

Pázmány Péter Catholic University
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THESES OF PHD DISSERTATION

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**Funerary customs in the Avar Age Mezőföld and questions of the
spatial use and continuity in the 5th–10th centuries**

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1. Previous research and the research issue

In my dissertation, I investigated Mezőföld, a smaller geographical area within the Avar settlement area, located in East Transdanubia. Until recently, only one book summary of Migration Age Fejér county (Fejér county includes two-thirds of the area of Mezőföld) was published that of István Bóna (A népvándorlás kora Fejér megyében – Die Zeit der Völkerwanderung. In: *Fejér megye története I. Fejér megye története az őskortól a honfoglalásig*. Szerk.: Fitz J. Székesfehérvár 1971, 217–314). Since the publication of this work, almost half a century has passed. At present, we have countless new field walking and excavation data available. It is rightful to reconsider burial customs according to the current state of research and to outline a more accurate settlement history which fits then the former reality more accurately. In addition to the chronological analysis of the artefacts, the focus of the dissertation was mainly on two periods. This dual focus was formed in order to get a clearer picture of the issues of spatial use and continuity:

1. On the one hand, I am focusing on the Early Avar Age (last third of the 6th century – first half of the 7th century A.D.) because of the issues of the origin of Romanized and Germanic population and their role in space organization,
2. on the last phase of the Late Avar Age (9th century A.D.) because of the issue of the survival of Avars.

2. Methodology and sources

The necessity and importance of regional investigations are generally accepted in Avar Age research. However, there is only one work published so far, which offers a comprehensive analysis of Avar Age burial customs in a larger region (Balogh Cs.: *Régészeti adatok a Duna–Tisza közti avarok történetéhez – The History of the Avars in the Danube–Tisza Interfluve as Reflected in the Archaeological Record*. Budapest 2016). In other regions, such analyses are only available for a part of the Avar Age or only for certain burial customs. After clarifying the geographical and chronological frameworks and discussing the ancient natural image, the research problems and the history of the research, I have undertaken to analyze the Avar Age burial customs of Mezőföld.

To do this, I needed to compile all relevant data from the given geographic and chronological framework. Based on the articles in the *Archäologische Denkmäler der Awarenzeit in Mitteleuropa* (hrsg.: Szentpéteri, J. Budapest 2002), I started creating three site catalogues. The sites were sorted according to their type: cemeteries and grave finds, settlements, and stray finds. I have improved the articles of the ADAM based on the archaeological literature as well as the documentation and finds, which were available in the Szent István Király Museum (Székesfehérvár) and the Intercisa Museum (Dunaújváros). I also included the description of the graves of many unpublished cemeteries. These and the published descriptions of graves were the basis of the database, which consist of two Excel

spreadsheets. One spreadsheet contains records on the graves and the skeletons of those buried there, and the other related Excel sheet contains the data of the goods found in the graves.

In the area investigated in the dissertation, 2716 graves of 84 Avar Age cemeteries were excavated. Although I tried to collect all documentations and artefacts, they were not always available or accessible. This explains why the database contains less grave and grave goods record. I took part in the excavation of nearly 13% (346 grave) of the 2716 graves. The making of the dissertation was hindered and the achievements were limited by the high degree of unpublished cemeteries (1487 graves, 55% of all graves). In order to include the data of these graves in the database, it was first necessary to identify the artefacts, review the variable quality documentation and standardize the description of the graves.

I analyzed the chronology of the artefacts and the burial customs based on the dataset described above. It was then possible to examine the continuity or discontinuity of each community, and to draw conclusions on the spatial use and organization of space.

3. New results

After chronologically analyzing the artefacts, I specified seven chronological phases for the Avar Age (568–830/850) of Mezőföld. Most of the cemeteries opened in the Early Avar Age (Phases 1–2) and were used throughout the Avar Era. From this, we can deduce the continuity of the population using cemeteries opened in the Early Avar

Age throughout the Avar-Period. There are only five cemeteries that were left in the middle of the 7th century (end of Phase 2), but based on destroyed graves, stray finds and other data that are still uncontrollable, it is more likely that they were used longer. I know of two Early and four Middle Avar solitary graves, but because of the uncertain finding conditions, it cannot be excluded that they belonged to smaller or larger cemeteries. The solitary graves in some regions represent the typical burial form of the Early Avar Age, and research usually assumes that these are expressions of the shepherding lifestyle of those buried there. On the other hand, the fact that they are missing from Mezőföld indicates that the economy of a large part of the population living there was based on fixed land use (in other words on animal husbandry or farming related to the settled lifestyle) and not on migrating land use (not on nomadizing).

