

COMPETING NARRATIVES BETWEEN NOMADIC PEOPLE AND THEIR
SEDENTARY NEIGHBOURS

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Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours

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New Results in the Research on the Hun Age
in the Great Hungarian Plain.
Some Notes on the Social Stratification
of Barbarian Society

Valéria Kulcsár – Eszter Istvánovits
University of Szeged – Jóna András Museum, Nyíregyháza

Before the Hun Age, the Carpathian Basin was in the zone of influence of different geographical regions. The Danube, one of the largest European rivers, was the border between the eastern and western parts of the basin. This was also the case on the eve of the Hunnic expansion: the right bank belonged to the Roman Empire, while the left one was occupied by Barbarians. As a result of this division, the two sides of the Danube came under the rule of the Huns at different times. To formulate this question in a different way: we need a varied approach to the term “Hun Age”, whether we speak about the spread of the Hun power in the territory of the Sarmatians in the Great Hungarian Plain, or about the occupation of the Middle Danubian provinces. The barbarisation of the provinces is a widely known fact, but the time and circumstances of the Hunnic occupation of Pannonia or Valeria are still a subject of sharp discussions. Most probably, Valeria was overtaken by the Huns in 406 or 409, and the Romans left Pannonia in 431 or 433 (Tóth 2009: 113–114, 159–189). A constantly debated question is how these changes appear in the archaeological material.

The Hunnic occupation of the Great Hungarian Plain, that is to say, the middle part of the Carpathian Basin must have happened long before they received the Middle Danubian provinces. In O. Maenchen-Helfen’s opinion, the Huns could have penetrated the Hungarian Plain already in the time of Uldin, because in the late 370s, there were already no serious forces that could have stopped them. Taking into consideration the intense activity of the Huns at the Lower Danube and the fact that the Goths had left Transylvania, and also that the Alans (who were related to the Sarmatians of the Hungarian Plain) had been the main allies of the Huns already for three decades, we should agree with O. Maenchen-Helfen. He thought that by the 380s, the Hungarian Plain was already under the control of the Huns and their Alanic allies (Maenchen-Helfen 1973: 43; Thompson 2002: 33). This date is also referenced in the account of the last Sarmatian attack against Pannonia recorded in written sources (383–384). Despite the decreasing data in the written sources, one can feel that in the second third of the 4th century Sarmatian pressure on the limes suddenly ceased.

We suggest that in the background there could have been the formation of a new power structure in the Hungarian Plain. This is an additional argument for O. Maenchen-Helfen's hypothesis (Istvánovits, Kulcsár 2017: 379–380). Based on Ausonius' report,¹ Yu. A. Kulakovskij dated the occupation of Eastern Hungary to a time after 378 (Кулаковский 2000: 83–84).

Starting from the last quarter of the 4th century, the archaeological picture of the Great Hungarian Plain becomes very heterogenous. The number of graves obviously increased, that is to say, we experience a “demographic boom,” the only explanation for which are the continuing new waves of migrants.

The earlier archaeological horizon continued to exist – the indigenous population got incorporated into the new structure. In the Sarmatian settlements formed before the Hunnic invasion life obviously went on without any crucial changes at least until the beginning of the 5th century. Continuity can be observed also in the cemeteries. This observation started to take shape already on the basis of materials published earlier.² As a result of large-scale preventive excavations in recent decades, we have at our disposal detailed documentation on cemeteries. Some of the burials can be reliably dated – mainly on the basis of buckles with thickened frames and prongs bending on the frame – not earlier than the start of the 5th century. These graves undoubtedly can be considered Sarmatian due to several features (burials surrounded by ditches, costumes decorated with a large number of beads, etc.) As examples, we can list the following sites: Abony site 49 grave 236 (Gulyás 2011: 170, 176. T. 66: 4), Nagykálló-Ipari park,³ Nyíregyháza-Rozsrétszőlő,⁴ and Óföldséák-Ürmös (Gulyás 2014: 52–53), Üllő site 5,⁵ etc. This means that the earlier Sarmatian population had grown due to the influx of new eastern migrants. That is to say, if our goal is to study the social stratification of the Hun Age Barbarians, as a first step, we should make an analysis of changes that went on during this time in Sarmatian society.

