

## NOVAJIDRÁNY-SÁRVÁR-ERDÉSZHÁZ. A CELTIC CEMETERY AT THE FOOTHILLS OF CSEREHÁT, HUNGARY

BÍBORKA VASS<sup>1</sup> – ZSÓFIA SÖRÖS F.<sup>2</sup>

Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 10 (2021), Issue 2, pp. 15–23. <https://doi.org/10.36338/ha.2021.2.4>

*At the end of the 4th century BC, and the beginning of the 3rd century BC a Celtic population wave reached the eastern parts of the Carpathian Basin, including Northeastern Hungary. The elements of the funerary rite and the archaeological finds attest to the presence of the newly arrived communities in the cemeteries of the region. The present study serves as a preliminary report on the research results of a Celtic cemetery in the Hernád valley excavated in 2019. The site of Novajidrány–Sárvár-erdészház was in use between the late 4th century BC the earliest and the 3rd century BC and it fits well into the row of Late Iron Age cemeteries in the region. Both cremated and inhumated burials were documented with richly accompanied metal and pottery grave goods. Appearing next to the typically La Tène-styled finds, the graves also contained – mainly in the ceramic assemblages – Scythian-influenced forms which can be explained by the Celtic and Scythian cohabitation in the region during the Late Iron Age.*