In the geographical sense Mezőföld is still part of the Great Hungarian Plain (Alföld) but based on the material culture of the end of the 6th century and the first half of the 7th century, it belongs to the Transdanubian region, which is markedly different from the rest of the Carpathian Basin. In addition to its strong Asian roots, it is characterized by the strong presence of Romanized traditions (dress, survival of certain burial customs and workshop traditions) and the relatively high number of Byzantine and Merovingian Germanic artefact types. However, compared to the large East-Transdanubian Merovingian-type cemeteries (Budakalász, Környe, Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út, Kölked-Feketekapu, Zamárdi), the number of

Merovingian cultural elements is lower in Mezőföld (including the cemetery in Csákberény).

69 of the 149 graves without grave goods was probably undisturbed in the cemetery of Csákberény. By marking them on the cemetery plan, we can observe that they are mainly found around graves dating back to the last third of the 6th century or to the first third of the 7th century (Phase 1), principally in the middle of the cemetery. The undisturbed graves without grave goods get rare and sometimes even spectacularly missing around the graves dating from the second third of the 7th century (Phase 2) to the beginning of the 8th century (Phase 5). From this observation it may be concluded that the local Romanized population was buried in these graves in the early period (like in Longobard cemeteries), who have emphasized their own identity with the custom of burial without grave goods. The changes in the funeral rituals are evidenced by the fact that, as a consequence of Avar and Merovingian-German cultural influence, they have completely abandoned the custom of burial without grave goods by the second third of the 7th century (Phase 2) and their artefacts forming part of the costume were put into their graves. In the cemeteries of Csákberény, Mezőfalva-Vasútállomás (Előszállás-Bajcsihegy) and Tác-Fövenypuszta there were many *fibulae* and *styli* in wearing position from the second quarter of the 7th century to the end of the century, which are remarkable signs of the continuity of Roman Age fashion. At the same time, Merovingian and Romanized traditions have emerged together in several graves since the second quarter of the 7th century. This is a sign of cultural transformation. This coincides

with the Phase 2 (second third of the 7th century), when Merovingian-Germanic influence on culture is the strongest in Mezőföld.

The comparison of the position of Roman forts, villas and reconstructed roads with the location of the Avar Age sites of Mezőföld, clearly demonstrated the decisive role of Roman structures in (primarily Early) Avar spatial use and space organization. In addition, and in this context, the topographic relationship between sites of German (mainly Longobard) Age and Early Avar Age is also prominent.

I interpret the emphatic presence of Romanized traditions in Csákberény (although they appear sporadically in the whole region), the decisive role of Roman Age structures in the spatial use of Early Avar Age, and the topographical relationship (of German Age (second half of the 5th century and the first two-thirds of the 6th century) and Early Avar Age sites (occasionally they are next to each other) as an indirect archaeological evidence of the survival of the Late Roman provincial population.

There are some doubts concerning the partial degree of the excavations, but it can be stated that 12 new cemeteries were opened in the Middle Avar Age (Phases 3–4). Their burial customs and their grave goods did not differ from those in the Phase 3–4 found in the cemeteries that were continuously used throughout the Avar Age. For this reason, we can think of internal migration, but due to the lack of larger cemeteries in the Early Avar Age, a large part of the population

opening new cemeteries could come from areas of Avaria outside of Mezőföld.

The Avars, who were increasingly integrating agriculture into their economy, but were still intensively engaged in animal husbandry, have established a dense network of settlements by the 8th century. New cemeteries in Mezőföld were not opened in the second half of the 8th century (Phase 6), only in the first half of the century (Phase 5). The Late Avar Age brought a quantitative change in the social use of space with using newer natural spatial elements, in other words with subjecting additional areas along watercourses to cultivation.

