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An Early Medieval Settlement in Nyírség

Data on the Early Medieval Settlement History of the Upper Tisza Region

Abstract of doctoral (PhD) thesis

by

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All over Hungary, the period of large scale preventive excavations resulted in the significant increase of Early Medieval settlements excavated, at least partly, on vast surfaces. So, in the last decades, from the research of cemeteries the emphasis moved to the study of settlements. This sheds a new light on the old discussion about the Avar continuity, because chronological classification of the Late Avar and Early Árpád Age is problematic from many aspects, so its systematic research could give us a clue for new conclusions. It is regularly observed that Late Avar and Early Árpád Age settlement features are met in the same sites, that, at the first sight, may suggest their chronological connection.

In my dissertation, I deal with the Late Avar and Early Árpád Age settlement parts excavated in Nyíregyháza–Rozsrétszőlő, Szelkó-dűlő Site M3 148b. Due to the recent preventive excavations, findings of several hectares large Early Medieval settlements became quite frequent. However, their evaluation is extremely energy- and time-consuming, demanding team work. That is why publication of such sites is still waited for. So, in the process of my work, I could not build upon experiences and methodological supports provided by the publications of similar sites.

Processing of the find material from Rozsrétszőlő presented an opportunity for the examination of an important and actual problem, the Late Avar continuity, from the point of view of settlement history. Thus, I considered important to review the Early Medieval sites of the Upper Tisza Region (beside Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County, also from neighbouring regions of Ukraine, Romania and, partly, Slovakia), because the study of a site can bring real results only after placing it into an appropriate context.

My thesis consists of three larger logical units. In the first chapter, I review the history of the Late Avar and Early Árpád Age settlement research focusing mainly on the question, how chronological frames of the present examination have been formed, on the first place, regarding the dating of the settlement pottery, for the starting point of our work is the analysis of the vessels found during the excavations.

In chapter two and three I aimed to give a general picture on the data known from the Early Medieval settlement research of the Upper Tisza Region (beyond and inside Hungarian borders). After introducing characteristic features of the research in the region, I considered it important to make systematic catalogues of sites. So, I collected and shortly presented Late Avar cemeteries and settlements that have been archaeologically investigated in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County up to the present moment. In my opinion, it is a basic problem that we make assumptions on the Early Medieval settlement history of the region without having a

realistic picture on the number, main features and geographical distribution of the excavated sites[1].

I also made the review of the research in the Upper Tisza Region's Romanian and Ukrainian parts. (I also registered sites of the Bodrogköz, the territory enclosed by Tisza and Bodrog rivers, but dealt with them only tangentially.) I made a catalogue of settlements, keeping in mind also conclusions that can be drawn from cemeteries.

Transcarpathian (Carpathian Ukrainian), Northwest Romanian and the Bodrogköz parts of the Upper Tisza Region have been investigated on different scale, bearing different research traditions. Chapters dealing with them were written with different degree of elaboration, but even still, I succeeded in collecting a significant number of Early Medieval (mainly 7^{th}–9^{th}/10^{th} century) sites.

Fourth and fifth chapter contains the evaluation of the 8^{th}–9^{th} and 10^{th}–12^{th} century settlement parts from Nyíregyháza–Rozsrétszőlő, Szelkó-dűlő Site M3 148b. First, I assessed Late Avar Age, then Árpád Age settlement features and their find material. After that I delineated conclusions drawn by me from the archaeological material of these two periods, mainly regarding the continuity of the population that lived here.

The last part of the dissertation is a short postscript in which I formulate some thoughts on the present and future tasks of the settlement research of the region.

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Nyíregyháza–Rozsrétszőlő, Szelkó-dűlő Site M3 148b is situated in the middle-western part of the Nyírség region, 8 km south of Nyíregyháza, by the Szelkó Lake. The site was found preceding the construction works of Motorway M3 and was excavated mainly by Attila Jakab and other colleagues between June and December 2005, then in March 2006. The following archaeologists participated for longer or shorter periods: Katalin Almássy, József Lukács, Márta L. Nagy, Gábor Pintye, Róbert Scholtz, Liviu Marta, Dan Băcueț-Crișan, Sanda Băcueț-Crișan, Balázs Gergely and Áron Dávid.