**Keywords:** Late Iron Age, biritual cemetery, Hernád valley

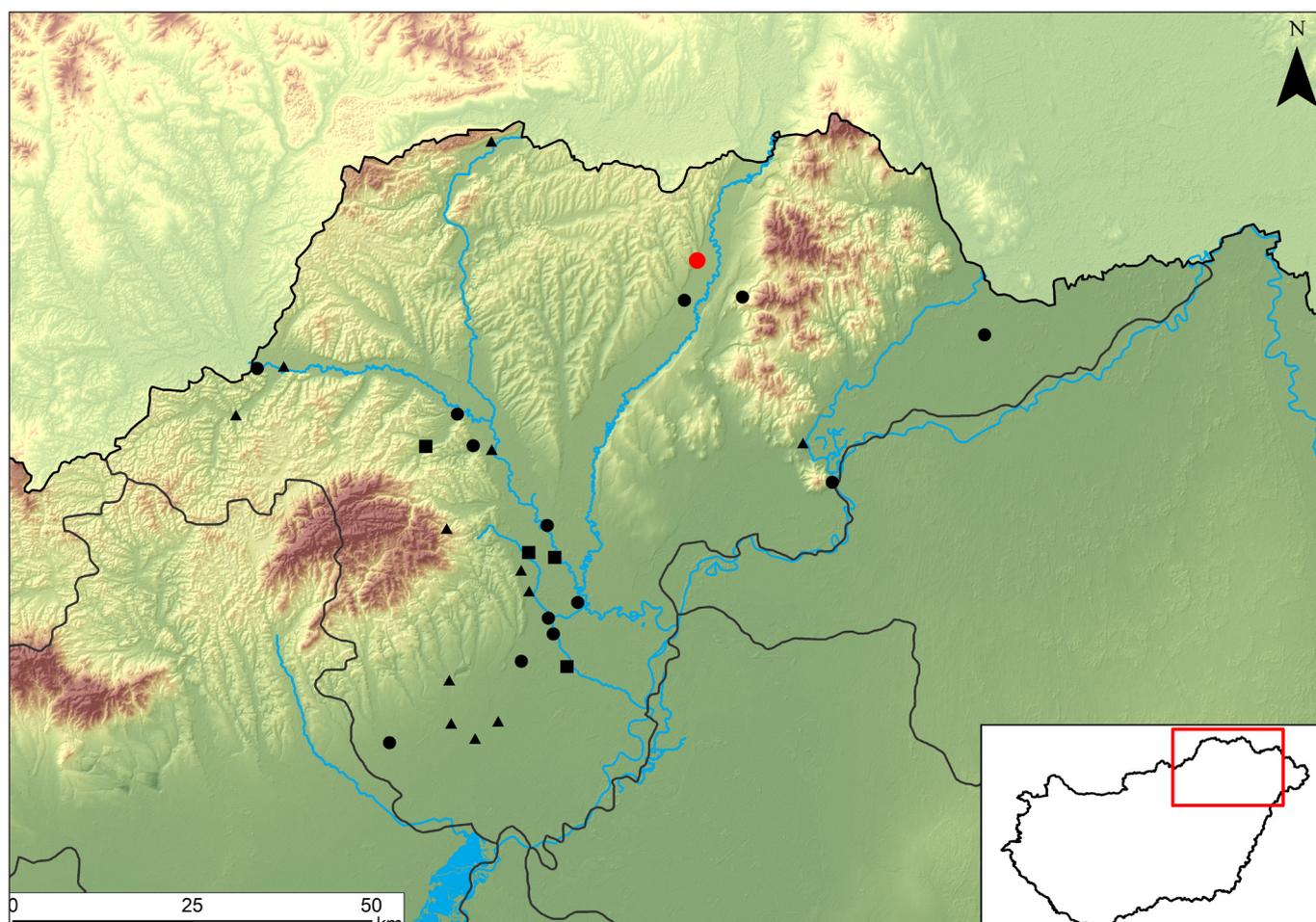


Fig. 1. Late Iron Age sites in County Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, Hungary: red circle: location of the site, circles: cemeteries/graves, triangles: settlements, squares: cemeteries/graves and settlements (graphics: Bíborka Vass, F. Zsófia Sörös, Tamás Látos)

<sup>1</sup> Archaeologist, Hungarian National Museum Archaeological Heritage Protection Directorate. E-mail: [vass.biborka@mnm.hu](mailto:vass.biborka@mnm.hu)

<sup>2</sup> Archaeologist, Hungarian National Museum Archaeological Heritage Protection Directorate. E-mail: [soros.zsofia@mnm.hu](mailto:soros.zsofia@mnm.hu)

During the Late Iron Age, a row of sites attest to a Celtic presence in the region of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén in northeastern Hungary,<sup>3</sup> which can be dated to the 4th century BC the earliest, and mainly to the 3rd–2nd centuries BC (SZABÓ & TANKÓ 2018, 211–222). This includes the site of Novajdrány, which is situated in the Hernád valley at the foothills of the mountain Cserehát. A previous lack of research in this area has meant that inferences on the occupation of this valley are based entirely on the settlement networks and cemeteries of the neighboring Sajó valley and the Sajó-Hernád plain (*Fig. 1*). However, recent excavations preceding the construction of the M30 motorway uncovered numerous archaeological finds that could potentially fill some of these gaps. Burials belonging to a La Tène cemetery, unearthed by the Hungarian National Museum Archaeological Heritage Protection Directorate (MNM RÖG) at Novajdrány can hopefully expand our understanding of the Late Iron Age in the region.

### THE CEMETERY'S SURROUNDINGS

Novajdrány–Sárvár-erdésház [Forest House] lies between two microregions – the Hernád valley and the Eastern Cserehát – on a south-facing slope approximately 100 meters north of the municipality (*Fig. 2*). The territory has been known in the archaeological record since earthworks in 1984



*Fig. 3. The territory of the excavated cemetery. Grey: trenches unearthed during the 1990s, brown: location of the former Forest House, area demarcated by a dotted line: sections excavated in 2019 (graphics: Biborka Vass)*



*Fig. 2. The site viewed from the northeast (photo: Emese Zsiga-Csoltkó)*

uncovered several artifacts, including a sword with its scabbard, a knife, and a vessel interpreted as an urn (WOLF & SIMÁN 1986, 352). Magdolna B. Hellebrandt with the Herman Ottó Museum in Miskolc led excavations north of the Forest House between 1990 and 1993. She published her results in a short report in which she mentions eighteen Late Iron Age graves documented during the three excavation periods. Despite the name of the site (Sárvár means "Mudcastle"), it was not fortified (HELLEBRANDT 1997, 71).

