Ádám Bollók

Excavating Early Medieval Material Culture and Writing History in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Hungarian Archaeology

In this essay, I examine the initial stages in the nineteenth century of the study of material finds from the Middle Ages in the Carpathian Basin. I offer a brief overview of the history of the scientific work that led to the identification of archaeological findings from the Avar era and the era of the Hungarian Conquest, and I also shed light on some of the reasons underlying the failure to identify properly findings from the Hun era (i.e. the fifth century) and the late Avar era (i.e. the eighth century). I examine the principal considerations that shaped the research endeavors of historians and archaeologists in the nineteenth century, and I present the primary methodological approaches according to which historians drew on archaeological findings in support of their conclusions. I focus in particular on the works of Miklós Jankovich, Flóris Rómer, Ferenc Pulszky, Géza Nagy, József Hampel, Géza Supka, and Zoltán Felvinczi Takács, though I also consider the writings of less influential representatives of scholarly life.

Keywords: archaeology, late antique and early medieval history, historiography, Carpathian Basin, Avars, ancient Hungarians

Introduction

The founding father of ancient critical history-writing, the rightly famous Thucydides, in his celebrated narrative of the pre-history of the Greeks (the so-called “archaeology,” Greek arkhēologieō), reports on a “dig”, i.e. what we today would call an “archaeological excavation”. It had been carried out by the Athenians in 426 BC at Delos in order to purify the island, which was regarded as the birth place of the gods Artemis and Apollo, and therefore both births and burials had been prohibited there. His conclusions, which were based on the results of this early “excavation,” are particularly interesting, since they shed considerable light on the thinking of “researchers,” both ancient and modern, engaged in the study of history through material remains of the past. As the

---

1 The present paper was written within the research project no. K 108 670 supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund, entitled Művészetek és tudomány a nemzetépítés szolgálatában a 19. századi Magyarországon.
fifth-century BC author concludes on the basis of his inspection of the relics discovered at Delos, before the arrival of the Greeks,

Carians inhabited most of the islands, as may be inferred from the fact that, when Delos was purified by the Athenians in this war [i.e. the Peloponnesian war] and the graves of all who had ever died on the island were removed, over half were discovered to be Carians, being recognized by the fashion of the armor found buried with them, and by the mode of burial, which is that still in use among them.²

Thucydides’ observation offers a very clear illustration of the fact that one of the important aspects of the interest in the material culture of the past has always been closely connected in European intellectual life to the conviction that these objects constitute sources on the basis of which conclusions concerning the past can be drawn. Furthermore, his chain of thought also clearly shows that one of the primary aims of this interest in the past was to clear up questions concerning the identity of those people who created these objects. One of the important aspects of this is referred to in contemporary scholarly discourse as the “ethnic interpretation” of the archaeological record.

This is particularly true with regards to the archaeological remains of eras from which very few or only very uninformative written sources survive. Thus, the study of material culture can acquire a role of particular prominence in the process of acquainting ourselves with this slice of the past. It is therefore hardly surprising that, since the early nineteenth century, this approach has enjoyed considerable popularity in European scholarship and, within this, in Hungary, whose academics initially was very closely tied to the pursuit of German scholarly circles. Though, in the second half of the twentieth century historical and archaeological scholarship began to express serious doubts concerning the theoretical foundations and reliability of ethnic interpretations of archaeological finds. This skepticism was no doubt prompted in part by the fact that, after World War II, experts of the history of Antiquity and the early Middle Ages became increasingly emphatic in their observation that the notion of ethnic identity in these periods could hardly be described with the conceptual frameworks that were used by representatives of the eighteenth-century idea of the modern nation, however enthusiastically these thinkers, who projected the notions of

identity that prevailed in their era onto the past, attempted to do so.³ On the other hand, one still comes across heated debates in the secondary literature on the extent to which archaeological relics can be assessed and studied from the perspective of their “ethnic” attribution,⁴ while other scholars simply seem to ignore this question altogether.

However, in the nineteenth century, which is the period that is the most important from the perspective of my inquiry, the question of the ethnic attribution of archaeological relics (or, more precisely, the question of the grounds on which a scholar could venture an assertion on the ethnic interpretation of a relic) was hardly a concern for the majority of researchers. The notion that the various finds that were being excavated could and indeed had to be connected to some earlier ethnic group was regarded as self-evident. Naturally, this view was closely tied to political nature of the study of history and the public discourse concerning history at the time.

---


The Early Stage of Archaeological Research

Historians studied the history of the Carpathian Basin in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages primarily from the perspectives of political history, endeavoring to write narratives of the histories of the various gentes that for a time made the middle Danube Basin their home by collecting, critiquing, and assessing the written sources. The importance of this seemed self-evident at the time in part simply because for most of the gentes in question there was no simple, adequately stable chronological narrative of events that could serve as a point of departure for further inquiries. In addition to this focus on the essential need for annals of history, understandably the question of the pre-history of the peoples who lived in the Carpathian Basin was also a subject of considerable interest, including for instance the desire to determine their earlier homes and the paths they had taken in the course of their migrations. However, as noted above, scholars at the time hardly took into consideration the possibility that the peoples of the early Middle Ages were not ethnic groups in the modern sense of the term. They were even less communities that could be described using the Romantic term “nation.” Thus, one could hardly regard their “wanderings” as the migrations of coherently defined and “closed” ethnic groups or “nations” from one homeland to another.

