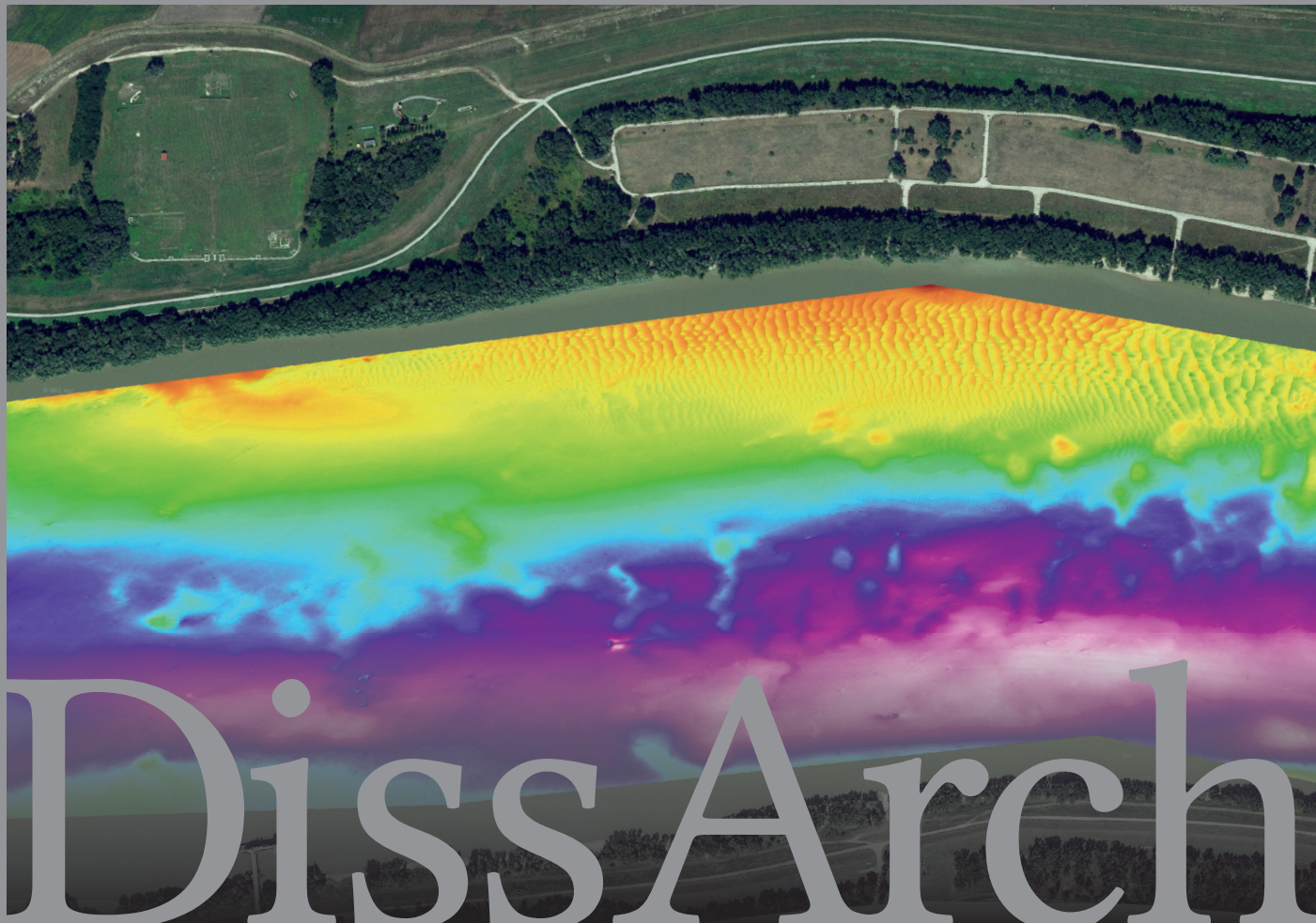


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ex Instituto Archaeologico

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From the table to the grave?

The question of animal sacrifices in Avar cemeteries on the Little Hungarian Plain

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Abstract: One of the customs observed in Avar burials is that the Avars provided their dead with food and drink, as a kind of ‘passage’ to the afterlife. However, these bone and ceramic finds may have another interpretation, as it is also possible that they were placed with the deceased during the funerary feast. The bones could be traces of a last supper, or even donations placed in the grave to win the favour of the spirits.

Keywords: Avar, burial custom, donation, structured depositum, animal bones, graves, cemetery, Migration period, early Middle Ages

In Avar Period cemeteries, starting from the Early Avar Period, the inclusion of animal remains in graves is a well-documented phenomenon. Within Hungarian scholarship, this pagan funerary custom has most often been interpreted as either animal sacrifice or the deposition of food offerings; however, its precise significance remains unclear.¹ To date, no study has addressed this issue specifically within the region of the Little Hungarian Plain.

This paper examines possible interpretations of animal remains placed in graves through the lens of Avar Period religious beliefs and funerary practices, with a particular focus on the cemeteries of Bágyog-Gyűrhegy² and Táp-Borbapuszta.³

The two burial sites are located in the Little Hungarian Plain, in Győr-Moson-Sopron County, approximately 36 kilometres from one another (Fig. 1). At Bágyog-Gyűrhegy, Elemér Lovas uncovered 26 graves during a rescue excavation carried out between 1925 and 1927, undertaken to protect the cemetery from destruction caused by sand mining, which had been ongoing since the early 20th century.⁴ In addition to burials dating to the Middle and Late Avar periods, an Early Avar Period grave (Grave 2) was found, which has since remained the subject of scholarly debate.⁵ In 2012, Péter Tomka reanalysed this grave,⁶ challenging Lovas’s original interpretation.⁷ Further

1 See TÓTH 2012 with further references.

2 This paper relies only on data from the 1950 excavation of Bágyog-Gyűrhegy by necessity, since there is no precise documentation available of the excavation led by Elemér Lovas.

3 I thank Peter Tomka for the possibility to work with unpublished data from the Táp-Borbapuszta cemetery.

4 LOVAS 1929, 248.

5 LOVAS 1929, 248–255.

6 TOMKA 2012, 501–519; LOVAS 1929.

7 LOVAS 1929, 248–258.



Fig. 1. Bácskai Győrhegy and Táp- Borbapuszta.

evidence for the use of the cemetery during the Early Avar Period is provided by a pyramid-shaped pendant earring dating to the first third of the 7th century.⁸



Fig. 2. Bácskai Győrhegy. Cemetery map of the 1950 excavation.