This in itself is not a simple matter, which is shown by the poor scholarship on this question. Studies at our disposal are based, on the one hand, on the data provided by ancient literary sources (Vaday 2011; 2003; 2008). The main problem is the outstandingly high degree of Sarmatian graves' looting. In reality, the “poor” character of burials is deceptive. A relatively large number of graves with golden objects recently collected by us (Istvánovits–Kulcsár 2013b) attests to an outstandingly rich population. Originally rich burials must have been systematically and deliberately robbed. As a – unique – example we should

1 “...the wandering bands of Huns had made alliance with the Sarmatian” and “the Getae with their Alan friends used to attack the Danube” (Auson. precat. cos.VI. 28–35).

2 For example: Szentes-Jaksor (Párducz 1950: 249–250).

3 We thank Róbert Scholtz and Gábor Pintye (Jósa András Museum, Nyíregyháza) for their kind permission to use data of their unpublished excavation.

4 We thank Márta L. Nagy, Attila Jakab and their colleagues (Jósa András Museum, Nyíregyháza) for their kind permission to use the data of their unpublished excavation.

5 Excavation by Valéria Kulcsár and her colleagues (Kossuth Museum, Cegléd).

mention here the golden bracelet from Baja weighing 35.3 g, determined by M. Kóhegyi to belong to the period III of the Sarmatian relics from the Middle Danube (i.e. 3rd-4th century) (Kóhegyi 1958: 42, no. 10).⁶

At the same time, we have to admit that the mapping of the golden finds did not reveal Sarmatian centres of different periods in the territory of the Great Hungarian Plain. For example, on the basis of some finds of Roman aurei from the 1st century A.D., the possibility was suggested that at least one such centre could have been located in the Jászság, in the Middle Tisza Region (Fülöp 1976: 255). However, judging from the spread of the finds and from the fact that no other archaeological signs of the elite were found there, this suggestion can be excluded. As will become clear in the following, the only, perhaps, princely grave was discovered in Jászsalsószyörgy.⁷

In her recent work, Margit Nagy made an analysis of the social stratification of Sarmatian society (Nagy 2014: 119–124). According to her noteworthy suggestion – earlier we came to the same conclusion but in a less concrete form (Istvánovits–Kulcsár 2014: 442, 443)⁸ – in the case of the badly looted Sarmatian graves, the social status of the dead can be determined by the size of the grave pit.⁹ She supported this hypothesis by the analysis of two cemeteries: Budapest-Péceli út and Madaras-Halmok. In both cases burial constructions of absolutely different sizes were revealed. The biggest pit-grave in the Budapest cemetery measured 6.53 sq. m, while the average area of burials without ditches was 1.96 sq. m; in Madaras the largest pit was 11 sq. m and the average area was 2.38 sq. m.¹⁰ As M. Nagy noted, the growing of the graves' sizes is in inverse proportion to their number, that is to say, large grave-pits are met with much more rarely than small ones. As an example, we cite M. Nagy's evaluation of the Madaras cemetery:

- more than 11 sq. m – 1 grave – high-rank leader;
- 9–10 sq. m – 4 graves – high-rank leaders and family members;
- 8–9 sq. m – 10 graves – high-rank leaders and family members;
- 7–8 sq. m – 10 graves – high-rank leaders and family members;
- 6–7 sq. m – 18 graves – leaders of lesser rank and family members;
- 5–6 sq. m – 11 graves – leaders of lesser rank and family members;
- 4–5 sq. m – 15 graves – retinue of the aristocracy, free warriors and family members;

⁶ Hungarian National Museum, inv.no. 28.1913.

⁷ This burial was dated to a much later period and its ethnic interpretation is debated.