The W–E track of Motorway M3 crosses the northern part of an almost N–S directed hillside. The excavated territory – around 27,000 sq.m – practically covers the whole of the

[1] Though the dating of the Rozsrétszőlő site would motivate the expansion my catalogue and the involvement of also the Árpád Age sites of the Upper Tisza Region, but such a work would already demand a well-organised project team. (Heroic character of such a study is supported by the fact that Eszter Istvánovits collected 146 Árpád Age villages only from the single region of Rétköz; true, that only at a small part of them excavations had been conducted.)

hillside.

A total of 621 features was investigated, out of which 397 ones can be dated to the Early Medieval times. Among the latter, 52 were dated to the Late Avar, while 281 belong to the 10th–12th century, and the dating of 64 features is uncertain, but according to the records and stratigraphic observations, they, in all probability, belong to the horizon examined by me. Find material – mainly pottery – is kept in the the Jósa András Museum.

There are further two Early Medieval settlement parts situated in the direct vicinity of the site in question. Late Avar and Árpád Age settlement features have been also excavated at Site M3 214 lying at the neighbouring western hillside, some 150 m from our settlement. Avar features of Site 214 are bordered by a N–S directed parallel ditch system, that from the west separates the settlement from a Late Avar Age cemetery consisting of 20 burials. At Site M3 215, features from the Late Avar and Early Árpád Age also have been excavated.[2]

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At the site, relatively few – comparing to the Árpád Age settlement – features, a total of 52 certainly dated to the *Late Avar Age* were investigated. Except for the ditches, they concentrated at the southern part of the territory, relatively densely, frequently dug into each other. Beside that, features of the 10th–11th century cover them in many cases. Among the features of the 8th–9th century, there were six dwellings, 19 ditches, two exterior furnaces, two wells, one cistern, 20 pits, one grave pit, and one feature had an uncertain function. Most of features were extremely disturbed that makes their analysis very difficult.

According to the present stage of research, we can suggest that the Avar Age find material of the settlement can be dated to the final stage of the Late Avar Age, possibly also to the 9th century. Pottery material almost exclusively was made on slow wheel (93 %) clearly marking the very end of the Avar Age. At the same time, the relatively small number of the material and the heavily disturbed features do not allow me to specify further chronological frames determined by the earlier scholarship.

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At Site M3 148b, a total of 281 *10th–12th century* features were excavated. About half of

[2] These sites are being processed by Rozália Bajkai and Gábor Pintye, their results have not been published yet. I thank them for their help!

them (142) are pits, but houses (49) and exterior furnaces (37), furnace complexes (23) are also represented in a relatively large number. Ditches were found also in significant quantity (26). Only one well and three further features of uncertain function can be dated to the age in question.

The most part of the material uncovered at the site is made by pottery (85%). Number of metal objects is scarce.

To set the inner chronology of the Rozsrétszőlő settlement, I chose the following method. I started with outlining of the best-set period moving from here towards the uncertain periods. So, first, I attempted to determine the 11th century phase setting from here to the 12th and then to the 10th century. Examining find material and supespositions together, I succeeded in identifying three more or less confinable chronological phases among which the dating of the middle one is probably (at least partly) the 11th century.

Determination of the ***middle phase***, the 11th century was based on some benign superpositions and presence of pottery with cogwheel decoration. (I also recorded the dispersion of wheelmade clay cauldrons in the settlement, but I did not use the presence of this object type in the dating.)

However, before automatically relying on the dating value of cogwheel pattern, I examined superpositions containing features with cogwheel decoration. It could be determined that features containing pottery with cogwheel decoration did mark a younger horizon of the the site. There were no cases where another feature cut a feature with "cogwheel" (!). So, I suppose that the presence of this decoration can indeed be a standard for the determination of the relative chronology of the site.