8 The circumstances of discovery of the earring are unknown; it was found by László Gyula during his research in the 1950s, and it has been held in a private collection since. Csilla Balogh has analysed it (BALOGH 2014, 91–157).

In 1950, Gyula László, Dezső Csallány, Béla Szőke, and Pál Lipták excavated 80 more graves at Bágyog-Gyűrhegy (Fig. 2). Based on the artefacts recovered from these burials, this phase of the cemetery was dated to the Middle and Late Avar periods.⁹ Although the cemetery has only been partially investigated—106 graves have been excavated out of an estimated total of approximately 800—the available archaeological evidence indicates that it was in use from the first third of the 7th century until the late 8th to early 9th century.

The cemetery of Táp-Borbapuszta was excavated between 1965 and 1987 in a series of one-month field seasons led by Péter Tomka. A total of 446 graves were excavated, in addition to records of 11 graves that had previously been destroyed (Fig. 3). Based on currently available evidence, the cemetery was in use from the last third of the 7th century until the late 8th to early 9th century.¹⁰ Although the comprehensive analysis of the site is still ongoing, the cemetery has already been discussed in numerous publications focusing on Avar Period burial customs.



Fig. 3. Cemetery map of Táp-Borbapuszta (TOMKA 2008, 166).

The belief system of the Avars

To better understand the role of animal bones in Avar graves and the intentions of the people who placed them, it is necessary to consider the religious aspect of the burial itself.¹¹ The religious beliefs of the Avars appear to have been strongly influenced by shamanistic practices and by the worship of a celestial deity, often referred to as the ‘God of the heavens’.¹² However, the scarcity of written sources

9 Three sections of the cemetery have been investigated; the 1950 excavation only explored the extents of the cemetery.

10 TOMKA 2008, 166.

11 For a detailed discussion, see BALOGH 2022 with further references.

12 CSIKY 2016, 152; ELIADE 2001, 19–27; PRICE 2004, 3–4, 6; HOPPÁL 1994, 10.

means that the precise nature of Avar religious concepts remains uncertain.¹³ This religious framework likely encompassed a range of ritual practices, including animal sacrifice and the offering of food in funerary contexts. The available sources nevertheless provide valuable insights into the broader spiritual and ritual life of the Avars, particularly regarding practices intended to secure divine favour.

Several historical sources attest to the presence of such elements in Avar religious life. The 10th-century Byzantine *Suda* lexicon, for example, refers to the Avars' use of 'weather magic' against the Byzantines, describing how they allegedly sent rainstorms and darkness upon their enemies.¹⁴ An oath sworn by Khagan Bayan during the siege of Sirmium further illustrates the invocation of divine powers at moments of political and military importance:

"[...] the authorities in Singidunum asked Bayan to swear the oaths. He immediately drew his sword and swore the oaths of the Avars, invoking against himself and the whole Avar nation the sanction that, if he planned to build the bridge over the Save out of any design against the Romans, he and the whole Avar tribe should be destroyed by the sword, heaven above and God in the heavens should send fire against them, the mountains and the forests around fall upon them and the river Save overflow its banks and drown them."¹⁵

The 'God in the heavens' mentioned in historical sources is commonly regarded as comparable to Tengri, the supreme deity venerated among the Altai Turks.¹⁶ Tengri, associated with the sky and celestial power, played a central role in the religious systems of various Inner Asian nomadic groups, including the Avars. This parallel suggests that Avar religious concepts may have been shaped by broader Inner Asian shamanistic traditions. Additional evidence for Avar ritual practices appears in Eugarius' hagiographical work *Vita Pancratii*, which alludes to sacrificial customs and provides further insight into the ceremonial practice of Avars:

"We are of the Avar nation, and we venerate gods in the likeness of every sort of quadruped, fire and water and our swords."¹⁷

Although sparse, such references underscore the importance of sacrifice within the Avars' spiritual worldview, possibly aimed at appeasing or invoking divine forces. The ritual mentioned in this source recalls descriptions found in the works of Theophylact Simocatta, who recorded aspects of the religious life of the 7th-century Altai Turks. In a letter from the Turkic Khagan to Emperor Maurice, Simocatta describes the following beliefs and practices:

"Now the Turks honour fire to a quite extraordinary degree, they revere air and water, and they praise the earth; but they only worship and call god him who made the heaven and the earth. To him they sacrifice horses, cattle, and sheep, and they have priests who, in their opinion, even expound the prophecy of the future."¹⁸

The reverence for fire and the practice of animal sacrifice described in this passage represent further points of convergence between the religious systems of the Avars and those of the Altai Turks.

To date, however, no unequivocal archaeological evidence has been discovered to confirm the existence of shamanistic practices among the Avars, such as sanctuaries, temples, altars, or specialised

13 Regarding the issues of Avar religion and belief system, see PÓCS 2023; on the use of the term 'shamanistic', see pages 284–285.

14 CSIKY 2016, 156.

15 Menander Protector, *Suda*, (Fragment) 25.1–10; BLOCKLEY 1985, 221; POHL 2002, 200–220.

16 ROUX 1956, 197–230.

17 Euagrios, *Vita Pancratii*, The Avar Prisoners Convert, Chapter 196; STALLMAN – PACITTI 2018, 319.

18 Theophylact Simocatta, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta* VII. 8, 14–15; VÖRÖS 2017, 102; WHITBY – WHITBY 1986, 191.

shamanic equipment.¹⁹ A possible exception is the bone container carved from deer antler discovered in Grave 8 of the Mokrin cemetery. Gyula László suggested that the engraved symbols on this object may carry shamanistic significance (Fig. 4).²⁰ The incised depiction of a nine-branched tree is most plausibly interpreted as a representation of the World Tree, while the accompanying hills may symbolise the World Mountain; nevertheless, these motifs remain open to interpretation.²¹

Despite sparse material evidence for formal religious structures or ritual specialists, Avar belief systems are most clearly reflected in burial customs. The orientation, depth, and shape of graves, as well as post-burial disturbance, manipulation, or reopening, are likely connected to their belief system. Moreover, the placement of grave goods—particularly food and drink offerings—emphasises the ritual character of Avar burials. Such provisions may have been intended to sustain the deceased on their journey to the afterlife and reflect a belief in the continuation of existence beyond death, as well as the broader cultural significance attributed to funerary rites.²²