For Hungarian scholars, the arrival of the ancient Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin was a topic of particularly keen interest, as was the question of their migrations in the times before the so-called Conquest (i.e. the ancient Hungarians’ settlement in the Carpathian Basin at the turn of the ninth century). At the same time, however, for perfectly understandable reasons from the outset scholars did not really consider archaeological finds alone as suitable sources for the study of historical questions of such importance. Clearly, one of the reasons for this was the fact that, at the time of the first excavations of finds from the period of the Conquest (from the 1830s to the 1860s), Hungarian archaeologists had no historical relics from the territories of “Scythia” (the “original homeland” mentioned in the Hungarian chronicles from the Middle Ages), the Hungarian

---

settlements discovered in the thirteenth century by Friar Julian on the Volga River, or the wider area around the Ural Mountains (which on the basis of the Finno-Ugric affinities of the Magyar language was regarded as their ancient homeland). Thus, it was not possible to make comparisons. Therefore, while the scholars who were investigating the question of the previous “homelands” of the ancient Hungarians and their migration towards East-Central Europe sought answers to the inquiries first and foremost in written sources and the theories concerning the linguistic affinities of the Magyar language, from the outset archaeological finds seemed for more suitable as a means of shedding light on the culture of the ancient Hungarians of the tenth century. And this culture seemed accomplished indeed. In contrast with descriptions found in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German historical literature, which concluded, on the basis of their own historical concepts and the image of the ancient Hungarians depicted in medieval Western chronicles, that the Hungarians of the tenth century were an unrefined, barbaric people, nineteenth-century Hungarian historians contended with pride and satisfaction that the surviving historical relics from the Conquest Period hardly support the image of the “uncivilized Hungarians” that had come to prevail in the historical scholarship in the West.

Nineteenth-century scholars could not easily refute this negative image of the ancient Hungarians drawn in the Middle Ages (an image of the attacker that was constructed by the attacked, who used topoi from the literature of Antiquity on the “Northern barbarians”), or, more precisely, the recurrence of this image in the Western European scholarship of the Early Modern Era, merely on the basis of the written sources. The oft-quoted description in the World History written by Regino, a late ninth-century abbot of Prüm (d. 915), for example, encapsulates this medieval Western attitude with epigrammatic conciseness. According to Regino, the Hungarians “do not desire gold and silver in the same way as other mortals. […] They know nothing about the use of wool and clothing, and although they are consistently afflicted by the cold they wear only skins of wild animals and rodents.”

---


Nevertheless, although this description of the ancient Hungarians’ pre-Conquest history and visual appearance is no more than a slightly modified version of the paragraph originally written by the second- or early third-century Roman historian, Justin, about the Scythians, Regino’s markedly hostile tone is clearly apparent. While the Scythians’ simple lifestyle in Justin’s characterization harmonized well with the stereotypes of the Antiquity about the “Northern barbarians”, who were supposed to have led a refined, moderate and admirable life, “[b]y omitting this [attitude from his writing], Regino turns Justin’s celebration of the simplicity of an ancient civilization into revulsion at a backward people.”

The images drawn of the ancient Hungarians by the majority of contemporary or near-contemporary authors correspond in their main outlines with the one delineated by Regino. More appreciative voices have not remained entirely unheard in late nineteenth-century Hungarian historiography, either. In contrast to Regino’s description, the famous Persian geographer Abū Saʿīd ʿAbd al-Hayy ibn Zahhāk ibn Maḥmūd Gardīzī (d. ca. 1061), writing in the first half of the eleventh century, offered the following description of the ancient Hungarians: “These Hungarians are a people [that] are [possessed] of [fair] countenances. Their clothes are of brocade and their weapons are [made] of silver and are goldplated.” Though Gardīzī is a comparatively late author, this passage is commonly thought to have been excerpted and translated into Persian from an earlier, but now regrettably lost Arabic work, thereby preserving a later ninth- or tenth-century account. Given its positive depiction of Hungarians, it is hardly surprising that Gardizi’s text rapidly became familiar among Hungarian historians and figured frequently in their writings. However, considering that neither the Persian text nor the Hungarian translation was published before the very end of the nineteenth century, at the time when the first archaeological

---

10 Earlier scholarship concurred that the passage cited from Gardīzī’s was excerpted from al-Gayhānī’s late ninth- and early tenth-century Kitāb al-masālik w’al-mamālik (Book of Roads and Kingdoms). However, István Zimonyi suggests that the passage in question may have been taken from another, unknown work. See Hansgerd Göckenjan and István Zimonyi, Orientalsche Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter: Die Ğayhâni-Tradition (Ibn Rusta, Gardīzī, Hudud al-Alam, al-Bakrī und al-Marwazī), Veröffentlichungen der Societas Uralo-Altaica, 54 (Wiesbaden: Klaus Röhrborn, Ingrid Schellbach-Kopra, 2001).
11 Gardīzī’s chapters on the peoples of Eastern Europe, including the ancient Hungarians, were first published (although separately from one another, but based on the same manuscript and almost in the same year) by the Russian Vasilij Vladimirovich Bartol’d (Otchet o poezdke v Srednii Azii s nauchnoy celi 1893–
excavations were being done (roughly between the 1830s and the 1880s) the only available descriptions of the early Hungarians were found in the works of (medieval) historians from Western Europe, and these descriptions offered decidedly negative depictions of the Hungarians.

In light of the above, it is hardly surprising that in the nineteenth century Hungarian historians and archaeologists, in order to correct the picture bequeathed by the biased written accounts, turned to the tenth-century archaeological material that had recently been excavated from sites all over the Carpathian Basin. However, this approach hardly turned out to be without pitfalls.