In the order of frequency of the decoration patterns found at the settlement, the cogwheel occupies the fifth place. Features containing pottery with this decoration came to light more or less all over the site, that is to say, the whole of the hillside was inhabited in the 11th–12th century as the latest.

In my opinion, the "Early Árpád Age" and the ***latest*** phase of the settlement datable to the 12th century can be well separated despite of the fact that the ratio of the features dated by me to the youngest horizon is very low. The general picture of the settlement's pottery shows a rather "archaic" character. Most part of the vessels were decorated and the types of patterns are really varied. It is to be emphasised that dense, horizontally combed pattern is even more frequent than spiral line, but pots decorated with wavy and/or straight line bundles are also very frequent. Vessels can be classified into more or less heterogenous technological groups,

but really fine, evenly fired examples with homogeneous material occur rarely. No variety of forms could be observed. Number of strongly profiled rims is low. There is no consistency in the common finding of clay cauldrons with other pottery or decoration types, so their dating value known from the scholarship cannot be specified on the basis of the present site's material.

Beside the pottery material with characteristics commonly met in the settlement, in the northern part of the site we observe a group of features containing somewhat different pottery comparing to the previously described. Material of these vessels is homogenous, they have thin walls and they are well fired. They are decorated exclusively with shallow incised spiral lines. While their colour is uneven, the dark gray tone dominates. As far as I could assume, they have got relatively high capacity that can be probably explained also by the higher level of their technology. Their presence shows that the final stage of the settlement's life can be identified with the period when pottery-making on household level ceased and uniformisation of the ceramic material have started (this process can be observed all over the country). However, no flasks, jugs, bowls or lids are known either from these features, or from other parts of the settlements. We observe also the lack of white pottery from the site.

Taking into consideration all these, I think that features grouped on the northern part of the site represent the youngest phase of the settlement I dated to the end of the 11th–12th century. At this territory we can observe that, comparing to the southern parts, features appear more rarely. Judging from their finds, this territory was scarcely populated before the 11th century. So, we should look for the the earliest phase of the site at the lower two thirds of the hillside.

I would have liked to avoid the mistake of dating features not containing cogwheel decoration automatically to the elder period of the 10th–11th century horizon. Besides, I took into consideration the fact that "cogwheel" features also can cover earlier – but not neccesserily 10th century – settlement features. Keeping in mind and confronting all these with the superpositions and concentration of features at some spots, I determined six feature groups that can mark the ***earliest phase*** of the settlement. (Translating this to absolute chronology: possibility of their dating, at least partially, to the 10th century, *cannot be excluded*.)

Besides, I suceeded in registering five 11th century concentrations occuring on the whole territory of the hillside. I conditionally date three feature groups on the northern and northwestern edge of the site to the end of the 11th–12th century.

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In my work, first, I presented the 8th–9th century, then 10th–12th century settlement fetures and find material. Evaluation of the settlements belonging to two periods was separated deliberately: I was not able to solve the problem of the settlement's continuity reliably. If we compare the find material and the use of space of these two periods, or – in other words – two populations, we find more differences than similarities.

Avar population probably inhabiting the neighbouring hill (Site 214), from the late 7th century used the territory of Site 148b, but not as a residential area. It was occupied as a pasture or agricultural land that becomes clear from the well-structured ditch or channel system covering the hill. This situation changed sometime at the late 8th–9th century: Avar population or part of it moved to the southern part of the site in question. At this point or somewhat later, but, in any case, still in the Avar Age, the ditches were filled.

The "wandering" of features and the continous change of the hillside's function in itself does not exclude the possibility of the Avar continuity, though stratigraphy does not support this. However, find material of the two populations shows a lot of differences.

The difference in the quality of Late Avar and Árpád Age pottery of the site is striking. Massive, well-fired, thick walled Avar vessels are of excellent quality. Their clay is well processed, the surface is treated carefully and evenly, decoration is of high standard – opposite of the Árpád Age vessels found at the site, which, from technological point of view show a wide qualitative range, but all in all, they represent a much lower level than the Avar Age pieces. The quality of firing obviously declined comparing to the previous period that may be the result of the coarse clay used for wheeling and its superficial processing. The surface of the vessels only rarely is plain and even. Decoration is varied, but unpretentious. It would not be an exaggeration to state that in the Early Árpád Age of the site a spectacular decline of pottery quality can be observed compared to the Late Avar Age.