After nearly thirty years, in April 2019 additional graves came to light during the excavation prior to the construction of the M30 motorway between Miskolc and Tornonyosnémeti. This excavation took

<sup>3</sup> The work of Magdolna B. Hellebrandt (HELLEBRANDT 1999) is noteworthy in the Late Iron Age research history of northeastern Hungary and the county of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén. In the last few decades, topographic studies (CZAJLIK & TANKÓ 2004) and excavations preceding large investments led by the Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest (ELTE) have also added important knowledge to the history of the Late Iron Age in the region by researching the Celtic settlement (SZABÓ 2007) and cemetery (SZABÓ & TANKÓ 2018) near Sajópetri.

place south-southeast of the previously researched area under the direction of Emese Zsiga-Csoltkó (Fig. 3). Several factors hampered the work: during the removal of the topsoil, it became clear that the subsoil was uneven, and in some cases, the graves were quite shallow (10-15 centimeters). Consequently, despite all caution, the excavator destroyed the rims of some of the vessels. Archaeological work was also not facilitated by the fact that there were no signs of grave fillings; so on many occasions, the graves were indicated only by finds protruding from the ground. In order to identify further graves, the Museum<sup>4</sup> conducted a magnetometer survey that helped to uncover additional features. Several excavated graves exhibited signs of natural disturbances caused by the destruction of the hillside and landscaping in the 2000s.

### ABOUT THE FUNERAL RITE AND THE FINDS

In 2019, fifteen features loosely organized into three groups came to light as likely graves. Based on the location of a middle group, it was probable that the cemetery continued to the southwest, so the excavation area was expanded. As a result, another grave was discovered in the southeastern part of the trench, close to the edge of the plateau, not far from main road No. 3. Based on the location of the graves, it cannot be ruled out that the cemetery would have continued in the south; however, we are not aware of any additional graves that were found during previous humus removal works on the southbound trail. When the results of the 1990s excavations will be published, these will facilitate a better understanding of the cemetery structure.

In the absence of grave fillings, we can only indirectly assume by the positioning and leveling of the grave goods that, in several cases, the grave pits were square-shaped and even-bottomed (Figs 4–5). As for the funerary rites, presumably<sup>5</sup> fourteen burials were cremations and one grave was biritual in the area of the trench. Only STR 16-17 contained an inhumation burial, and it appeared together with two other cremated individuals (Fig. 4). According to the current state of processing, this is the only grave in the cemetery where at least two burial phases occurred; however the time between these phases cannot be clarified due to the absence of observable layers (SÖRÖS & VASS 2020). In several graves, a layer of charcoal mixed with ashes was able to be documented, making it likely that a funeral pyre was scattered into the grave pit (Figs 5–6; see as parallel e.g. Ludas, grave 670: SZABÓ & TANKÓ 2012, 25). The proportion of the different burial rites is comparable to those observed in the other part of the Novajidrány cemetery excavated during the 1990s; where only one of the eighteen burials was an inhumation (HELLEBRANDT 1997, 71). A dominance of cremation rites can be observed in most La Tène cemeteries in northeastern Hungary (SZABÓ & TANKÓ 2018, 136–137).

Generally speaking, the less disturbed graves were rich in grave goods. In the following section, we discuss the abundance of finds in the cemetery excavated in 2019 by presenting some selected groups of objects. Parts of garments were found in the ashes of some burials (Figs 7–8), however this pattern is not yet definitive as the process is still ongoing and the disturbed burials require more analyses. Several fibula types – amongst which Dux-type fibulae can



Fig. 4. The only biritual grave of the cemetery, STR 16-17 (photo: Biborka Vass)

<sup>4</sup> The survey was conducted by Krisztián Tóth with a portable MAGNETO® magnetometer provided by the Herman Ottó Museum. We hereby thank him for his contribution to the research.

<sup>5</sup> Several tombs have been excavated where ashes could not be observed with the naked eye, therefore it is difficult to determine whether we can speak of symbolic burials in the current state of processing. Earth samples were collected from all the graves in the cemetery. During their flotation, additional human remains were found, albeit in small quantities. The human bone material is being processed by Dr. Orsolya Mateovics-László.