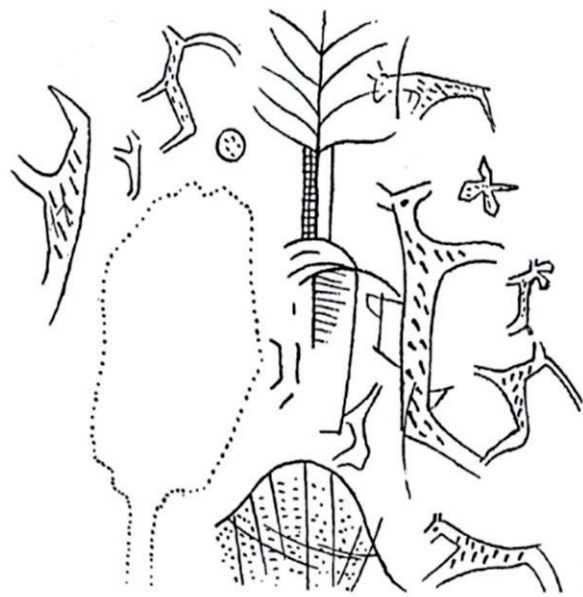


Fig. 4. Exposed drawing of the Homokrév/Mokrin bone crucible.

Sacrifice or offering?

In scholarly literature, animal bones found in Migration Period and early medieval graves are most often interpreted as sacrifices—whether complete skeletons, skull-leg deposits, or remains previously prepared as food.²³ These deposits are generally understood as the records of religious acts involving the recognition of, and/or interaction with, supernatural entities.²⁴ Some scholars define sacrifice as the killing of a living being whose life is offered to supernatural forces for the benefit of the person performing the act. Although the consumption of the ‘victim’ may occur, it is not considered a necessary component of the sacrificial act.²⁵

According to this understanding, any object or substance offered with the intention of influencing supernatural forces to act in accordance with the sacrificer’s will may be regarded as a sacrifice. Such offerings may be directed towards a supernatural force/entity to ensure the deceased’s safe passage to the afterlife, or towards the deceased themselves, to assist them on their journey by providing sustenance.²⁶ Sacrificial acts of this kind are often integrated into the funeral feast, a ritual meal held in honour of the dead that forms part of the broader funerary ceremony.

19 For example, the grave goods recovered from the goldsmith’s burial at Kisújszállás, in addition to their classification as tools or instruments, may also be interpreted as possessing magical or apotropaic properties (RÁCZ 2013, 374).

20 LÁSZLÓ 1946, 82; CSALLÁNY 1968, 61–72; CSIKY 2016, 156; RANISLAVJEV 2007, 14–15, T. 4–5, T. 36.1, T. 37.

21 CSIKY 2016, 153; LÁSZLÓ 1946, 82.

22 PEARSON 1999, 10.

23 For the archaeological interpretation of ‘sacrifice’, see INSOLL 2011, 151–165.

24 SCHWARTZ 2017, 223–240; RENFREW 2007, 112–114.

25 HUMPHREY – LADILAW 2007.

26 TÓTH 2012, 537–538.

The funeral feast may be defined as a ceremonial sacrificial meal performed in honour of the ancestors, rooted in beliefs concerning spirits, ancestor veneration, and the cult of the dead. The worldview of the participants of the ritual determined the perceived relationship between the living and the dead, whose wrath was to be avoided and whose goodwill was to be secured.²⁷ This ritual is documented in a wide range of cultures, from the pre-pottery Neolithic²⁸ through Roman times²⁹ and into medieval England.³⁰ In a modified form, it persists even today, when people share a meal after a funeral. Comparable practices can also be observed during the Migration Period, as illustrated by the account of Attila's burial:

“When they had mourned him with such lamentations, a *strava*,³¹ as they call it, was celebrated over his tomb with great revelling.”³²

Not only in the 5th century, but throughout the Avar Period, animals and animal parts were frequently deposited in graves as food offerings and as complete or partial sacrifices. It should be emphasised that sacrificial animals have not been identified outside funerary contexts, such as houses, work pits, or so-called sacrificial pits. Animal remains may therefore be regarded as sacrificial only when they are placed in the grave of the deceased or in a pit directly associated with the grave.³³

Two principal forms of sacrifice may be distinguished: bloody and bloodless. Bloody sacrifices involve the killing of an animal in connection with the burial ceremony, whereas bloodless sacrifices comprise offerings of food, drink, or smoke. The term ‘bloody sacrifice’ does not necessarily imply that ritual slaughter involved visible bloodshed, as methods such as strangulation or breaking the animal's neck are also included in this category.³⁴ Conversely, despite the designation ‘bloodless’, offerings of food or drink may still contain blood; the terminology instead refers to the violent or non-violent nature of the act itself. Bloody sacrifices may involve whole or partial animals, raising the possibility that the remains also functioned as food offerings. The meaning of partial animals added to the grave remains ambiguous. It is plausible that such animals were consumed during the funeral feast, with selected parts—typically long bones and the skull retained within the animal's hide—buried with the deceased.

László Bartosiewicz has suggested that in some regions, the body parts represented by these bones (e.g., sheep rump) are considered a delicacy,³⁵ making it possible that they served a dual purpose, both as a meal and offering. Certain body parts, such as skulls, teeth, or shinbones,³⁶ as well as the sheep's rump, are known to have carried symbolic or religious significance;³⁷ however, other elements may be associated with divinatory practices, for which the use of sheep scapulae is a well-known example.³⁸ It should nevertheless be stressed that the meat attached to these bones, or the marrow contained within them, could also have been consumed as part of a meal.

27 KÁROLY 1997, translated by the author.

28 GORING-MORRIS – HORWITZ 2007, 902–919.

29 SALAZAR-GARCÍA *et al.* 2022.

30 WOOLGAR 2019, 35–47.

31 *Strava* usually meant a funeral ceremony. It must be a word of Gothic origin, which was later adopted by the Slavs in the meaning ‘food at a funeral feast’ (BOKOR 1904, 116). Translated by the author.