There are few data on the capacity of the vessels, but it can be assumed that the average rim diameter of the Avar Age pots exceeds the ones of the 10th–12th century vessels. This and the strongly profiled shoulders show that in the Late Avar Age inhabitants of the settlement used vessels of larger capacity. These pots were not only bigger, but less in number: while the fill of Árpád Age features is full of pottery sherds, Avar features contain much less pottery. This shows that Avar households needed less from the vessels of better quality and larger

capacity, than the Árpád Age ones that used worse and somewhat smaller pots.

I had an opportunity to check my relative chronological assumptions with radiocarbon examination of five features, done by dr. Mihály Molnár in 2016 (Izotoptech Ltd., Debrecen)[3]. Samples were taken from animal bones found in features. In the case of the latter, I considered it important to use intact features with relatively large number of pottery containing chronologically sensitive marks (cogwheel decoration, clay cauldron, vessel with ribbed/cylindrical neck). That is how I have chosen one Avar Age and four Árpád Age features.

Result of the examinations did not let us specify the dating of the settlement. The dating of the Avar feature between 660–770 shows a somewhat earlier period than the one determined by me. Unified dating of the Árpád Age settlement features to 1020/1030–1150 is earlier than the expected date. Taking into account the experience on the accuracy of the radiocarbon dating considering the period in question, in my opinion, all that we can say is that features dated by me to the Late Avar Age indeed belong to the Late Avar Age, and the ones dated to the Árpád Age indeed belong to the Árpád Age.

More valuable results can be gained from the examination of animal bones of the site. Archaeozoological material found in the Late Avar and Árpád Age features shows significant differences.

In the Late Avar settlement, bones of the following animals were found:

1. pig (38%)
2. cattle (27%)
3. domestic small ruminant (13%)
4. horse (12%)
5. dog (5%)
6. goose, chicken (3%)

Opposite of the above, the Árpád Age picture is the following:

1. cattle (45%)
2. horse (30%)
3. pit (12%)
4. domestic small ruminant (7%)
5. dog (5%)
6. chicken, goose (1%)

[3] Radiocarbon and archaeozoological examinations, restoration of metal finds and digitalisation of part of the excavation records was financed by OTKA (Hungarian Scientific Research Fund) project NK 104533.

The latter list refers to a community breeding large animals: the total ratio of cattle and horse bones in the 10th–11th century settlement is 73%. In the Late Avar settlement the first place is occupied by pigs; cattle is followed by domestic small ruminants who outrun horses standing on the fourth place. Transhuman animal husbandry must have played a much less role in the life of the communitiy, than breeding of croft animals. Besides, traces referring to hunting are present only in the animal bone material of the Árpád Age.

So, beside the find material and stratigraphy, archaeozoological data also attest to two populations of different culture who inhabited our site in the Late Avar and Early Árpád Age. No factors that can be studied with archaeological methods refer to any kind of connections between the population of these two horizons.

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From the territory of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County, I have collected a total of 64 Late Avar Age sites that were at least partially investigated. This is a quantitative jump comparing to previous compendia, due to the preventive excavations preceding large investment projects in the last decades: since the publication of ADAM the number of the investigated Late Avar sites in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County increased by more than four times. In concrete numbers, this means 17 cemeteries and 37 settlements. In ten cases, I registered the common appearance of cemeteries and settlements at the same site.

Based on the above said, we can assume that part of Dezső Csallány's conclusions on settlement history can be considered outdated. First of all, this affects the role of the Csörsz Dyke played in the organisation of the settlement area, that is no longer supported by the mapping of the sites. As we can see on the map, Avar settlement area determined by burial sites "moved" to the east (by 20 km since Gábor Lőrinczy's compendium of 2001). An even more important development is the appearance of earlier almost unknown Avar settlements as far as the national border and beyond it. Dezső Csallány and later József Szentpéteri when finishing the manuscript of ADAM could not see this change, but G. Lőrinczy in his study of 2001 drew attention to the traits attesting against the uninhabited character of the eastern territories considered to be "white spots". His assumptions were completely justified by the excavations of the recent decades.