⁸ We wrote that the largest grave-pits must have contained wooden burial constructions that can be connected with the burial customs of the upper layer of Sarmatian society.

⁹ M. Nagy, very correctly, did not consider the depth of the pit – this is a much less reliable piece of information than the floorspace of the grave. The uneven modern surfaces make it difficult to determine the difference between the ancient and modern level of the daily surface.

¹⁰ The smallest pits should not be taken into consideration, because child graves obviously differed from the average. In our opinion, these examples show well the differences.

- 3–4 sq. m – 44 graves – retinue of the aristocracy, free warriors and family members;
- 2–3 sq. m – 195 graves – retinue of the aristocracy, free warriors and family members;
- 1–2 sq. m – 227 graves – poor commoners and/or slaves, part of the children;
- 1 sq. m or less – 75 graves – mainly children.

In M. Nagy's opinion this data should be compared with the age and gender of the buried individuals. Sometimes new elements are added to the general picture by some finds overlooked by the looters (e.g. weapons). The analysis of grave-pits' sizes in Nyíregyháza-Felsősim (156 burials, excavation by E. Istvánovits) and at Űllő site 5 (around 100 burials, excavation by V. Kulcsár and colleagues) supports M. Nagy's suggestion. If it proves to be adoptable to other cemeteries as well, we'll be able to answer the question about whether there is difference between certain necropolises, or between different regions and chronological horizons. This aspect is illustrated by comparing the diagrams showing the situation in the cemeteries of Nyíregyháza (fig. 1) and Űllő (fig. 2). The differences in grave-pits' sizes are striking in both cemeteries, but in the first case they are more blurred than in the second one; we do not see such a gap in the parameters of the burial pits. The latest graves in Nyíregyháza are dated not later than the end of the 3rd century, and the Űllő cemetery had just been started in the next period, so we have to consider whether this difference reflects social changes in time.

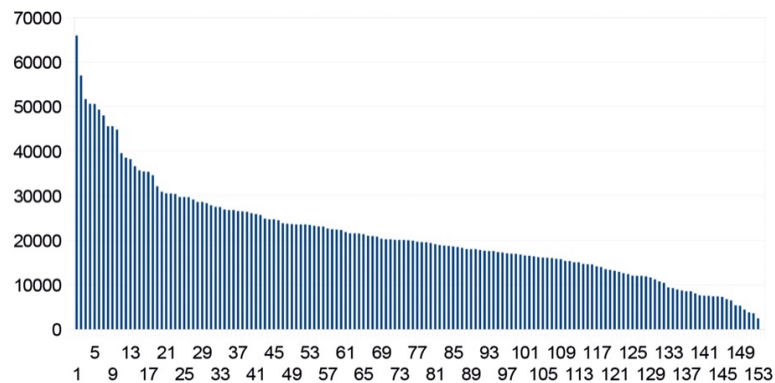


Figure 1. Size of gravepits (sq. cm) in Sarmatian cemetery of Nyíregyháza-Felsősim