32 Iordanes, *Getica*, III. 2. 258; MIEROW 1908, 81.

33 TÓTH 2012, 531.

34 TÓTH 2012, 529.

35 BARTOSIEWICZ 2006, 66; TÓTH 2012, 533.

36 BIRTALAN 2012, 445–472.

37 GULYÁS *et al.* 2022, 297–308.

38 BIRTALAN 2012, 445–472.

In the context of Avar Period burials, the precise interpretation of these practices remains unresolved. It is often unclear whether the animal remains represent the central act of a ritual or merely the residue of a ceremony carried out elsewhere. To avoid misinterpretation and terminological confusion arising from inconsistent or imprecise usage, Anglo-Saxon scholarship introduced the concept of ‘structured deposition’. This term refers to archaeological contexts in which material was deliberately placed in a meaningful manner rather than discarded randomly. While sacrifice presupposes a religious system in which the officiant seeks the intervention of a supernatural force, in more basic forms of religiosity, the aim may instead be the direct influence of natural processes. In such cases, structured deposition need not constitute a sacrifice in the strict sense; deposited animals may function as symbols within the ritual’s own symbolic language³⁹ The use of this neutral terminology, therefore, encourages a more nuanced interpretation of such deposits.

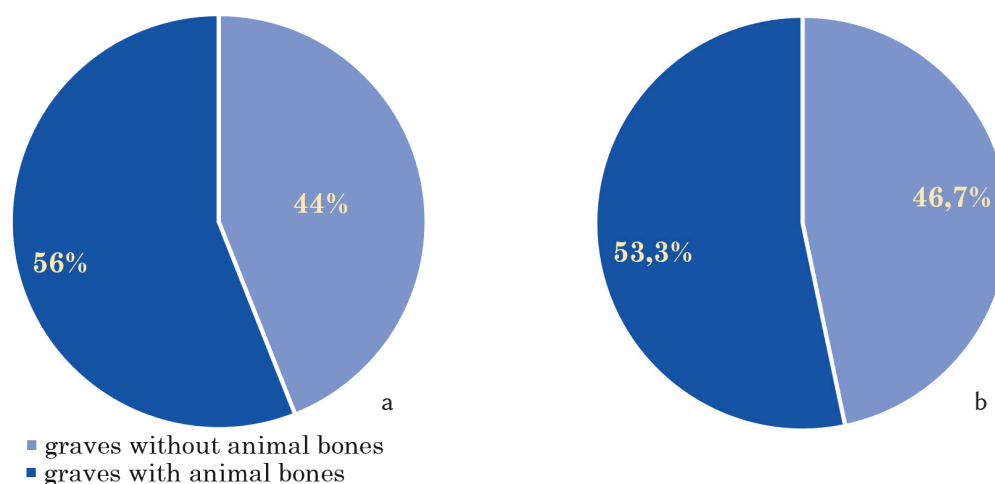


Fig. 5. Animal bones in graves in Bányog-Gyűrhegy, 80 graves (a) and Táp-Borbapuszta, 457 graves (b).

Following this approach, it may be more appropriate to employ the terms ‘donation’ or ‘offering’ rather than ‘sacrifice’ when describing unequivocal food offerings, as there is no clear indication that a supernatural force was being invoked. Offerings may be directed either towards a metaphysical entity or towards the deceased, without an expectation of reciprocity. Interpreting all such deposits as sacrifices risks obscuring their intended purpose and the nature of what, if anything, was expected in return from the supernatural realm. From this perspective, partial animal remains placed beside the deceased in wooden or pottery vessels may be interpreted as food offerings, deposited either as part of the funeral feast or as a final meal intended for the deceased.

At the cemetery of Bányog-Gyűrhegy, deposits were classified as food offerings when animal remains were found within or in close association with pottery. Contexts in which pottery and animal bones were placed in different parts of the grave, as well as burials containing only pottery vessel offerings, were categorised separately but likewise treated as offerings. In contrast, partial and articulated animal skeletons were, in most cases, interpreted as structured deposits.

Insights from Táp-Borbapuszta and Bányog-Gyűrhegy: Patterns in animal remains

At the Bányog-Gyűrhegy cemetery, animal bones were identified in 16 out of 27 male graves, 12 out of 23 female graves, and 17 out of 30 graves of individuals whose sex could not be determined (classified preliminarily as *infans I–juvenis*). Overall, animal remains were present in 45 of the 80

39 INSOLL 2011, 151–165.

excavated graves, representing 56% of the total burial assemblage. A comparable proportion can be observed at the Táp-Borbapuszta cemetery, where animal remains were recorded in 238 of the 457 excavated graves, accounting for 53.3% of all burials (Fig. 5).

Variations in animal bone placement at Bágyog-Gyűrhegy (Fig. 6)

Scattered remains

This category comprises bones whose placement cannot be reliably interpreted as structured deposits and whose original function therefore remains uncertain. These finds include split or calcined bone fragments, most of which were recovered scattered within the grave fill or located beside or on the skeleton. Such occurrences may result from post-depositional disturbance or from specific burial practices⁴⁰ that are no longer archaeologically intelligible (Graves 1, 3, 15, 23, 33, 34 [disturbed], 47, 49).

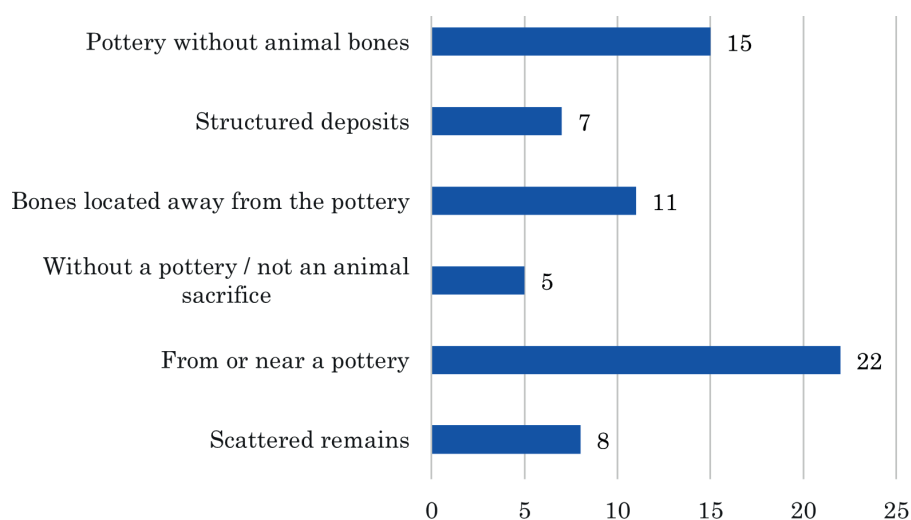


Fig. 6. Animal bone placements in graves (Bágyog-Gyűrhegy).