So, the most important research result comes not from the examination of the cemeteries,

but from that of the geographical distribution of settlements: in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County, territories occupied by Late Avar Age cemeteries and settlements overlap each other only partially. The easternmost Avar cemetery (Máriapócs–Pócsi-Pap-dűlő) is situated some 70 km west from the national border. At the same time, the stripe between Máriapócs and the border are densely filled by recently excavated Avar Age settlements, so we cannot speak about uninhabited eastern territories. Of course, these sites are found accidentally, connected to different investments demanding rescue excavations, but still, tendencies shown here cannot be considered incidental.

I collected Early Medieval settlements of the Upper Tisza Region beyond Hungarian borders (Romania and Ukraine) in a special chapter, discussing the sites divided into two periods: Early Slav horizon and 8th–9th/10th century. In my catalogue, I listed all the settlements and settlement traits found in the accessible special literature, independently of the scale of research of this or that site.

Systematic investigation of Early Medieval settlements (and cemeteries) in *Northwestern Romania* has an even more serious past than the one in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County, and recently it developed spectacularly. In Romania most of the Early Medieval settlements came to light as a result of small surface excavations or fieldwalks. The only serious excavation and its detailed evaluation can be mentioned in the case of the Lazuri–Lubi tag site. Most part of the find material in the publications cannot be associated even with the features, or if yes, description of the latter is not satisfactory. So, the 148 sites that seem to be numerous at first sight, give us only few relevant information. If we examine the numbers more profoundly, we can see, that small scale excavations were conducted only at 16 "Early Slavic" and at 35 8th–9th century sites.

Dating and evaluation by Romanian scholars of the Early Slavic horizon differ from the Hungarian research. When examining the settlement in Lazuri, Ioan Stanciu suggested that Slavic migration to the territory of present Romania could have started already before the arrival of the Avars, at the turn of the 5th–6th century. He published a detailed list about settlement traits found in the territory of Partium (small scale excavations or fieldwalks), that can be possible dated to the 5th–6th century. Sometimes he "pulls back" to the 5th–6th, in some cases to the 6th–7th century the earlier published settlement parts originally dated to the 8th–9th century or "discovers" at the same site a phase earlier than the Lazuri-Pişcolt group phase. When evaluating sites, he drew a sharp border between these two horizons explaining it by a new wave, the actual Lazuri-Pişcolt group, arriving simultaneously with the Avar conquerors

to the Slavs who lived here earlier together with Gepids. Stanciu tried to support the Slavic settlement preceding Avars also by written sources.

Ioan Stanciu made his assumptions on the Avars mainly based on the burials. In 2000, there were 12 burial finds certainly connected to Avars on this territory, which came to light incidentally. Their geographic situation shows that the third, suggested track of the Csörsz Dyke running in the line of Valea lui Mihai did not determine the border of the local Late Avar settlement area, also east of which Avar finds came to light. According to him, their small cemeteries suggest the presence of little, dynamic, constantly moving communities that only controlled the territory. It is difficult to esteem the ratio of the Slavic aborigine population comparing to Avars, because in the period in question cremation graves are completely missing (with two exceptions: Someşeni and Nuşfalău). However, according to Stanciu this could mean that Slavs took over Avar burial rites.

A similar opinion can be met in the works by Călin Cosma who evaluated the 8th–10th century settlements regarding the presence and influence of Avar and Hungarian population in modern Northwest Romania. He also preferred the role of the local Slavs opposite of Hungarian population remarking the possibility of the continuous Romanised population's presence.