With the discovery and identification in 1834 of the first ancient Hungarian grave assemblage, the famous burial of a tenth-century Hungarian in Benepuszta (today part of Ladánybene in Central Hungary), archaeology began to play a significant and continuously growing role in the research on the visual appearance of the ancient Hungarians in particular and the early phases of Hungarian national history in general. Miklós Jankovich (1772–1846), a famous art-collector and art-connoisseur of the earlier nineteenth century and the first publisher of the Benepuszta grave assemblage, proudly compared the glittering of the silver-gilt costume accessories revealed among the finds with the visual appearance of the Celtic and Germanic tribes described by Julius Caesar and Tacitus, respectively.

Jankovich was also obviously pleased to note that the tenth-century western European coins, minted in the name of Berengar I as King of Italy (r. 887–915) and then Emperor (r. 915–924) and King Hugo of Provence (r. 924–947), evidently corroborate the contemporary chroniclers’ accounts of the western European military campaigns of tenth-century Hungarians.


The presence of these coins among the finds of Benepuszta was doubtless of utmost importance, since these objects provided the necessary clues enabling Jankovich to identify the proper chronological position of the entire burial. On the other hand, the exploration of an ancient Hungarian assemblage prompted him to take a step further by attempting to define the main characteristics of tenth-century Hungarian national decorative style and its eastern, pre-Conquest roots. In this endeavor, Jankovich happily referred to the leaf-shaped silver-gilt mounts, which according to his supposition was attached to the deceased’s overgarment, by emphasizing that the technique of mercury gilding was introduced to Europe from Asia by the ancient Hungarians. The griffon portrayal on the Benepuszta strap-end, a late Carolingian product in reality, was likewise regarded by him as a typically Asian phenomenon which did not bear any resemblance to Greco-Roman or European griffon depictions. Of course, it would be a serious mistake to judge Jankovich’s assumptions by the standards of our today knowledge. Still, two notable tendencies were palpable in this very first assessment of the tenth-century material culture of the Carpathian Basin. The first and more understandable is the author’s national pride, which characterizes the almost hymnal tone of his entire contribution. The second, in contrast, is more closely connected with Jankovich’s and his contemporaries’ historical concept of the Hungarians’ eastern origins, a notion that led them to trace back all possible elements of the material record known to them at the time to an eastern, Asiatic ancestry. The equation of the Hungarians’ eastern origins, a commonsensical fact generally acknowledged from the very beginnings of medieval Hungarian historiography, with a specifically Asiatic ancestry, on the other hand,

18 For Jankovich’s views on Hungarian prehistory and early history, see István Vásáry, “Jankovich Miklós és a magyar őstörténet,” in idem., Magyar űsházak és magyar őstörténészek. Magyar Śtörténeti Könyvtár, 24 (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó 2008), 179–89. As Vásáry notes, Jankovich concluded on the basis of the secondary literature that was available to him at the time that the relatives of the Hungarians and their distinctive language were to be sought first and foremost among Asian peoples and languages. He felt that “the Huns, Cumans, Khazars, and Hungarians all had a shared language. The dialectical differences were like the dialectical differences between the Germanic languages of today. Jankovich was obviously mistaken, but most of the scholars of his time shared this mistaken belief. It was merely a hypothesis regarding ancient history, since they had no concrete data whatsoever concerning the languages of the Huns, the Cumans, and the Khazars.” Ibid., 185–86.
19 Cf. Vásáry, “Mediaeval theories.”
hardly gained universal acceptance in later decades. Needless to say, archaeology was hardly in a game-changing position in the research of Hungarian origins in the middle and late nineteenth century. The debates about the Finno-Ugrian or Turkic genealogy of the Magyar language were understandably dominated by comparative linguistics and resulted in the demonstration of the Finno-Ugrian affinities of the Magyar language.\footnote{For a brief overview of the main views, see János Pusztai, Az “ugor-török” háború után (Budapest: Magvető, 1977).} Historical analyses of the available written sources, conversely, repeatedly directed the researchers’ attention to the world of the steppes. Relying on the testimonies of western European Latin and Byzantine Greek authors, who often saw, in all new-coming nomadic tribes, the same “Scythians,” “Huns” or “Turks,”\footnote{For an unsurpassable critical overview of the Byzantine sources, see Gyula Moravcsik, Byzantinoturcica, vol. 2/1 of Die byzantinische Quellen der Geschichte der Türkvolker: Sprachreste der Türkvolker in den byzantinischen Quellen. Zweite durchgearbeitete Auflage, Berliner Byzantinische Arbeiten, vols. 10–11 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1958).} several historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth century considered the Scythians, Huns, Sabirs, Avars, Bulgars or Pechenegs as the ancestors and/or closest relatives of pre-Conquest Hungarians.