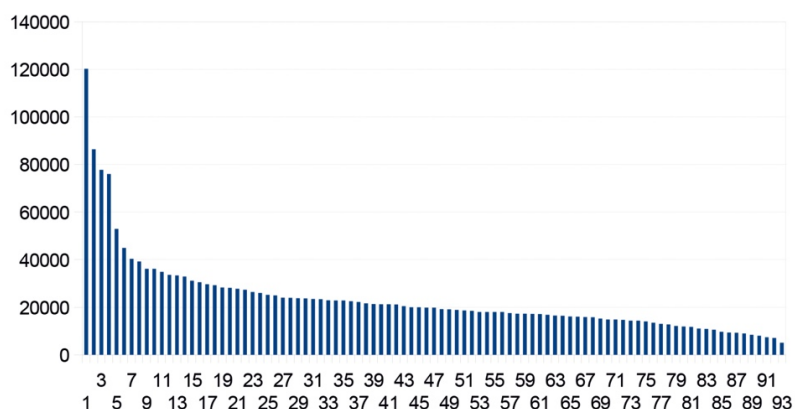


Figure 2. Size of gravepits (sq. cm) in Sarmatian cemetery of Úllő site 5

Undoubtedly, by the end of the 4th – beginning of the 5th century the cemeteries of the Great Hungarian Plain – Csongrád, Tápé-Malajdok, Tiszadob, Ártánd, etc. – began to seriously differ and belonged to different groups. We see both small cemeteries like Sándorfalva, and also big ones, like Madaras. Historical changes following 380 A.D., mentioned in the introductory part of the study, had a strong impact on the archaeological situation in the Hungarian Plain. Though – as we noted above – on the basis of the continuity of the cemeteries and settlements, the mass presence of the Sarmatian population cannot be questioned, we still have to reckon with new groups of migrants.

Considering Sarmatian centres of power, we should note that Hungarian scholarship has totally neglected two Sarmatian elite treasures found in the Serbian Banat. One of them came to light in Starčevo, the other in Vatin. The former, dated to the period following 336–337, included three golden fibulae with onion shaped knobs, a golden torc, two golden rings (among them, two multiplas) and a silver platter; the latter – a massive golden bracelet with the inscription *DN CONSTANTII*. The first treasure was interpreted as a gift to a Sarmatian noble by a Roman citizen, the second one as a gift by the emperor (Ivanišević, Bugarski 2008: 40, 42, Fig. 2), which, of course, should be considered a hypothesis.

In reality, in the period in question we have only one, perhaps, princely burial from the Great Hungarian Plain: the barrow grave from Jászalsószentgyörgy (Hild 1901). Features of the burial rite (outstandingly high – 7 m – mound, accompanied by a group of other barrows; large wooden burial chamber) and preserved objects overlooked by looters (iron shield bosses with golden coating, golden plaques decorating the costume, candelabrum, etc.) show that the dead person buried here belonged to high society. A preserved fragment from a Höögöm type glass beaker

allows a Late Roman or even a Hun Age dating (Vaday 1989: 181, 182). It is difficult to interpret several elements of the rite because of looting and old – 19th-century – methods of recording. Most of the objects can hardly be seen as either Sarmatian or Hunnic material. The barrow should undoubtedly be connected with some newly arrived steppe Iranian ethnic group, but more detailed conclusions cannot be made at the present stage of our knowledge.

Numismatic research opens further perspectives in the study of the Sarmatian society of the Carpathian Basin. In our opinion, new results can be reached by collecting the 4th-century coins found in the Great Hungarian Plain and grouping them according to *officines*. This possibility was raised by the publication of stray finds from the settlement of Óföldrék. M. Torbágyi identified 69 Roman coins from the 4th century. In this connection, K. Sóskuti, the author of the publication, wrote: “The distribution of late coins by *officines*, in its tendency shows an absolutely different picture than in Pannonia. While in the case of Pannonian coins, the most frequently met coins are the ones minted in Siscia and Aquileia, among the finds of Óföldrék ... 73 percent of identified pieces come from Thessalonica, Constantinople, Nicomedia, and other eastern towns.” (Sóskuti 2013: 504–505). This phenomenon can be explained by a new – East Roman – orientation of the Barbarians. For the time being, it is now clear enough how these relations formed, especially taking into consideration that for most of the 4th century coins coming from the territory of the Chernyakhov (and partly the Wielbark) Culture were also minted in eastern *officines* (Magomedov 2006: 48–49; Myzgin 2013: 229).¹¹ Further research can throw light on a number of important questions, among them, whether the similar composition of Hungarian and Chernyakhov coins can be connected in some way. It may emerge at what moment the Sarmatians’ attention turned to the east of the Empire, and whether the change of political and economic orientation went on in the whole of the Hungarian Plain concurrently or whether there were still regional differences.