Fig. 5. STR 14 showing a mixed layer of ashes and charcoal, as documented in a west-east direction (photo: Emese Zsiga-Csoltkó)



Fig. 6. Patches mixed with charcoal and human remains could be observed in multiple graves, STR 18 (photo: Emese Zsiga-Csoltkó)

also be found (Fig. 9) – have also been unearthed, which date to the turn of the LT B1-B2 periods (BUJNA 2003, 104, Obr. 62). As for the different types of hoop jewelry, their fragments were found in several graves, although none of them were found intact. Pieces belonging to bronze bracelets came from four graves, among which were a plastic decorated (Fig. 10), a knobbily thickening, and a beaded piece (BUJNA 2005). In the case of the latter pieces, it is currently unknown whether or not they can be classified as the sealed-end-

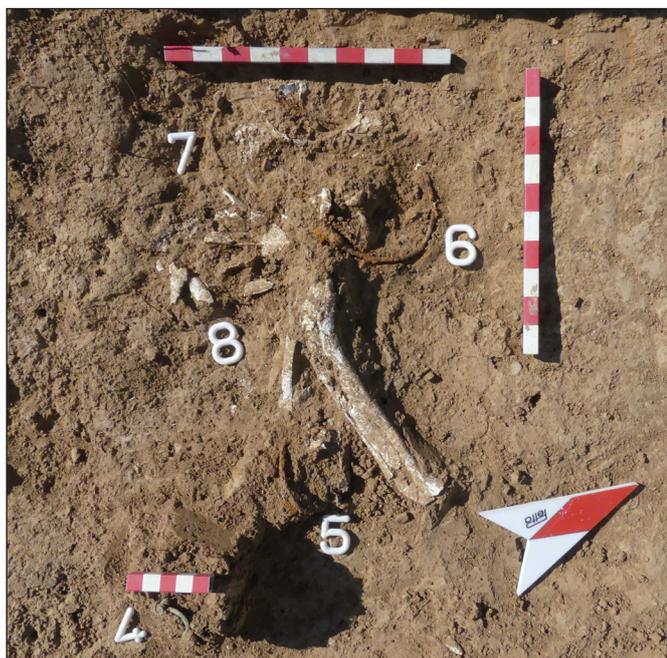


Fig. 7-8. Different garment assemblages between the human remains, STR 14, STR 16-17 (photo: Emese Zsiga-Csoltkó, Biborka Vass)

ing or closed ring type because their ends have not been found. The funeral rite is characterised by a small pot picked up *in situ* which contained a Bujna EF-A1/A2 type iron fibula (BUJNA 2003, 61–64) and two Bujna BR-A1 type bronze bracelet fragments (BUJNA 2005, 13–18). After a radiographic examination of the vessel, the restoration took place in the laboratory (PÁLFALVI et al. in press).

The excavated part of the cemetery was rich in grave goods. All in all, three folded swords with their scabbards were recovered within the graves, and these inventories also contained spearheads. B. Hellebrandt additionally observed this rite in the other part of the cemetery in four out of five cases. An iron sword was documented around a big urn-like vessel from STR 19-20 was an interesting rite element (Fig. 11). While

the folding of weapons is a common feature in the La Tène cemeteries, this example is a rare variation of this custom (see as parallels: e.g. Ludas–Varjú-dűlő grave 904: SZABÓ & TANKÓ 2012, 46 and Sajópetri – Homoki-szőlőskert grave 59/131: SZABÓ & TANKÓ 2018, 92). In STR 13, a Kosd C-type chape end was found that can be dated between the end of the 4th century BC and the first half of the 3rd century BC (SZABÓ & PETRES 1992, 28, 80, Fig. II).

Six spearheads from four graves also came to light in which two of the graves contained a spearhead on either side of the deceased individual, while the other two graves contained a single spearhead. Although spearheads show relatively high variability in their typological variations, their formal fea-