From or near a pottery

This category includes animal bones found inside pottery or in their immediate vicinity. Owing to taphonomic processes or the collapse of coffins, the food offerings may not have remained intact, resulting in the dispersal of bones. Similarly, human or animal activity may have altered the original position of the remains (Graves 2, 5, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 22, 23 [disturbed], 24, 28, 40, 51, 52, 61, 62, 66, 68, 72, 77, 79).

Animal bones were most frequently recovered from within or close to pottery. In 17 of the 22 cases, the vessel was placed near the deceased's right leg, while in the remaining five cases it was located beside the left leg. Seven potteries were small, cup-like containers, whereas the others were larger specimens suitable for holding food. Of the 22 burials, 12 contained women, eight men, one infant, and one individual of indeterminate sex (Fig. 7).

Without a pottery / not an animal sacrifice

In these cases, animal bones were found piled beside or on the skeleton and cannot be attributed to taphonomic processes or to structured deposits. They may be interpreted as food offerings deposited without a ceramic container, or as the remains of animals that died within the grave after burial (Graves 20 [disturbed], 21 [disturbed], 31, 35, 41 [disturbed]).

⁴⁰ GILCHRIST 2008, 119–159.

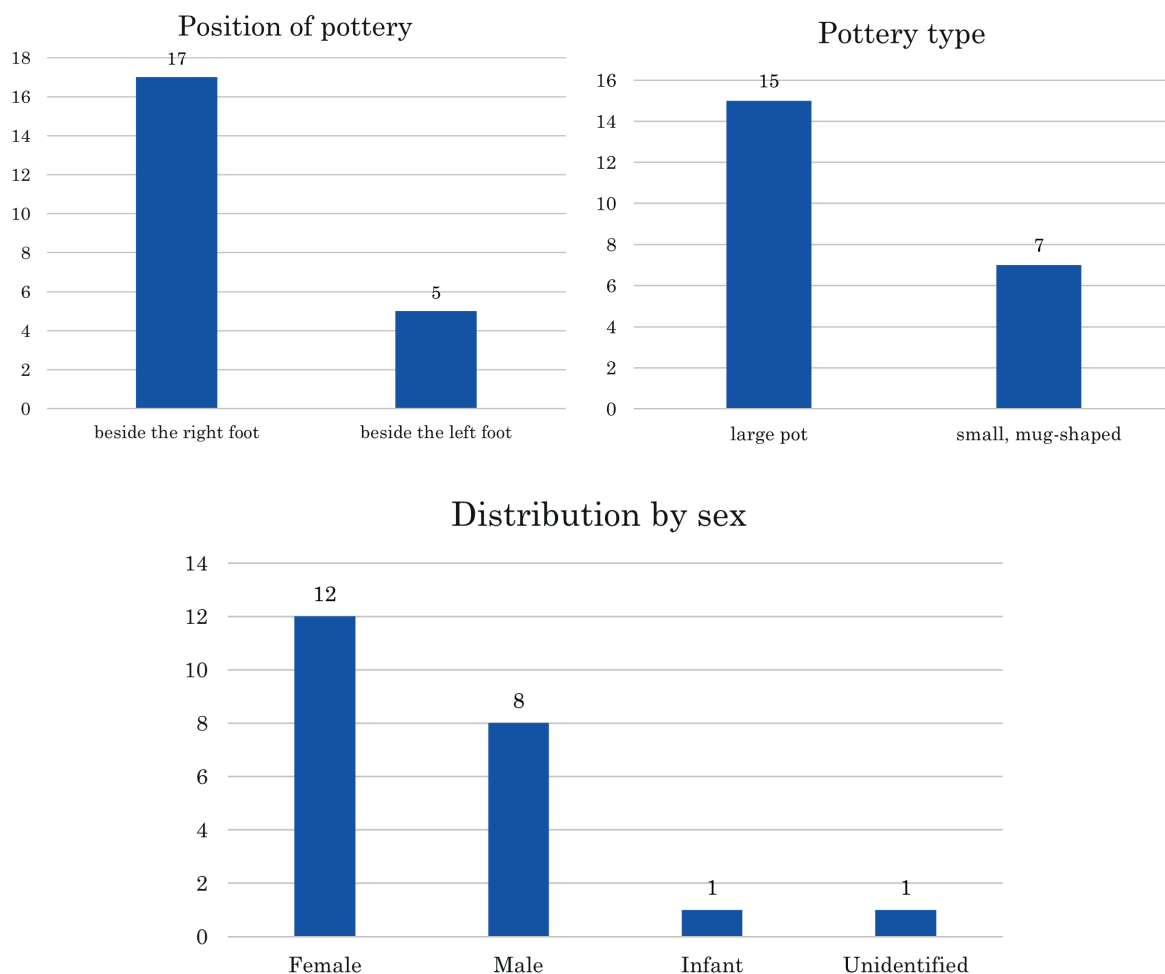


Fig. 7. Animal bone placements in graves—from or around the pot (Bágyog-Gyűrhegy).

Bones located away from the pottery

In these graves, ceramic vessels were present, but the animal bones were positioned in a different part of the grave, often at the opposite end. This spatial separation appears intentional rather than the result of taphonomic processes (Graves 14, 38, 39, 50, 53 [disturbed], 56 [disturbed], 57 [disturbed], 60, 66, 73, 80).

In several cases (Graves 50, 53, 56, and 57), disturbances prevent a definitive reconstruction of the original placement of animal bones and pottery. It is possible that the remains were initially located near the vessels but were later scattered by human or animal activity or by the collapse of the coffin.⁴¹ Field documentation mentions overturned vessels in these graves, which supports this interpretation, and small animals may have caused additional displacement.

Of the 11 burials in this category, three were disturbed, and two contained structured deposits, requiring separate interpretation. In the remaining six cases, a more detailed analysis is possible:

- Grave 14, of a wealthy adult man, was buried with a belt; the left arm appears to have been missing, at least according to the drawing of the grave. A hand-formed cup was found near the left arm, and animal bones were found at the feet. This arrangement likely represents two distinct offerings: a container for a drink and a separate food offering. This interpretation is supported by the symbolic placement of the cup in the hand.

⁴¹ TOMKA 1979, 51.

- Grave 38, of a wealthy male child interred with a belt. A pottery was found at the right side of the head, and animal bones were found at the feet. In this case, the animal remains at the foot of the grave most likely represent a structured deposit, whereas the vessel may have contained a boneless food offering.
- Grave 60 contained two potteries, one—probably containing a drink—placed near the head, and another located at the feet and surrounded by animal bones, likely representing a food offering.
- Grave 73, of a child. In this burial, a small cup was found near the child's head; it probably contained a liquid beverage.