Anyway, further systematic research of the data cited above, in all probability, will support the suggestion that, despite the severe looting of the burials, we can make conclusions on the changes in Sarmatian social structure on the basis of the archaeological material. Judging from what has been said above, at present, we can assume that we have relatively little information on the structure of Sarmatian society both in the Hun Age and earlier periods. It is obvious that we have a strongly stratified agricultural population. Judging from the archaeological finds, Sarmatians, in all probability, quickly and without major upheavals got integrated into the society of the Hun Age: in the earlier settlements life continued without

11 Of course, it is purely a coincidence that here, similarly to Óföldrék, the ratio of eastern mints is 73 percent. The authors of the studies on the Chernyakhov coins suggested that this phenomenon can be explained by the Gothic participation in Persian Wars as *foederati*, which, possibly will prove to be a mistaken interpretation, in light of the investigation of the coins from the Great Hungarian Plain.

any particular changes. Usually, no destruction layers are found in the Sarmatian settlements of the Hungarian Plain. It has been proved that cemeteries continued to function at least until the beginning of the 5th century. A lack of data makes it hard to say when exactly they were given up. We cannot exclude that they stayed in use up to the appearance of the Gepids. Looting of the late burials, difference in the size of the burial pit, etc. show that Sarmatian society kept the basic features of earlier times.

In the provinces west of the Danube (Pannonia I-II, Valeria, Savia) we observe a similar situation in its main features. Here, earlier objects and burial rites also continued to exist in the 5th century without any signs of crisis (Ottományi 2001; 2007: 307-314; 2012). However, taking into consideration the toponomical data, we should emphasise the difference between the eastern and western provinces, because in the latter territories there was – at least partly – a continuity (e.g. Arrabo – Rába; Poetovio – Ptuj; Sala – Zala; Siscia – Sisak, etc.), while in the eastern provinces no such continuity can be observed (Mócsy 1974: 196). So, the specialists on provincial archaeology and history believe that the Roman population was evacuated from Valeria. The use of earlier Roman cemeteries in the Late Roman and Hun Age, their chronology and the appearance of “Barbarian” material in them, make the ethnic interpretation as difficult as in the case of the cemeteries in the territory of Eastern Hungary. Here only some of the problems of provincial archaeology are to be mentioned, such as the settlement of Barbarians and the question of the *foederati*. Both in the Great Hungarian Plain and in Transdanubia we see not only the continuity of the earlier cemeteries of the “autochthonous” population, but also the formation of graveyards in the Hun Age, the rite and grave-goods of which were new and unusual in the milieu. New finds, on the one hand, are usually characterised by uniformization (objects and elements of the burial rite similar to those of the contemporaneous burials in the east and west of the region, like the northern and western orientation of the dead, burials in simple pits, earrings with polyhedric knobs, combs, Murga type jugs, buckles with thickening prong, brooches with inverted foot, and Chmi-Brigetio type mirrors; on the other hand, they are very heterogenous: strongly differing cemeteries/single burials/groups of burials (e.g. in some cemeteries many deformed skulls were found, in others not even one; there are cemeteries in which orientation is unified, in others it is varied; necropolises differ by structure, or by the situation of grave-goods, such as the vessels, etc.). This situation did not change until the arrival of the Gepids. Later we observe the same picture on the periphery of the Hungarian Plain, while Gepid and Langobard finds of the 6th century refer to a unified archaeological culture.

Leaving aside cemeteries where continuity is observed, let us examine necropolises of the period between the last third of the 4th and first third of the 6th century. Here three types can be classified:

1. Single burials/offering places
2. Small groups of burials

3. Large cemeteries

These differences, in all probability, in some way reflect social stratification, and thus, deserve a detailed study. In the present work, we focus our attention on the first two groups.