An archaeological assessment of the various historical theories was hindered for a long time by the fact that the identification of the material heritage of the abovementioned peoples was far from sufficiently advanced in these decades. In the material record as it was known at the time, the large Hun-age copper cauldrons were ascribed to different peoples, from the Scythians to an “unspecified” early medieval population.\footnote{The first Hun-age grave assemblages that dated back to the Migration period: Flóris Rómer, “A czakói bronz-edény,” Archaeologiai Értesítő 2 (1869) [1870]: 292–92. Very soon after having published this article, Rómer enriched the literature with data concerning another cauldron which had not been fully published for a long time. Idem., “A czakói bronzedény ügyéhez,” Archaeologiai Értesítő 3 (1870): 114–15. Mór Wosinsky, the archaeologist who published data concerning the second cauldron found in the course of archaeological excavations in the Carpathian Basin, also thought that it probably dated to the Migration period. He was able to present two similar types of finds among finds known from Russia. Mór Wosinsky, “A kaposvölgyi népvándorláskori üst,” Archaeologiai Értesítő 11 (1891): 427–31. József Hampel, however, did not regard this hypothesis as persuasively founded. He hypothesized that this kind of artifact might have been used in the Scythian period, though he did not exclude the possibility (particularly in his article written in German) that the cauldrons might have been used in the early Middle Ages. József Hampel, “Skythiai emlékek Magyarországban,” Archaeologiai Értesítő 13 (1893): 400; idem., “Skythische Denkmäler aus Ungarn: Beitrag zur uralaltsaischen Archäologie,” Ethnologische Mitteilungen aus Ungarn 4 (1895): 15. It was not until the twentieth century that the cauldrons were dated accurately to the Hun period, cf. n. 66 below. For a detailed examination of the history of scholarship on the question, see István Bóna, Das Hunnenreich (Budapest: Corvina, 1991), 220–21.} The first Hun-age grave assemblages
were either identified as “Migration period antiquities”\(^23\) or they appeared among early and middle Avar-period, i.e. sixth- to seventh-century, finds.\(^24\) In contrast, the eighth-century cemeteries characterized by the appearance of a great number of bronze casts were thought to represent the later Sarmatian and Hunnic periods, i.e., the third to the fifth, or more broadly, the third to the sixth or seventh centuries.\(^25\) The reasons for the latter misidentification clearly exhibit the main problems faced by, and in the meantime the central interests of, later nineteenth-century Hungarian archaeology. A third- to fifth-century (perhaps sixth century) date was proposed for these eighth-century grave assemblages and cemeteries mainly on the basis of the late Roman coins and secondarily reused Roman artefacts found among the finds. The late Antique style of the ornamental vocabulary appearing on the late Avar-period bronze casts likewise seemed to strengthen this chronological attribution. Both the majority of excavators of individual sites\(^26\) and leading archaeologists performing the systemization of the finds shared these views concerning chronology.\(^27\) József

---


25 In contrast with this view, which was accepted by the majority, Wosinsky regarded the graveyard in Závod, a cemetery in which interments began in the seventh century and were continuous into the eighth, but where the characteristic eighth-century bronze casts did not appear, as the heritage of a Germanic community on the basis of a pectoral cross that was found there. Mór Wosinsky, “A závodi sírmező,” *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 16 (1896): 30.

26 The individual argumentations varied considerably, and non-professional archaeologists were also often cautious enough not to offer precise ethnic labels. Cf., e.g., Gyula Tergina, “Az ordasi lelet,” *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 14 (1880) [1881]: 336–40; Zsigmond Szelle, “Régészeti ásatások a bölcskei népvándorlás-kori temetőben,” *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 11 (1891): 239–49 (by alluding to the chronological position of the Keszthely cemeteries); Vilmos Lipp, “A vasmegyei régiség törőből,” *A vasmegyei régiség-történeti egyetemi évi jelentése* 6 (1878): 31–34 (although misguided by the coins, but otherwise cautious and subtle in his analysis). Soon, however, Lipp changed his mind and suggested an eighth-century date for some of his finds, which ultimately proved correct according to later analyses. Nevertheless, unfortunately he did not specify the considerations which led him to this result. Cf. idem., “Keszthelyi leletek,” *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 14 (1880) [1881]: 122. Then, in his subsequent studies published after the excavation of several new Roman-era coins, he returned to the fourth- to fifth-century date, cf. idem., *A keszthelyi sírmezők* (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1884), 51; Idem., *Die Gräberfelder von Keszthely* (Budapest: Kilian, 1885), 87. For a complete survey of his works and views on this topic, see Gábor Kiss, “A Keszthely-városi avar kori temető kutatásának kezdetei,” *Zalai Múzeum* 9 (1999): 77–98.

Excavating Early Medieval Material Culture

Hampel (1849–1913), one of the most outstanding minds of late nineteenth-century Hungarian archaeology, attempted to carefully consider the value of late Roman coins in dating the artifacts and assemblages. He realized that several cemeteries containing the eighth-century casts actually continued well into the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries. Yet even he assumed that the griffon depictions and animal combat scenes on these casts represented a late Scythian legacy preserved by the Sarmatians. Finally, he presumed that the casts decorated with animal figures and vegetal ornaments went out of use only slowly around and slightly after the sixth-century arrival of the Avars.

The rather romantic assumption, however, according to which a people of such an enormous world-historical importance as the Huns must have left significant archaeological traces, was raised only sporadically. On the contrary, considering the lack of securely dateable find assemblages from the late fourth and earlier fifth centuries (other than those assigned to the Sarmatian population), some archaeologists argued that only the Hun political center had moved from the Ukrainian steppes to the Carpathian Basin, while the bulk of the ethnically Hun population had continued to reside in the eastern European steppes throughout the Hunnic epoch. The main rationale behind these and many similar hypotheses was doubtless the strong belief in the ethnical and historical interpretability of the archaeological record.

Such strongly historically-minded approaches, however, may equally have led to suppositions which later proved to be more accurate, even if they were hardly more than uncertain educated guesses at the time of their formulation. I cite a single eloquent example. Ágost Sőtér (1837–1905), a landowner and lawyer in Moson County, concluded on the basis of the results of his excavation conducted at Dunacsúny (today Čunovo in Slovakia) that the abovementioned cemeteries that had been attributed to the Sarmatians by the leading experts of his time were, 