Overall, animal remains at Bágyog-Gyűrhegy were most commonly found either inside ceramic vessels or in their immediate vicinity. Ceramic vessels without associated animal bones may likewise have contained food or drink offerings. Based on these observations, it can be suggested that boneless foods—such as meat, offal, porridge, vegetables or fruits—and beverages, possibly including alcohol, were placed near the upper body or head, while dishes containing bones were positioned near the feet (Fig. 8).

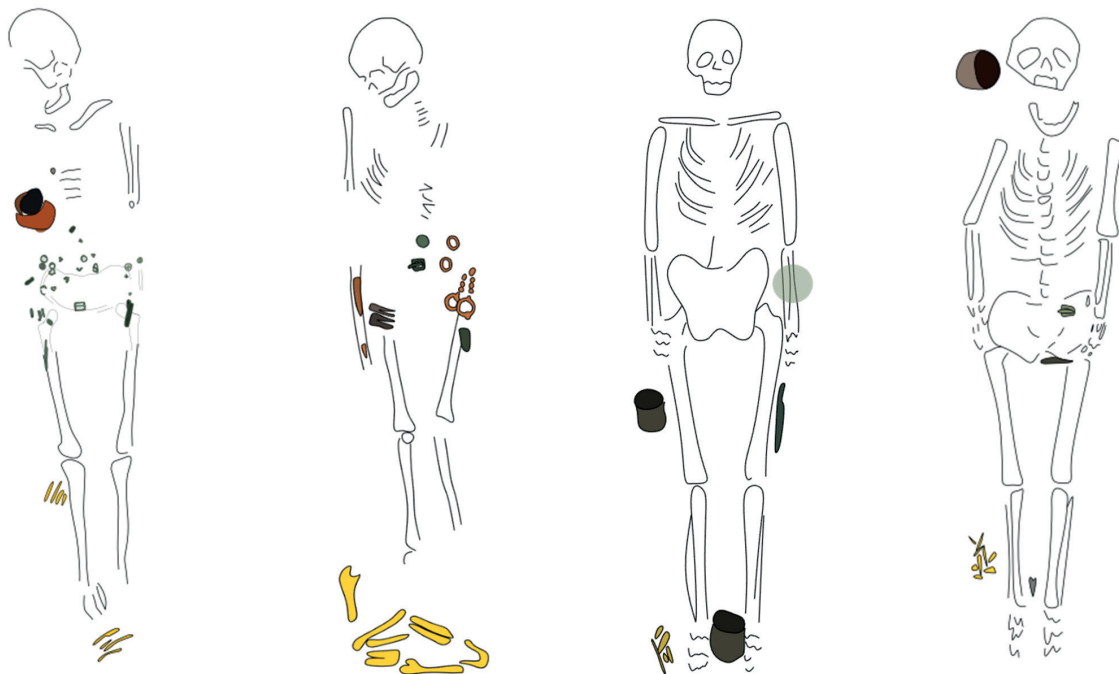


Fig. 8. Drawing of burials 14, 38, 66, 73 (from left to right). In the case of grave 38, the description and inventory included the ceramic pot near the upper body, but this was omitted from the drawing (HNM Archive ID: 2351).

Structured deposits

This category comprises complete or partial animal skeletons arranged coherently and placed either separately from or directly beside the deceased. Such deposits may occur with or without pottery, as the presence of a vessel does not appear to be an essential component of this practice (Graves 16, 17, 38, 57 [horse tooth?], 60, 72, 80).

Pottery without animal bones

In several graves, potteries were present, but no animal bones were recovered. These vessels may have contained liquids or boneless food offerings, such as porridge, grains, fruits, vegetables, meat, or offal (Graves 4, 7, 18, 19, 25, 26, 27, 36, 37, 44, 59, 63, 64, 65, 70).

In 11 out of the 15 cases, the potteries without associated animal bones were small cups, while the remaining four were pot-like vessels with low, flared rims. Three of these vessels were found in women's graves, while one was recovered from the grave of a juvenile. Cups have also been found in two women's graves (Graves 26 and 36). Overall, the vessels were distributed among the graves of five men, seven women (including two children buried with grave goods typically associated with women), and three individuals of indeterminate sex. Their placement varied: three vessels were located near the right leg, six near the left leg, and three near the head or upper body (shoulders, elbows, or upper pelvis) (Fig. 9).