The burials called “single” by scholarship (separate or isolated graves) belong mostly to warrior men and partly to women wearing double-plate brooches. Earlier it has been already pointed out that the latter were sometimes accompanied by one or two child graves. As to the isolated character of these burials, there have been several theories published on this issue. First there was the overview by P. Prohászka (Prohászka 2003: 78), and later that by Zs. Rácz (Rácz 2014: 204–205). The most widely spread hypotheses considering single graves can be summarised in the following way:

1. These burials belong to the Germanic elite, they mark the centres of power (Bóna 1986: 71; Tejral 1999: 255–274).
2. These are family graveyards that sometimes can be connected with manors; burials reflect the settlement structure (farms) of the period; the reason is hidden in the way of life (Nagy 1993: 60; Prohászka 2003: 78).
3. Burials were conducted in isolated places or possibly in secret in order to hide the graves from looters (Bóna 1986: 71).

Before analysing the opinions above, let's turn to some sites of this type excavated relatively recently. This is important not least because finding circumstances of the assemblages turned up earlier are usually unknown. In addition, in most cases, the surroundings of “rich” graves have not been investigated, so we don't know if there were any other burials around them. During the excavations of the recent decades, in many cases it was revealed that burials dated to the 5th century which probably belonged to the same group of graves, were situated relatively far from each other. For example, two pairs of burials in Ordacsehi–Kis-töltés were “far from each other” (Kulcsár 2007: 192); four burials in Ordacsehi–Csereföld were “at a large distance, 50–100 m from each other” (Gallina 2007: 210); two graves in Nyíregyháza–Rozsrétszőlő were 480 m from each other (Pintye 2014: Fig. 2) (Fig. 3). In Üllő site 5, where we know of four graves and one more the Hun Age dating of which is not certain, the minimal distance between the graves was 50 m, and the furthest was 150–170 m. Two burials in Üllő site 9 were separated by a distance of 30 m (Fig. 4).¹²

¹² It is not clear whether Üllő 5 and 9 belong to the same site or not. Anyway, of the two sites, the graves nearest to each other were situated 1250 m from each other. The Hun Age burials were excavated by Klára Kővári, Andrea Nagy and Tibor Rácz. We thank them for the information. The burials of Üllő site 9 were excavated by Valéria Kulcsár, only one burial has been published (Kulcsár 2018).



Figure 3. Map of the cemetery from Nyíregyháza-Rozsrétszőlő (Hun Age graves marked) (Pintye 2014: Fig. 2)



Figure 4. Map of Úlló sites 5 and 9 (Hun Age graves marked with numbers)

That is to say, preventive excavations conducted over large areas, basically changed earlier widely-held ideas. On the one hand, it became clear that these “single” graves can belong not only to women with double-plate brooches (so-called Mád-Tiszalök horizon), but also to men buried with weapons. Quotation marks in the case of “single” are relevant here, though it is doubtful whether burials situated several tens or even hundreds of meters from each other should be considered as belonging to the same group of graves. However, these are not single cases, so we can suggest with a great probability that this is not a random phenomenon even in the case of burials made over a large distance, but more or less at the same period; there is a system. The common characteristic feature of these burials is that they are also frequently found near a contemporaneous or somewhat earlier cemetery or settlement. As mentioned above, these are not single cases, and they are known not only from the Hun Age. As an example, we mention the recently excavated burial from the 5th-6th century in Jobbágyi-Gyúri-földek and a female grave published much earlier, found in Jobbágyi-Petőfi Sándor utca 46, dated by A. Kiss to the first quarter of the 6th century (Kiss 1981). These burials were situated “less than one kilometre” from each other (Masek 2014). In the site of Kótaj-Verba-tanya a cemetery from the end of the 5th – beginning of the 6th century came to light. At a distance of 60 m from it, a contemporaneous single burial came to light. If it had been found during an excavation conducted in a small area, it would have been classified as a “single” one (Fig. 5).¹³

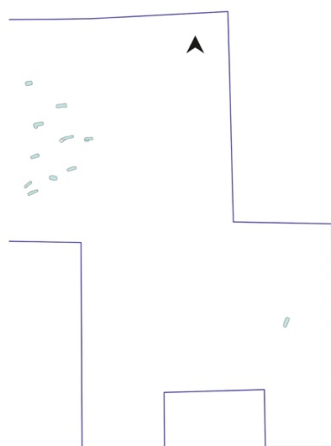


Figure 5. Kótaj-Verba-tanya, map of the Early Migration Period cemetery

¹³ We thank Attila Jakab, the excavator, for the information.