Early Medieval settlement history of *Carpathian Ukraine (Transcarpathian Region)* from many aspects was also evaluated in a different way comparing to Hungarian scholarship. Here, comparing to Northwest Romania, we meet just few settlement materials, which marks the actual state of research rather than the relevant historical situation. Similarly to Romania, Ukrainian research of Early Medieval settlements and cemeteries has been started long ago, but here researchers published mainly excavation materials and only rarely field walks or stray finds. This can explain, why I succeeded in finding only three "Early Slavic" and 37 8th–9th/10th century settlements, out of which only four sites' materials can be considered stray finds.

Though at the general periodisation of the Transcarpathian settlements we can meet a theoretical phase of the 6th–7th century, no such dating can be observed in the practice of determining chronology. Sites that can be associated with the horizon called in Ukraine "Prague Culture" are mostly dated to the 5th–6th century, that is to say, both of our eastern neighbours date the first Slavic population of the Carpathian Basin one century earlier. This uncertainty obviously comes from the difficulties connected with the analysis of the

handmade pottery and, even more, from the effort to justify the appearance of Slavs in Transcarpathia and Romania as early as possible.

In Carpathian Ukraine we meet several settlements dated partly to the 7th century. As far as it could be assumed from the publication, their material does not belong to the Lazuri-Pişcolt group (in Hungarian-Romanian terms). Hungarian and Romanian scholars, though they haven't reached consensus regarding the role of Early Slavs, agree that this horizon broke sometime before the 8th century. Ukrainian researchers also detect this hiatus, but despite of this, they consider Slavic culture continuous practically from the 5th century.

At the same time, the dating practice considering the 8th–11th century Transcarpathian settlements does not differ significantly from the traditions of Hungarian research. In many cases in the dating of Ukrainian settlements discontinuity can be observed between the 9th and 10th century, but this is explained not by the stereotypes coming from the Hungarian Conquest, but by political changes connected with the formation of the Kievan Rus. Stepan Penyak neglected vessels with ribbed neck appearing the publication of some settlements. He, without doubts, determined settlements excavated in Transcarpathia as Slavic ones (White Croatians), Russian or Rusyn (Ruthenes).

Though evaluation of the Upper Tisza Region burials (whether in Hungary or in the neighbouring countries) does not belong to the topic of my thesis, I thought it necessary to devote some words to this question in the postscript.

In Carpathian Ukraine, Stepan Penyak counts with three types of burial rite: cremation under barrows, biritualism and inhumation. However, in his monograph he dealt only with barrow graves, so we do not get information on the ratio of the other two rites (he mentioned only the urns from Uzhhorod–Galago). So, from the picture drawn by him it seems that in Transcarpathia, cemeteries consisting of several dozens of barrows spread. Scholarship dates them to the 8th–10th century. Most of them were not excavated. At the sites, where archaeological investigation took place, similarly to the Slovakian part of the Bodrogköz, ashes were found on the ancient daily surface with few pottery inventories. The diameter of these barrows is 6–11 m, average height is around 0.5 m.

Lacking systematic research, it is also difficult to clear the ethnic background of the Northwest Romanian cemeteries. According to Călin Cosma, most of them belong to Eastern and Western Slavs. Anyhow, it should put us on guard that, according to our present knowledge, number of inhumation graves dated by Romanian scholars to the 8th–9th century exceeds the number of cremation graves (12:2).

Evaluating the above-mentioned cremation cemeteries together with barrow graves known from the Bodrogköz, in the wider region an Early Medieval Slavic horizon can be outlined. In my opinion, for the time being all that we can say is that settlement pottery of the Upper Tisza Region is unemployable for determining ethnic groups. However, if we consider elongated-irregular (log)houses and barrow graves as ethnic markers, we can conclude that Slavic settlement area did not overstep significantly the line of the Tisza in southern and southwestern direction.

At the same time we know also from the Partium inhumation graves, that, judging from a hint by Stepan Penyak, can be suggested also in Transcarpathia. We also have to count with Late Avar population in the region, though we cannot esteem their number.

However, there are no archaeological traces referring to either Early Medieval Slavic or Avar population in the time of Hungarian Conquest. So, the general settlement historical tendency experienced in the Carpathian Basin (or at least in its part east of the Danube) in this aspect can be projected also to the Upper Tisza Region independently from the density or ethnic determination of the population living here.