29  Ibid., 2:20, 26. The origins of this conviction appear to be twofold. On the one hand, some of his considerations seem to be of a typological nature. On the other, some of the cemeteries really were only opened in the seventh century, in other words, at a time at which the available archaeological finds had already been accurately dated by scholars.
31  Ibid., 2:27.
in fact, established and occupied by the Avars. His line of reasoning, or, more precisely, his passing remark was based solely on the extension of the Dunacsúny cemetery and his conviction that “only the Avars resided in this region” in sufficiently large numbers to leave behind hundreds of graves.\(^{33}\) The archaeological finds themselves may have led to similar “accurate intuitions.” The suggestion made by Ferenc Pulszky concerning the dating of finds that had characteristic cast belt adornments to the Avar period (though in the case in question the sixth and seventh centuries were meant) was similarly founded on a relatively weak argument. The idea was based on a fibula that had been found in a seventh-century grave of one of the cemeteries in Keszthely. Because of the nature of the excavations, however, Pulszky could not have known that the fibula had not been taken from the same grave as the cast mountings (for this problem, see note 39 below).\(^{34}\)

Knowledge concerning the archaeological material connected with the Sabirs, the Bulgarians, and the Pechenegs was even more limited. The initial identifications of the first Proto-Bulgarian assemblages in present-day Bulgaria were only made in the 1930s,\(^{35}\) practically 100 years after the publication of the Benepuszta finds, while the pinpointing of the archaeological heritage of the Sabirs poses unsolvable problems for specialists even today. One of the few possible reliable points of departure for a comparative analysis that would have enabled archaeologists to take sides in the contemporary debates of historians and linguists was thus provided by Ferenc Pulszky’s (1814–97) identification of the material culture of the early Avar period in 1874. In the latter case, again coin finds, namely solidi minted under the Byzantine emperors Justin I (r. 518–527), Justinian I (r. 527–565), Phocas (r. 602–610), and Constantine IV Pogonatus (r. 668–685), offered the necessary starting point.\(^{36}\) On the basis of the main characteristics of these finds, the sixth- to seventh-century assemblages

---


discovered over the course of the following decades were in most cases properly identified, even if some of the attributions were still mistaken.38

As is readily apparent from this brief overview, the accurate dating of types of artifacts and find assemblages was rarely possible without contemporary coin finds. Where these coins were not available or the available ones were not contemporary with the burials in which they were found, only stratigraphic and typological observations or securely dateable imports would have provided the necessary help. However, neither did the excavation methods employed in course of the majority of the nineteenth-century archaeological explorations supply specialists with the crucial stratigraphic data, nor was the archaeological research conducted on the territories from which exports that might have been accurately dated arrived in the Carpathian Basin in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages advanced enough to provide sufficiently useful assistance for experts specialized in the research of the material culture of the Middle Danube region. (Germanic finds originating from the Roman imperial and the Merovingian periods were notable exceptions, however.) Still, it would be unfair to fail to note that in a number of cases typological comparisons could and actually did play a role in establishing the proper chronological position of several assemblages. To mention only a few examples, on the basis of formal analogies—which are not entirely acceptable today, but at the time were the only available ones—Flóris Rómer (1815–89) came to the accurate conclusion that the Hun-age cauldrons were, in fact, early medieval manufactures.40 Similarly, Hampel based his dating of the finds from Adony on comparisons with artifacts from the late Roman and Merovingian periods, and Géza Nagy (1855–1915), an archaeologist at the Hungarian National Museum, came close to dating accurately the eighth-century assemblages on the basis of typological observations (indeed he was hindered

38 Cf. n. 23.
39 It is interesting to note, for example, that the overwhelming majority of hundreds of burial assemblages excavated by Vilmos Lipp at various localities in and around Keszthely remained practically undocumented. Consequently, it was impossible to know which objects might have originated from the same grave. This practice left archaeologists unable to separate, among others, the various chronological horizons of a multi-period site.
40 Rómer, “A czakói bronz-edény.”
41 Hampel, “A n. múzeum érem. és régiségosztályának gyarapodása,” 348–49; and see the assemblages collected in his “third group” in Hampel, *Alterthümer.*
first and foremost in this by his faith in the usefulness of coins as artifacts on which to base hypotheses concerning dating).\textsuperscript{42}

Indeed it is worth mentioning, in this context, an essay by a German archaeologist, Paul Reinecke (1872–1958), that was written towards the end of the nineteenth century and remains a captivating read even today. With thorough knowledge of early medieval Western European finds and relying on proper methodologies, Reinecke used formal analogies to accurately date the eighth-century relics (i.e. of the late Avar period) found in the Carpathian Basin.\textsuperscript{43} His conclusions, however, found little echo in the Hungarian scholarship of the time.

In addition to these obstacles, mention must also be made of at least two decisive subjective factors, each of which played a significant role in the emergence of long-term misconceptions. The first was, as we have already seen, an immediate consequence of the belief of nineteenth-century historians and archaeologists that archaeological cultures constitute well-definable entities corresponding to peoples in the modern sense of the word. As a consequence of this strongly historical approach, many researchers focused on ethnic interpretations of the assemblages that had been and were being discovered, labelling them with ethnic names known from the written sources. On the other hand, the inevitable use of coin finds in course of the determination of the chronological position of a given assemblage and find horizons not only turned out to be a helpful tool for archaeologists, but, along with the written accounts of conquests and decisive battles, it also generated a sort of optical illusion. Since coins from the sixth, seventh, and tenth centuries were found primarily in graves and small cemeteries characterized by a high percentage of horse burials, rich grave furnishings, and weapon finds (and thus, one can conclude, were left behind mostly by the members of early and middle Avar and ancient Hungarian elites), scholars were inclined to regard both peoples as relatively small, but rich and militant groups.