The dissertation, with an overview of the burials of Mezőföld, provided new regional data for the issue of the 9th century Avars. The number of known cemeteries, which were in use during the last phase of the Late Avar Age (Phase 7) in the region increased to seven. These sites uniformly show the conservative survival of Late Avar burial customs and material culture, so the 9th century culture of Mezőföld is primarily related to the culture of the Great Hungarian Plain (Alföld) and not to the Carolingian peripheral culture of South-, West- and North-Transdanubia. There is no trace of the cultural legacy of the Slavic-Frankish groups mixed with the Avars, in other words there is no sign that the direct control of Carolingian Pannonia extended to Mezőföld. It is likely that the boundary of the direct Carolingian control could have been the Transdanubian Mountains (Dunántúli-középhegység) and the Sió as a natural watercourse. In the absence of the so-called Carolingian Age find-horizon, it remains questionable

what archaeological objects and artefacts can be dated to the second half of the 9th century in Mezőföld.

4. Publications on the subject of the thesis

1. Szücsi F.: A kora és közép avar kori balták és fokosok – Axes and hammer axes in the early and middle Avar period. In: Petkes Zs. (szerk.): *HADAK ÚTJÁN XX. Népvándorlaskor Fiatalkutatóinak XX. Összevetelének konferenciakötete*. Budapest-Szigethalom, 2010. október 28-30. Budapest 2012, 121–137.
2. Szücsi F.: Avar kori balták, bárdok, szekercék és fokosok. Baltafélék a 6–8. századi Kárpát-medencében – Axes and hammer axes in the Avar Period. Axes in the 6–8. century in the Carpathian Basin. *Alba Regia* 42 (2014) 113–186.
3. Szücsi F.: Avar kori temetők Nagyvenyimről. A Munkácsy utca – Fűzfa utcai, a határvölgypusztai és a járműjavítói temetőrészek – Avar Period Burial Sites at Nagyvenyim. Cemetery Fragments from Munkácsy utca – Fűzfa utca, Határvölgypuszta and Járműjavító Sites. *Alba Regia* 43 (2015) 15–64.
4. Szücsi F.: Térhasználat az avar kori Mezőföldön – Use of space in Avar age Mezőföld. *Történeti Földrajzi Közlemények* 3/2 (2015) 41–59.
5. Szücsi F.: Térhasználat és kontinuitás a népvándorlás kori Fejér megyében: romanizáltak, germánok és avarok – Use of Space and

- Continuity in the Migration Period in County Fejér (Hungary): Romanized Population, Germans and Avars. In: Balázs J. *et al.* (szerk.): *Studia Varia. Tanulmánykötet*. Budapest 2016, 496–512.
6. Török B. – Kovács Á. – Szücsi F.: Előszállás-Öreghegy és Úrhida-Arany János utca lelőhelyeken feltárt avar kori fokokok elektronmikroszkópos archeometriai anyagvizsgálata és régészeti értékelése – Die elektronmikroskopische Materialuntersuchung der Awarzeitlichen Fokosche aus den Fundorten von Előszállás-Öreghegy und Úrhida-Arany János utca und ihre archäologische Bewertung. *Alba Regia* 44 (2016) 17–36.
 7. Szücsi F.: Mezőföld a 9. század küszöbén – Mezőföld an der Schwelle vom 9. Jahrhundert. In: Türk A. (szerk.): *Hadak Útján XXIV. A népvándorlaskor fiatal kutatóinak XXIV. konferenciája*. Esztergom, 2014. november 4–6. 2. kötet, Budapest – Esztergom 2017, 175–202.
 8. Szücsi F.: Síri csend a tó körül. Kápolnásnyék, Sukoró és Velence avar kori leletei – Dead Silence at the Lake. Avar Finds of Kápolnásnyék, Sukoró and Velence. In: Merva, Sz. (szerk.): *Hadak útján XXII. A népvándorlaskor fiatal kutatóinak XXII. konferenciája*, Visegrád, 2012. október 2–4. Visegrád 2017, 243–264.
 9. Török, B. – Kovács, Á. – Barkóczy P. – Szücsi, F.: Tradecraft of the Avars' metalworking – manufacturing of iron axes and a special multi-metallic method used for belt accessories. *Science*

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