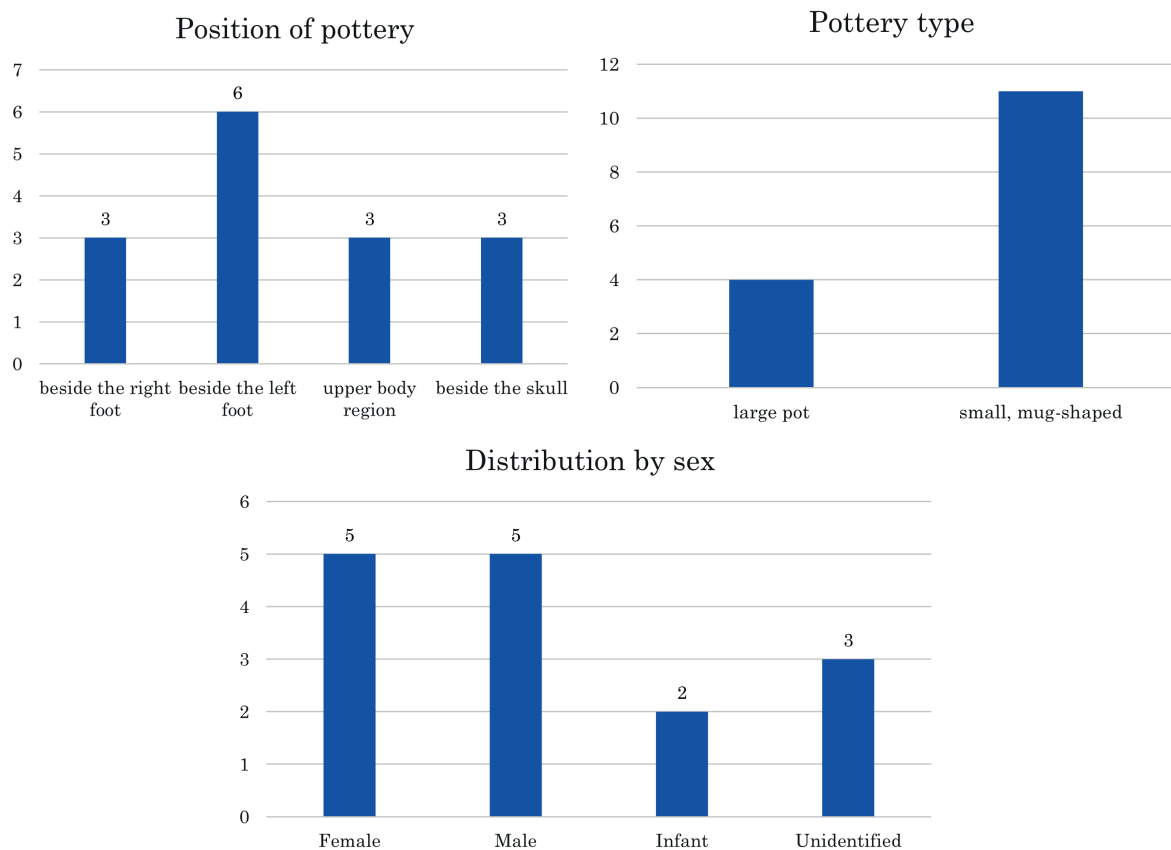


Fig. 9. Animal bone placements in graves-pot without animal bone (Bágyog-Gyűrhegy).

Variations in animal bone placement in the Táp-Borbapuszta cemetery

At the Táp-Borbapuszta cemetery, information concerning the precise placement of animal bones is less detailed. According to Péter Tomka, animal remains were recorded at the feet of the deceased in 253 burials, on the skeleton in 43 cases, and around the torso or skull in 18 instances (Fig. 10).⁴²

Types of animal bone and species

At Bágyog-Gyűrhegy, the evaluation of animal remains is primarily based on field observations and excavation documentation, whereas the material from Táp-Borbapuszta was subjected to detailed archaeozoological analysis by László Daróczi-Szabó.⁴³ At Bágyog-Gyűrhegy, 25 instances of poultry remains (goose, duck, and chicken) and 12 instances of larger-bodied (cattle) or smaller-bodied ani-

42 The information on animal bones of the unpublished Avar cemetery of Táp-Borbapuszta was provided by Péter Tomka.

43 DARÓCZI-SZABÓ 2008, 175–181.

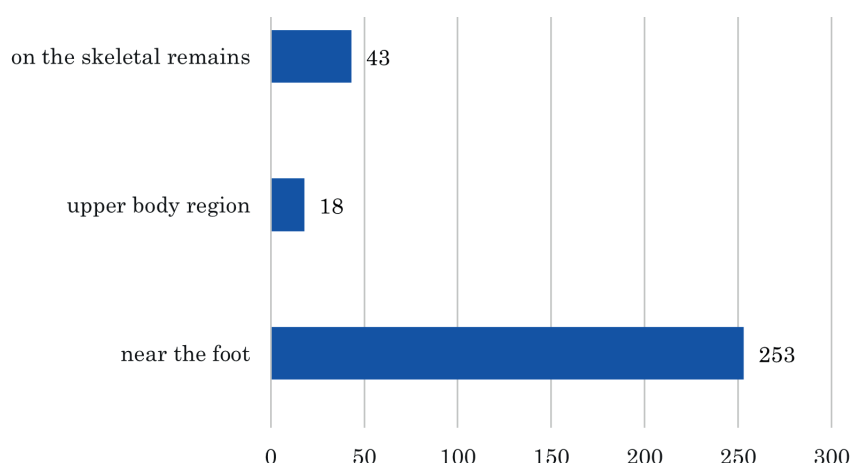


Fig. 10. Location of animal bones in Táp-Borbapuszta cemetery.

mals (sheep, goat, and pig) were documented. Structured deposits were more frequently associated with the latter category. Poultry was commonly interred; however, no clear correlation could be identified between the wealth of a burial and the species of animal deposited.

For example, Graves 16–17–17a, which contained a rich assemblage of grave goods, included both small ruminants and poultry, with the former placed as a structured deposit and the latter interpreted either as a deposit or as a food offering. Conversely, Grave 80, which was furnished with only a minimal number of grave goods, nonetheless contained three structured animal deposits placed beside the deceased.

At Táp-Borbapuszta, approximately 1,749 complete or fragmented animal bones were recovered from 218 graves (Tab. 1). Of these, 1,512 specimens were identified to species level, while 237 cases yielded only approximate identifications (Fig. 11).⁴⁴

As at Bágyog-Gyűrhegy, the majority of animal remains from Táp-Borbapuszta derive from domestic fowl. Poultry remains were identified in 124 graves, goose bones in 22 graves, and both species together in a further six burials.⁴⁵ Most of these remains were recovered near the feet of the deceased, which supports a food-related interpretation. Owing to the generally poor preservation of the bones, however, the presence of complete or partial skeleton burials cannot be excluded, particularly in cases where skull elements were also recorded. Of the 22 graves containing goose remains, four included complete animals.

The distinction between food offerings and structured deposits remains problematic in general, and especially in the case of poultry. At the Wien-Csokorgasse cemetery, for example, Henriette Kroll interpreted chicken bones as food offerings even when the skull was present. It remains uncertain whether the birds were interred feathered or plucked,⁴⁶ a distinction that would be crucial for determining whether they should be regarded as structured deposits or offerings.

In contrast to Bágyog-Gyűrhegy, the Táp-Borbapuszta cemetery shows a stronger association between goose remains and wealthier burials. Goose bones were recovered from the graves of 14 men, six women, and two children. In 13 of these cases, the deceased were furnished with ornamental belts, and in seven cases they were buried in coffins equipped with iron fittings.

Cattle remains, predominantly vertebrae, were identified in association with 113 individuals. As

⁴⁴ DARÓCZI-SZABÓ 2008, 176.

⁴⁵ DARÓCZI-SZABÓ 2008, 177.

⁴⁶ KROLL 2013, 208–212.

Tab. 1. Distribution of animal bones at Táp-Borbapuszta (DARÓCZI-SZABÓ 2008, 176).