It is therefore hardly surprising that for Ferenc Pulszky, who at the time was the director of the Hungarian National Museum, “the ancient Hungarians were conquerors and not craftsmen, and thus their jewelry was made by their servants, prisoners of war, and the local population found [inside the Carpathian Basin] in

\textsuperscript{42} In 1893, he still compared stirrups from the late Avar age with “eighth-century and ninth-century Germanic and Norman stirrups.” cf. Nagy, “A régi kunok temetkezése,” 109–10. Two years later he uncertainly explained items similar to the Germanic-type stirrups found in graves defined by him as dating from the Sarmatian period by some Germans among the buried. Cf. Idem., “Magyarország története,” CCCXXXII.

a period in which art was on the decline.”

Following a similar line of thought, Géza Nagy attempted to make a systematic comparison of objects and burial customs from the three assemblage groups assigned to the “Hunno-Sarmatians,” the Avars and the ancient Hungarians in a series of papers published in 1893.

Not surprisingly, more similarities were detected between the burial assemblages of the “Hun” and early Avar epochs, in large part because the material remains of the alleged “Hunno-Sarmatians” did in fact date from late seventh and eight centuries, in other words, the late Avar age, and therefore represent the archaeological heritage of the descendants of the gentes populating the Carpathian Basin in the early Avar period. On the other hand, Nagy seems to have been even more intrigued by the dissimilarities that divided his “Hunno-Sarmatian” and Avar groups from the ancient Hungarian assemblages. In his view, the middle Volga components of and the Sāsānian and early Islamic influences that left their marks on the ancient Hungarian material culture adequately explain these differences.

Interestingly enough, Nagy further added that the material remains of the Pechenegs, the Jasz people, and the Cumans are also to be found among the burial assemblages ascribed, on the basis of Byzantine, Islamic, and western European coin finds, to the tenth-century Hungarians. This latter assumption apparently reflects Nagy’s belief that “the cultures and customs of all these peoples differed only in nuances from one another.”

Nevertheless, not only the Hungarians, Pechenegs and Cumans were considered kin folks or essentially similar peoples in Nagy’s understanding. He also regarded the various tribes and tribal alliances—Sabirs, Utrigurs, Kutrigurs, Onogurs (or Hunugurs), Bulgars among others—mentioned in the historical record during the century following the dissolution of the Hun Empire and often labelled “Huns” in the Byzantine sources as the direct offspring of the Huns. Moreover, according to Nagy, in all likelihood Magyar elements had been among the Bulgar tribes migrating into the Carpathian Basin in the 680s, and therefore the presence of the Magyar ethnos in the Middle Danube region might

---

47 Ibid., 115–16.
48 Nagy, “Magyarország története,” CCCXXIX, CCCXLVIII–CCCXLIIX.
be traced back to the late seventh century at the latest. Perhaps not surprisingly, archaeology played virtually no role either in the construction of Nagy’s models of ethnic continuity or in his hypothesis regarding the Magyars’ settling in the Carpathian Basin before their historically attested arrival at the end of the ninth century. Accordingly, hardly any mention was made of the archaeological heritage of the “post-Hunnic” tribes enumerated above or the pre-conquest Magyars residing east of the Carpathians. The fact, therefore, that, as mentioned above, Nagy himself detected noticeable differences between the archaeological materials of his “Hunno-Sarmatian” and Avar groups on the one hand and that of the ancient Hungarians on the other and he still reckoned with a Magyar presence in the Avar-era Carpathian Basin is very telling as far as his understanding of the different values of the historical and material record is concerned. Although he shared the belief, which represented a widespread conviction and method at the time, that one could draw a relatively simple equation between ethnic entities bearing strong ethnic identities on the one hand and material cultures on the other, nonetheless, if the results of an archaeological investigation did not support the desired historical model the historical hypotheses were granted priority over the conclusions drawn from the archaeological finds.

Of course, it would be an oversimplification to claim that Nagy’s theories and approaches succeeded in convincing all of his contemporaries, whether archaeologists or historians. It was even more so when later, after the turn of the nineteenth century, he made clear steps toward demonstrating the direct historical and ethnic links between the Scythians and the early medieval steppe peoples, including the ancient Hungarians. Moreover, his dedicated efforts to search for the ancestors of the Hungarians led him to consider the Sumerian language one of the relatives of the Magyar tongue. The implausible nature of these theories was not always obvious even to the best minds of the age.

Several of Nagy’s lesser errors were shared by Hampel as well. Although Hampel was less historically-minded than his colleague at the National Museum,

49 Ibid., CCCLII.
52 For instance, Hampel did not entirely support Nagy’s theory according to which the Scythians were the ancestors of the “Turanian peoples” of the early Middle Ages. However, he also did not indicate that he found it inconceivable. He merely noted that “we cannot establish this continuity on any archaeological basis.” Cf. x.y. [József Hampel], “A skythák: székfoglaló értekezés Nagy Gézától” Archaeologiai Értesítő 29 (1909): 372–73.
he similarly believed in the necessity of identifying archaeological horizons with given peoples.\(^{53}\) Thus, Hampel was also convinced of the Sarmatian identification of the late Avar-age cemeteries, even if he clearly saw that on typological grounds a number of these assemblages must be dated to periods as late as the seventh and eighth centuries. Still, he dated the overwhelming majority of his “Sarmatian group” up to the sixth century.\(^{54}\) Nor did he recognize the genuine chronological position of the Hun-age copper cauldrons, as noted above.\(^{55}\) In his search for analogies of the tenth-century Hungarian archaeological relics, however, Hampel more consequently and strictly relied on the comparative methods widely employed by art-historians and archaeologists. Thus, he put less emphasis on the late antique and early medieval written accounts. It is therefore hardly surprising that the majority of the comparative materials cited in his writings originated from Eastern Europe and the Byzantine and Islamic worlds.