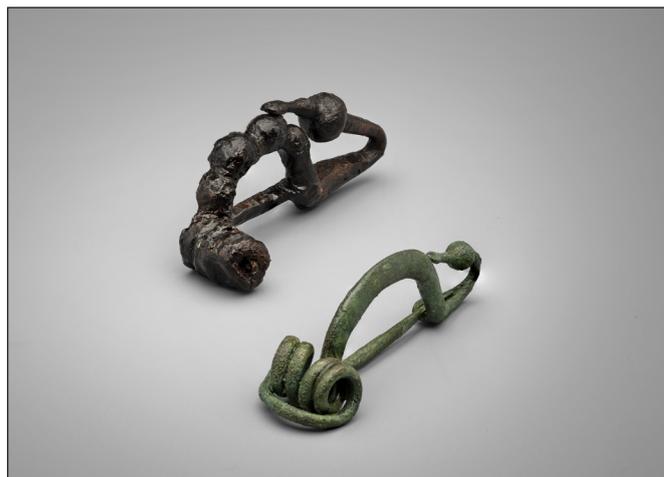


Fig. 9. Fibulae made of bronze and iron, STR 14 and STR 16-17 (photo: József Bicskei; Hungarian National Museum Archaeological Heritage Protection Directorate)

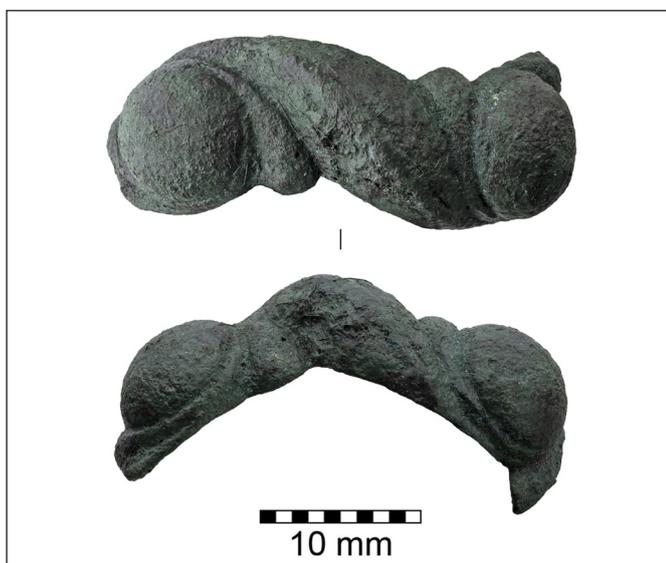


Fig. 10. Fragment of a bronze bracelet with plastic decoration, STR 13 (photo: József Bicskei; Hungarian National Museum Archaeological Heritage Protection Directorate)



Fig. 11. Iron sword bent around an urn-shaped vessel, STR 19-20 (photo: Biborka Vass)



Fig. 12. Spearheads corroded on each other, STR 1 (photo: József Bicskei; Hungarian National Museum Archaeological Heritage Protection Directorate)

tures do not always allow for a more accurate classification due to corrosion. A rare type of small-headed javelin head was discovered in STR 8 that is decorated on its long socket with ring bundles and knobs, and it was discovered corroded slightly obliquely on a classical leaf-shaped spearhead. Due to its proportion and shaping, this example can be interpreted as a throwing weapon or a pike (Fig. 12). In grave no. 11, discovered during the previous excavations in the 1990s, a similar but undecorated piece with a longer socket was found and interpreted by the excavator as a pike (HELLEBRANDT 1997, 71, Abb. 7/4). These weapons were used in the Greek and Macedonian cultures by armies moving efficiently in a closed formation. In contrast, the Celtic tribes did not use this form of warfare (SZABÓ 2014, 110). One of the most intriguing finds of the cemetery is also a small-sized spearhead placed among the ashes of STR 19-20, which remained in an almost “new” condition. On its socket, the engraved decoration is made up of reinvented palmette and sarmentum motifs in the post-Waldalgesheim style (Fig. 13).

In one case, parts of an early type of shield boss indicate that both weapons and shields were placed in graves. The geographically closest parallel of this finding originates from a grave from Felsőméra (approximately 5 km south of Novajdrány) (MIHALIK 1905, 263). Different iron parts of a shield came from a tightly packed set of metal objects – picked up *in situ* at the site – in the company of a folded iron sword, its scabbard, an iron spearhead, iron scissors, and other artifacts (Fig. 14). We observed several instances during the excavation of the graves where ashes and animal bones were deposited in piles as well as in different grave assemblages. This may indicate perishable containers of different types and sizes (made of textile, leather, wood) in which these finds were wrapped and put in the graves (TANKÓ & TANKÓ 2012, 254).

