungary. The new generation of archaeologists tend to be better informed about the use and interpretation of animal remains and many are well versed in international research networks.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Since 1989, the fact that after World War II the network of research institutes of the HAS was modelled following the Soviet system has been a recurring argument in political propaganda for the radical abolishment of this network. In fact, relevant Soviet policies in the 1920s copied the scientific research structure of Germany,⁵⁴ including the *Kaiser Wilhelm Gesellschaft* established in 1911.⁵⁵ Undoubtedly, the communist government directly interfered with the autonomy of the HAS in 1949, when many members representing the ‘*ancien régime*’ were purged from its ranks. Thereafter, even if politicians kept an eye on the election of subsequent members, “[t]his did not necessarily mean that members were selected only on the basis of political merit (i.e. party affiliation). However, election could be blocked on the basis of political ‘misbehaviour’ by the individual proposed for Academy membership.”⁵⁶

A characteristic turn of events was that after the political change in 1990 Bökönyi, a politically moderate specialist of no party affiliation, was unanimously re-elected as director by the Institute community for yet another four-year term. As Bökönyi’s successor in the director’s chair Csanád Bálint wrote: “Sándor Bökönyi was the director of the Archaeological Institute during the most fortunate period of its 36-year existence, between 1981 and 1993, when Academician László Gerevich had already established the image and place of the Institute in Hungarian archaeology, and when, incidentally, our budget was even used for excavations.”⁵⁷ This statement is congruent with the observation that the 1980s was a period when “(past) generous central funding and (future) increasing political openness could meet in an optimal mix” in Hungarian archaeology.⁵⁸

A valuable source from this period is Bökönyi’s 1993 article, published in the prestigious British journal *Antiquity* shortly before his death.⁵⁹ This writing summarizes the state of archaeological research in Hungary at the time for an international readership. It reflects both his ideas for organizing research and the spirit of that age. The report on the situation at that time is now a document of academic

history. In his own assessment, Bökönyi was able to work as a leader in a place and time when Hungarian archaeology was in a state of equilibrium: “...the Academy of Sciences has lost some of its importance as the main financial supporter (this role has been taken over by the National Science Fund) and supervisor of archaeological research. However, because of its tradition and less aggressive development it has suffered much less than the equivalent bodies in the neighbouring countries. Nowadays, it is playing an organizational role through its Archaeological Committee, the most important decision-making body in Hungarian archaeology. Archaeological research can be compared to a tripod whose three legs are the Academy Institute, the Archaeological Departmental Group of the University, and the Hungarian National Museum”.⁶⁰

From a theoretical perspective, it is important, that “throughout its history the Institute silently refused to conform to political expectations...even if the efforts to achieve ideological neutrality brought about an indifference towards all developments in archaeological thought and a technically determined, selective acceptance of certain aspects of ‘New Archaeology’.”⁶¹ However, it is even more striking that while ‘Western’ archaeologists profitably applied the pragmatic, non-ideological version of Marxist economic theory to explain prehistoric phenomena,⁶² Marxism appeared in Hungarian archaeological articles mostly in the superficial form of a brief, performative communist credo, sardonically called the ‘red tail’.⁶³

EPILOGUE

Sándor Bökönyi has come a long way in many ways. He arrived to the Presidium of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences from the small village on the country’s Eastern periphery. He experienced the poultry vaccination campaign of the 1950s and the university world of California, famous for its social experiments in the late 1960s. With his talent and well-known work ethic, he skilfully managed to recognize and exploit intellectual currents that he found useful in the interests of his profession, Hungarian archaeology. Even as director, he was known to be able to apologize to co-workers and a cleaning lady noted that he was always first to wish her good morning. On the other hand, he never denied how much pleasure the minor trappings of his position gave him. He enjoyed going to work to the former Archaeological Institute on Űri Street in the historical environment of Buda Castle, a listed building (cf. Fig. 11). After work, he preferred to walk home by descending the romantic-looking Korlát stairs, because this route — especially on winter evenings — had, as he put it, “the nostalgic atmosphere of novels written by Gyula Krúdy” (1878–1933).

⁵⁴Bálint (2010), v.

⁵⁵During the 1920s, the progressive organization of German scholarship likewise inspired the Hungarian Minister of Culture, Count Kuno Klebelsberg, and his Deputy, Zoltán Magyary: Palló (2002) 1469.

⁵⁶Bökönyi (1993) 142.

⁵⁷Bálint (1995) 482.

⁵⁸Choyke (2004) 144.

⁵⁹Bökönyi (1993).

⁶⁰Bökönyi (1993) 145.

⁶¹Török (2010) 48.

⁶²e.g. Childe (1936); Service (1958); Trigger (2007) 337.

⁶³Mérő (2003).



Fig. 11. The director's office in the former building of the Archaeological Institute in the Buda Castle district (Photo: Alice M. Choyke. Courtesy: Csanád Bálint)

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