**The Comparative Study of Archaeological Finds in the Carpathian Basin**

As of the mid-1860s, archaeologists studying the history of the Carpathian Basin in the early Middle Ages were able to begin familiarizing themselves with Russian archaeological finds, which constituted an increasingly important contribution to their work. It also contributed significantly to Hampel’s comparative efforts. In 1874, Rómer was able to study museum collections in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Helsinki,\(^{56}\) and Hampel traveled to Moscow and Saint Petersburg in 1886 to pursue similar work.\(^{57}\) In the 1890s, archaeologist Mór Wosinsky was able to travel east as part of the first expedition led by Jenő Zichy,\(^{58}\) and archaeologist Béla Pósta was able to familiarize himself with a tremendous range of archaeological finds as part of the third Zichy expedition, which journeyed as far

---

55 Cf. n. 22 above.
as the Minusinsk Basin. The incorporation of archaeological relics that were discovered in the course of these expeditions—relics that were from the Hun period or were in some way tied to Finno-Ugric peoples—and research ventures into the study of the relics from the Carpathian Basin represented an important step forward. It opened a new path for archaeological research on the ancestors of the peoples settled in the Carpathian Basin by enabling a comparison of the archaeological groups that had been established earlier on the basis of the relics found in Hungary with the relics from the territories of Eastern Europe.

On the other hand, the archaeology of further eastern territories, i.e. that of Central and Inner Asia and that of the Far East, was merely in statu nascendi in the days of Hampel and Nagy. Thus, it may not come as a surprise that the debates followed with more than keen interest by the leading archaeologist of the Carpathian Basin were centered on the interpretations of the late Antique and early medieval artistic cultures of the eastern Mediterranean. The most important among them, the “Orient oder Rom?” controversy, initiated and shaped for almost 40 years by the formidable Austrian art-historian Josef Strzygowski (1862–1941), had an extremely profound effect on the thinking and interpretative models of Hungarian early medieval archaeologists. In his later works, Hampel also swung between the sharply different images of Late Antiquity drawn by Austrian art-historians Alois Riegl (1858–1905) and Josef Strzygowski. Though he was obviously unable to take a clear stand between the arguments advocated by the Viennese art historian and the Graz-based scholar in the “Orient oder Rom?” controversy, he essentially remained true to the principles set down by Riegl in his understanding of early medieval ornamental arts, one of the central issues of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Hungarian early medieval archaeology.

60 Concerning the significance of Pósta’s work to the research on the archaeology of the Hun period, see Bóna, Das Hunnenreich, 222.
61 For more on this, see Géza Supka’s recollections from almost three decades later: Géza Supka, “Népvándorlási ötvösség Magyarországon,” A Magyar Nemesfémipar Évkönyve 6 (1930): 22.
63 Cf. József Hampel, Újabb tanulmányok a bonfoglalási kor emlékeiről (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1907).
Hampel’s successors, however, were more drawn to Strzygowski’s nationalistic and ethnocentric views, thereby distracting themselves in their scholarship from Hampel’s more balanced attitude. One of the main protagonists of this process was Géza Supka (1883–1956), one of Strzygowski’s former students in Graz, who began working in the Hungarian National Museum in 1904, during Hampel’s time. In his early studies, written during the first decade of his academic career in Budapest, Supka’s focus was primarily on the Near Eastern origins and historical developments of Byzantine art and its impact on the material cultures of early medieval steppe peoples.\(^{64}\) In the meantime, his gradually growing interest in the latter topic quickly led him to concentrate his research efforts more and more on the questions of the archaeology of Central Asia.\(^{65}\) Nevertheless, he was far from alone with this commitment to making use of the then recent results of emerging Asian archaeology. Zoltán Felvinczi Takács (1880–1964), a young art historian who approached the subject from a different direction, entered the picture in 1913 with an article demonstrating the Hunnic origin of the copper cauldrons.\(^{66}\)

The studies by Géza Supka, which concentrated on the art of Central and Inner Asia, and Zoltán Felvinczi Takács, which focused on the art of the Far East, directed attention to Asia, a region that was barely known to Pulszky, Nagy and Hampel’s generation. The “discovery” of Asia, the recourse to a host of previously unknown relics that were being brought to light almost continuously from one year to the next in the study of the early medieval archaeological assemblages of Hungary undermined the primacy of the Graeco-Roman world (and of Sāsānian and early Islamic culture) among the potential source regions from which the material cultures of the Migration period drew inspiration. Following the path paved by Strzygowski in the “Orient oder Rom?” controversy, as of the mid-1910s Supka immersed himself in the study of Central and Inner Asian Buddhist relics and their cultural milieu, on the basis of which he constructed hypotheses concerning the nomadic peoples who migrated to


the Carpathian Basin, including the ancient Hungarians.67 Pursuing a different path, Felvinczi Takács attempted to highlight the Chinese and Central Asian cultural connections of the Migration period material of the Carpathian Basin. Both scholars achieved important results: mention must be made of the final demonstration of the Hunnic affinities of the copper cauldrons by Felvinczi Takács and the proper identification of the Hun-age coins discovered in the Carpathian Basin,68 as well as of some western European Hun assemblages69 and the introduction of the new publications on the Turfan murals into the reference works regularly relied on by Hungarian archaeologists in the case of Supka.70 Conversely, the overwhelming majority of their conclusions never gained currency among specialists. To mention a single eloquent example, let me refer here to the dozens of studies published by Felvinczi Takács between the 1920s and 1960s, in which he continued to argue for the Sarmatian attribution of the eighth-century cast bronze belt ornaments by alluding to Central Asian and Chinese parallels of their decorative motives.71