The custom of putting knives in Late Iron Age graves is not a unique phenomenon. Five graves contained different types of knives, including an iron razor, a Stomfa-type and a large cutting knife ending in a hoop (Fig. 15). The latter was found in STR 13, not far from a heap of animal bones mixed with other bronze objects and a wild boar tusk. The use of knives may have been related to the cutting of the animals placed in the graves as attachments, and/or to the universal use of the object type (MARION & GUILLAUMET 2012; MÉNIEL 2012, 240–245).



Fig. 13. Spearhead with decorated shaft, STR 20 (photo: József Bicskei; Hungarian National Museum Archaeological Heritage Protection Directorate)



Fig. 14. Iron objects placed or wrapped presumably in some kind of perishable material in the grave, STR 14 (photo: Biborka Vass)



Fig. 15. Iron Stomfa-type knife (a: STR 13) and cutting knife ending in a hoop (b: STR 20) (photos: József Bicskei; Hungarian National Museum Archaeological Heritage Protection Directorate)



Fig. 16. Celtic (a-b) and Scythian type (c-e) vessel forms: a: urn-like vessel with stamped decoration (STR 14), b: small pot with omphalos (STR 16-17), c: bowl with inverted rim (STR 16-17), d: flowerpot-shaped pot (STR 14), double conical-type urn (STR 20) (photos: József Bicskei; Hungarian National Museum Archaeological Heritage Protection Directorate)

Compared to other Late Iron Age cemeteries, Novajidrány was also rich in ceramic assemblages, and often their various pieces were placed next to each other, either in groups or rows. Along with the typical wheel-thrown or combined technique, La Tène-type forms (Fig. 16/a-b) (e.g. S-profile bowls, small pots with *omphalos*, urn-like vessels) and hand-made Scythian-style vessels (e.g. double conical-type urns, bowls with inverted rims, and flowerpot-shaped pots) also emerge (Fig. 16/c-d). Additionally, on the shoulder of one urn-like vessel of the combined technique were stamped S-motifs and concentric circles arranged in a triangle. These two different ceramic traditions show the survival of previous forms and the mixing of Celtic (La Tène-) and Scythian (Vekerzug-) cultural elements during the Late Iron Age in the region (SZABÓ 2007, 329–332).

### PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF THE SITE

It seems clear from the current processing status of the cemetery that the site fits well into the series of Late Iron Age cemeteries excavated in the region of northeastern Hungary. Indeed, both cremation and inhumation burials were observed with rich metal and ceramic assemblages. Due to the typochronological characteristics of the objects, it can be stated that the graves excavated in the 1990s and 2019 were part of one cemetery used between the late 4th century BC the earliest and the 3rd century BC. Although the dating is based solely on the classification of the material already processed, it appears that the community who buried their dead here surely used the hillside during the LT B2 period which attest to an early Celtic presence in the region.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to Emese Zsiga-Csoltkó, who gave us the right to examine the graves, to Dr. Orsolya Mateovics-László for processing the human remains, and to Zsuzsanna Pálfalvi, Imre Balogh and Ágnes Nagy for their restoration work. We are also grateful to József Bicskei for the excellent photographs of the finds and Jessica Ryan-Despraz for her help with the correction of the translation.

### RECOMMENDED READINGS

B. Hellebrandt, M. (1997). Keltische Eroberung und Ansiedlung in Nordungarn (Kelta hódítás és megtelepedés Észak-Magyarországon). *Zalai Múzeum* 8, 69–78.

Jerem, E. (2003). The Late Iron Age: the Celts of the La Tène period. In Zs. Visy (ed.), *Hungarian Archaeology at the Turn of the Millenium* (pp. 192–200). Budapest: Ministry of National Cultural Heritage Teleki László Foundation.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bujna, J. (2003). Spony z keltských hrobov bez výzbroje z územia Slovenska (Fibeln aus keltischen waffenlosen Gräbern aus dem Gebiet der Slowakei). *Slovenská Archeológia* 51, 39–108.

Bujna, J. (2005). *Kruhový šperk z laténských ženských hrobov na Slovensku (Ringschmuck aus latènezeitlichen Frauengräbern in der Slowakei)*. Nitra: Filozofická fakulta UKF.