Dealing with “single” burials, we cannot disregard a similar phenomenon observed in the Early Avar Age (second half of the 6th-7th centuries) and the Period of Hungarian Conquest (9th-10th centuries). In both periods, there are authentically excavated single graves and, beside them, so-called burial territories. The latter are characterised by contemporaneous graves situated at a large distance from each other. Among these burials (mainly male, but there are also female ones) there are – especially in the Avar Age – outstandingly rich burials and also “middle class” ones (Lőrinczy 1996: 184-185; Balogh, Wicker 2012: 559; Balogh 2014: 244-245; Lőrinczy, Rác 2014: 166-171). The interpretation of both phenomena needs explanation in the future.

In the Carpathian Basin, single male graves with weapons and “noble” female burials characterise also the Period of the Hungarian Conquest.¹⁴ As a result of preventive excavations made on large territories, a type of cemetery was revealed, where in the area of warrior graves that seemed to be “single”, some 100-200 m away, a cemetery was found, e.g. Szeged-Kiskundorozsma-Hosszúhát-halom, Szeged-Óthalom sandpit V, Kiskundorozsma-Subasa, Nyíregyháza-Felsősim, Nyíregyháza-Oros. It was noted that in the grave-goods of these cemeteries, there were more objects of precious metals than in the case of single graves.¹⁵ Despite this, researchers of the Period of Hungarian Conquest still have to reckon with “single” graves, that in the future, for lack of better investigation, – for the same reason as for the Hun Age, i.e. the poor research of the surroundings of graves – can be qualified as single ones only tentatively.¹⁶

Another analogy with the Hun Age sites arises: “single” men, though armed, do not show specifically that they were rich, while “single” women buried with horse harnesses decorated with rosettes are considered to be “noble”, like the ladies of the 5th century who were buried with double-plate brooches. Taking all this into consideration, the ranking of the male and female burials in question to the same social group remains hypothetical. If we regard them as belonging to the same social layer, it remains unclear why they were buried separately and not in the same place.

Summarising the above, we can assume that single graves probably continued to exist – though in a relatively small number – starting from the Hun Age up to the Period of Hungarian Conquest. Sometimes their isolated character is only apparent, because at a few hundred metres from them cemeteries were found.¹⁷

14 Analysis of these sites was recently conducted by G. Lőrinczy and A. Türk (Lőrinczy, Türk 2011: 431).

15 In this case we should remember that Sarmatian graves were looted, in all probability, for precious metals, mainly gold. That is to say, originally, they were richer than women with double-plate brooches and armed men buried separately.

16 For a good summary on the scholarship of the problem, see Jakab 2019.

17 In the case of ancient Hungarian sites, this is an established fact. As to the affiliation of Hun Age burials to the same group or their contemporaneity with neighbouring Roman or Sarmatian necropolises, this question demands further research.

Scholars dealing with the Hun Age should take up the term “burial territory” used by the specialists of the Avar Age. Here burials scattered at a big distance from each other on a several hectares large territory, have likewise been observed. Several hypotheses have been suggested to explain this specific burial custom: the possibility of secret burials; a short stay in one place connected with the nomadic way of life; the construction of barrows according to steppe tradition; the settlement of families with different geographical origins who, thus, did not form a single community; that these were the first burials in a provisional cemetery of a small community; that “small communities, ‘accepting’ the sacral character of any area not used for other aims, buried their dead separately, reflecting the individuality of the community that existed during their lifetimes”. We agree with the assessment of G. Lőrinczy and Zs. Rácz according to which “...it is more than one factor that could be the reason for separate or scattered burials. We need here a wider approach: as an explanation, a nomadic way of life, colonisation of a certain territory and isolated burials of the elite can all be taken into consideration. The probability of these explanations varies depending on the time period and region.” (Lőrinczy, Rácz 2014: 171).