Although Supka and Felvinczi Takács’s efforts to demonstrate the direct Chinese and Central and Inner Asian roots of some of the Avar and Conquest period relics did not achieve any particular prominence, their influence should by no means be underestimated. Nándor Fettich (1900–71), the leading archaeologist of the Migration period in Hungary during the 1920s and the 1930s, was, for instance, visibly influenced directly and, even more importantly, indirectly by Supka and Felvinczi Takács’s views and Strzygowski’s pan-Iranian theory, which exerted a considerable impact both through his own writings and through Supka’s studies. Consequently, Josef Strzygowski’s views became absolutely dominant in Hungarian early medieval archaeology during this period.72

69 Cf. Idem., “Motívumvándorlás a korábbi középkorban.”
70 For their works of ground-breaking importance, their most important and still valid findings, and their general place in the research history of the Hun-age archaeological record, see Bóna, Das Hunnenreich, 222–23.
72 For more on this phenomenon, see Ádám Bollók, Ornamentika a 10. századi Kárpát-medencében: Formatírített tanulmányok a magyar bonfoglalás korai díszítőművészetéhez (Budapest: MTA BTK Régészeti Intézet, 2015), 29–49.
Despite the mistakes and deficiencies in the main lines of archaeological interpretations, mention must also be made of several important new results achieved in the early twentieth century. The scholarship of utmost importance includes the proper identification of the material heritage of the Huns in the mid-1920s and the final determination in the 1930s of the dating of the cemeteries characterized by the cast bronze belt ornaments to the eighth century. These series of advances slowly paved the way for the final construction of the proper chronological sequence of late Antique and early medieval find horizons of the Middle Danube Basin, which was an indispensable prerequisite of the search for the formal analogies of given artefact types and burial customs at the right places and in the right periods. These progressive developments were further reinforced by several significant new discoveries and publications in Russian and then Soviet-Russian archaeology in the first half of the twentieth century, as the progress that was made in historical and linguistic research likewise helped archaeologists continually sharpen the focus of their own investigations.

**Conclusion**

Be that as it may, one point clearly emerges, at least in my understanding, from the overview I have offered here. Although early medieval archaeological investigations of the material remains of the Huns, Avars, and ancient Hungarians were generally regarded as part of a scholarly discipline of essential historical and national importance from the outset, archaeologists specializing in research on these periods actually rarely were in a position to construct their own narratives of the national past in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries. Of course, sometimes they supported preexisting historical narratives by referring to obvious or superficial similarities between artifacts and burial customs or told their own versions of a people’s history based on their readings of the available written accounts, as Géza Nagy did, for instance. Others, like Supka and Felvinczi Takács, thought to establish historical connections by “discovering” formal parallels without considering the actual historical and chronological limits of the elements of the material record under examination. Yet, the points of departure of many ahistorical approaches and the findings that were made by the last two scholars were strongly historical in nature and actually had little if anything to

---

73 For more on this process, see the concise summary of Bóna, *Das Hnnereich*, 223.
74 For an overview of the history of the research, see Ilona Kovrig, *Das awarenzeitliche Gräberfeld von Alattyán*, Archaeologia Hungarica, 40 (Budapest: Ungarisches Nationalmusum, 1963), 224–27.
do with their reading of the archaeological record. The guiding idea behind
their investigations was their firm belief in the historical and, to a certain extent
at least, ethnic relatedness of the ancient and early medieval nomadic peoples,
from the Scythians or the Huns down to the Hungarians. On the other hand,
the best minds, like Pulszky and Hampel, who rejected the ahistorical construct
of the eternally unchanged “steppe peoples”, were to a great extent deterred
from constructing an independent historical narrative based mainly on their
own understanding of the material record by the apparent lack of necessary
comparative material. Furthermore, the general Zeitgeist of their age doubtless
granted priority to the information provided by the written testimonies over
the lessons that could be gleaned from the archaeological record. These and
other prejudices and misconceptions led to a curious situation; in the nineteenth
century, the age of master-narratives, an “outstandingly national discipline,” to
quote Gustav Kossina’s famous characterization of archaeology, could hardly
construct its own master-narrative of Hungarian national history.

Bibliography


75 Gustaf Kossina, *Die deutsche Vorgeschichte, eine hervorragend nationale Wissenschaft* (Leipzig: Curt Kabitzsch Verlag, 1912).


Hampel József. Újabb tanulmányok a honfoglalási kor emlékeiről [Recent studies on the finds of the Age of Conquest]. Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1907.

Jankovich, Miklós. “Egy magyar hősnek – hihetőleg Bene vitéznek, – ki még a 'tizedik század’ elején, Solt fejedelemmel, I. Berengár császárnak diadalmas védelmében Olaszországban jelen volt, újdonnan felfedezett teteméiről, ’s öltözetének ékességeiről” [On the recently discovered bodily remains and the adornments of the garments of a Hungarian hero, presumably Bene the Valiant, who at the beginning of the tenth century was present in Italy with prince Solt in the triumphant defense of emperor Berengär I]. A Magyar Tudós Társaság Évkönyvei 2 (1832–1834) [1835]: 281–96.


Marczali, Henrik. “A vezérek kora és a királyság megalapítása [The era of the princes and the foundation of the kingdom].” In Magyarország a királyság megalapításáig [Hungary until the foundation of the kingdom], vol. 1 of A magyar nemzet története [The history of the Hungarian nation], edited by Sándor Szilágyi, 1–344. Budapest: Athenaeum 1895.


Szabó, Károly. Magyar vezérek kora Árpádtól Szent Istvánig [The age of the Magyar princes from Árpád to St Stephen]. Pest: Ráth Mór, 1869.