Czajlik, Z. & Tankó, K. (2004). Késő vaskori topográfiai adatok Sajópetri környékéről (Late Iron Age topographic data from the environs of Sajópetri). *Régészeti Kutatások Magyarországon 2003* [2004], 97–110.

B. Hellebrandt, M. (1997). Keltische Eroberung und Ansiedlung in Nordungarn (Kelta hódítás és megtelepedés Észak-Magyarországon). *Zalai Múzeum* 8, 69–78.

Hellebrandt, M. (1999). Celtic finds from Northern Hungary. In T. Kovács, É. F. Petres & M. Szabó (eds), *Corpus of Celtic Finds in Hungary*, vol. 3 (pp. 183–280). Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.

Marion, S. & Guillaumet, J.-P. (2012). Couteaux, forces et autres instruments dans les sépultures de Ludas. In M. Szabó, K. Tankó & Z. Czajlik (eds), *La nécropole celtique à Ludas–Varjú-dűlő* (pp. 189–196). Budapest: L'Harmattan.

Méniel, P. (2012). Les offrandes animales de la nécropole celtique de Ludas–Varjú-dűlő. In M. Szabó, K. Tankó & Z. Czajlik (eds), *La nécropole celtique à Ludas–Varjú-dűlő* (pp. 219–248). Budapest: L'Harmattan.

Mihalik J. (1905). A felső-mérai La-Tène-kori vasleletről [About the iron finds at Felső-méra]. *Archeológiai Értesítő* 25, 261–266.

Pálfalvi, Zs., Vass, B., Balogh, I., Nagy, Á., Horváth, M. Sörös, F. Zs., & Czifra, Sz. (in press). *Lépésről lépésre: késő vaskori sírmellékletek (edény, bronz karperecek és vas fibula) restaurálása* [Step-by-step: conservation of Late Iron Age grave goods (a vessel, bronze bracelets and an iron brooch)].

Sörös, F. Zs. & Vass, B. (2020). “Death do us part”: Funerary Practices in the Late Iron Age cemetery of Novajidrány – Sárvár-Erdészház (Hungary). In K. Kleinová (ed.), *26th EAA Virtual Annual Meeting: Abstract Book* (pp. 232). Prague, Czech Republic: European Association of Archaeologists.

Szabó, M. & Petres, É. (1992). *Decorated Weapons of the La Tène Iron Age in the Carpathian Basin*. Inventaria Praehistorica Hungariae V. Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum.

Szabó, M. (2007). *L'habitat de l'époque de La Tène à Sajópetri–Hosszú-dűlő*. Budapest: L'Harmattan.

Szabó, M. & Tankó, K. (2012). La nécropole celtique à Ludas-Varjú-dűlő. In M. Szabó, K. Tankó & Z. Czajlik (eds), *La nécropole celtique à Ludas–Varjú-dűlő* (pp. 9–152). Budapest: L'Harmattan.

*Biborka Vass – Zsófia Sörös F. • Novajdrány–Sárvár-erdészház. A Celtic Cemetery at the Foothills of Cserehát, Hungary*

Szabó, M. (2014). Sur la question de l'élite des Celtes orientaux à l'Âge du fer. *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 65, 73–117. <https://doi.org/10.1556/AArch.65.2014.1.3>

Szabó, M. & Tankó, K. (2018), La nécropole celtique à Sajópetri–Homoki-szőlőskert. In M. Szabó, K. Tankó & Z. Czajlik (eds), *La nécropole celtique à Sajópetri–Homoki-szőlőskert* (pp. 9–224). Paris: L'Harmattan.

Tankó, É. & Tankó, K. (2012). Cremation and deposition in the Late Iron Age cemetery at Ludas. In Berecki S. (ed.), *Iron Age Rites and Rituals in the Carpathian Basin* (pp. 249–258). Bibliotheca Mvsei Marisiensis 5. Târgu Mureş: Editura Mega.

Wolf, M. & Simán, K. (1986). A Herman Ottó Múzeum ásatásai és leletmentése 1984-ben. [Excavations by the Herman Otto Museum in 1984]. *Herman Ottó Múzeum Évkönyve* 24, 347–353.