If we agree that the hypotheses listed above can explain the “isolation” of the graves, and burials made in small groups or on a “burial territory”, not forgetting single graves in the vicinity of a cemetery, then the following question arises: can we speak about members of the elite in this case, based purely on this one element of the burial customs? In other words, we need a system of concrete, relatively objective criteria that determine which layer is applicable to this or that burial of a certain period, and who belonged to the elite. We should not forget that the term “elite” means the upper level of the social pyramid and makes sense only if the pyramid also has a lower level. If we do not radically reject the “mixed argumentation”, then, partly on the basis of the written sources, partly on the basis of the archaeological data, it is possible to determine the top and bottom of the pyramid. The former obviously includes the leader of the Huns and his direct environment – Szeged-Nagyszéksós and other finds associated with the “real” Huns. The lowest level includes the layer of “commoners” in Sarmatian cemeteries; west of the Danube this was the population represented by the sites of the Csákvár-Szabadbattyán-Viminacium type described by V. Bierbrauer (Bierbrauer 1989: 76). From an archaeological point of view, we immediately face the question: if most of the Sarmatian burials were systematically looted – obviously because of golden objects – as we have underlined several times in the present study, then we should expect the burials of people standing on the higher steps of the social hierarchy to be richer. If we more thoroughly examine “single” burials and small grave groups in the Great Hungarian Plain, then it becomes clear that, apart from few exceptions, golden objects hardly occur in them. It would seem that in Attila’s time, in the Hun centre situated in the southern part of the Hungarian Plain, it would be possible to outline a massive layer of the elite. However, we do not observe anything like that. It is indicative that golden buckles with insets of

precious stones, said to be so characteristic for the Hun elite (Bóna 1991: 252–254, Abb. 39) are practically absent in the material of the power centre, in the Hungarian Plain.¹⁸ That is to say, we experience a paradoxical situation, in which the area of Attila's headquarters is marked only by some sporadic archaeological remains: finds from Szeged-Nagyszéksós most probably to be interpreted as a sacrificial site, burials from Bakodpuszta and hoards from Szikáncs and Szilágysomlyó/Șimleul Silvaniei – the latter don't have to be considered power centres in any case, because hoards could have been hidden in any random place. In the Great Hungarian Plain, no burials of the Untersiebenbrunn horizon were found belonging, according to V. Bierbrauer's classification, to the category IA ("valuable" decorations, golden torc, golden plaques, drinking set, etc.: Bierbrauer 1989: 81–82).¹⁹ Judging from several features (outstandingly big mound, wooden chamber, golden decorations of the costume, shield bosses covered with gold sheets), the barrows from Jászalsószentgyörgy can be ranked among the most elite burials. Unfortunately, they cannot be properly analysed because of heavy looting and insufficient documentation. An important task is to determine the place of women with double-plate brooches and "single" men buried with arms in the social hierarchy. It would be necessary mainly in order to understand who stood on the higher and lower steps, in other words, who should be identified with highest aristocracy and who with the so-called *populus* in the valley of Tisza. For a full picture of the social stratification of the Great Hungarian Plain in the Hun Age, we need a complete catalogue and re-evaluation of the burial materials of this time.²⁰

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¹⁸ Buckles of this type have recently been collected and mapped by J. Tejral (Tejral 2011: Abb. 307, Fundliste 1).

¹⁹ Finds from Bakodpuszta are exceptions, but they, in I. Bóna's opinion can be dated to a period following the Hun reign (Bóna 1993).

²⁰ The study was written in the framework of research project of the National Research, Development and Innovation Office no. 124944 "Online publication of Roman Age and Early Migration Period graves of the Barbaricum of the Carpathian Basin".

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