Táp-Borbapuszta		
Species	No. of items	% of identifiable bones
Domestic fowl (<i>Gallus domesticus</i>)	1189	78.6
Domestic goose (<i>Anser domesticus</i>)	186	12.3
Cattle (<i>Bos taurus</i> , Linné 1758)	80	5.2
Domestic pig (<i>Sus domesticus</i>)	29	1.9
Sheep and/or goat (<i>Capriane</i>)	19	1.2
Pike (<i>Esox lucius</i>)	9	0.6
Identifiable bones	1512	100
Bird	17	
Rodent	1	
Unidentifiable large animal	131	
Unidentifiable small animal	87	
Unidentifiable human or animal bone	1	
Unidentified bones	237	

with poultry, these bones were most frequently deposited near the feet of the deceased. In a smaller number of cases, however, cattle remains were found near the heads of two men and one woman, and around the hands of two women and three children. The presence of vertebrae in graves of adults may indicate the deposition of meat cuts from the animal's back, while ribs—frequently encountered in children's burials—may represent flank portions.⁴⁷

Small ruminants (sheep and goats) were present in 13 graves, while domestic pig remains were identified in nine. Among the sheep/goat burials, vertebrae were recorded in ten instances, two graves contained other skeletal elements, and one burial included limb bones exclusively.

Special food offerings at Bágyog-Gyűrhegy

At Bágyog-Gyűrhegy, most grave goods—including food and drink offerings, utensils, clothing accessories, jewellery, and weapons—were placed inside the coffin. However, animals associated with ritual practices were typically placed outside it⁴⁸—such external placements are often interpreted as sacrificial or votive offerings, or even as gifts.⁴⁹ This practice raises the complex question of whether these deposits should be analysed strictly within these categories or whether additional meanings may also be associated with them.

An illustrative example of this ambiguity is provided by Grave 15 (Fig. 12.1), where a small, hand-formed cup was found 25 cm above and away from the right femur, possibly outside the coffin. Both interpretations—that the cup was placed after a funerary feast or during a later reopening of the grave—appear plausible. The vessel was probably used to hold a liquid, and given its small size,

47 SZABÓ 1981, 67.

48 BENDE 2003, 319.

49 HÄRKE 2014; PEARSON 1999.

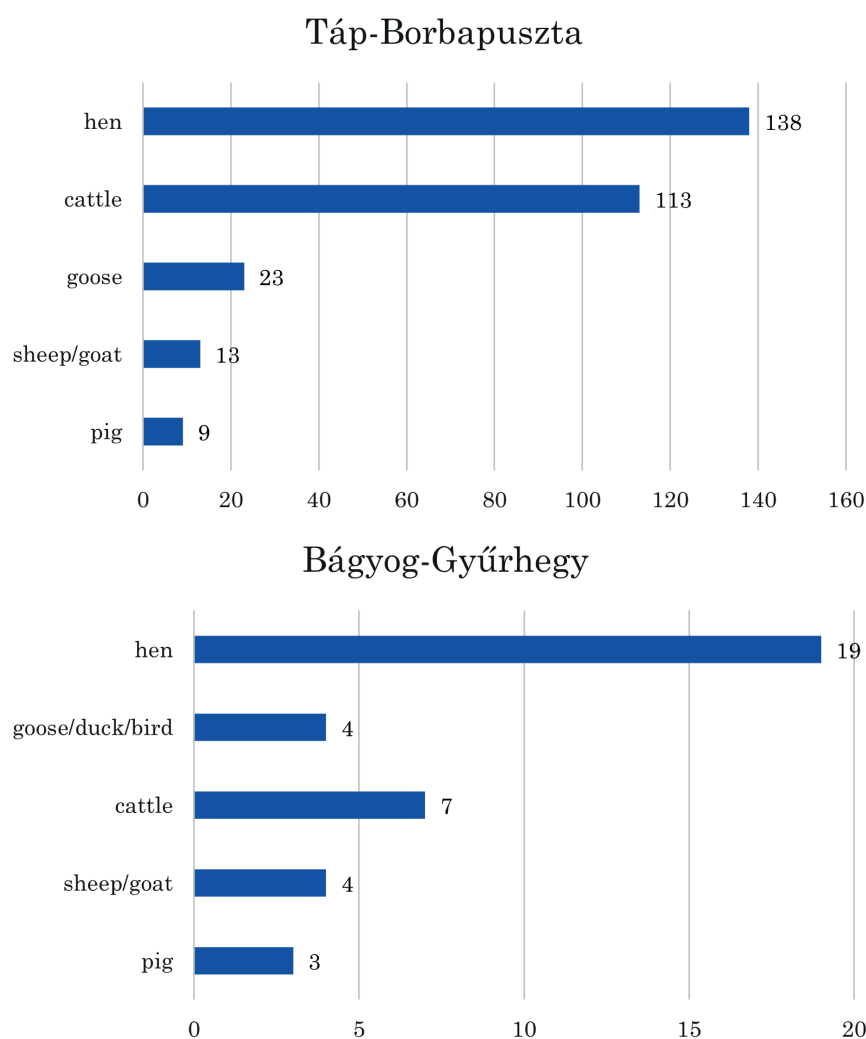


Fig. 11. Distribution of identified animal bones in the surveyed cemeteries.

it may have contained an alcoholic beverage. Near the left ankle, a larger hand-formed vessel was recorded, while poultry and small ruminant bones were found around the right ankle. Although the larger vessel has since been lost, its description suggests that it was suitable for holding food. In this grave, the larger food container appears to have been placed inside the coffin, while the smaller cup, likely containing a drink offering, was positioned on top of it. This spatial arrangement may point to the performance of a post-burial ritual.

In addition to the more typical food and drink offerings generally associated with pottery, some graves contained small accumulations of animal bones that deviated from the usual burial pattern. These bone clusters were often difficult to identify without detailed archaeozoological analysis—in some cases, the bones may represent animals that entered the grave after burial. However, where the bones could be identified as poultry, intentional inclusion appears more likely, although their precise function remains unclear. Given their unusual placement—particularly in disturbed graves—it is possible that these remains represent food residues scattered during post-burial disturbances.

A notable exception is Grave 72, in which pottery was found beside the right foot of the deceased, surrounded by poultry bones (Fig. 12.1). In addition, two further bone accumulations were recorded higher within the grave fill, at approximately 14 cm and 35 cm above the skeletal level. These deposits may have been placed after burial as part of a funerary feast and interpreted as food offerings.

Nevertheless, the possibility should not be excluded that such offerings were originally placed in wooden or other organic containers or laid directly onto the coffin without a vessel. Under favourable preservation conditions, comparable practices have been documented elsewhere: in Russia, Rekonstruktor IV, Kurgan 11, a sheep's rump bone from Grave 9 was clearly positioned on a wooden plate, while in Ukraine, Sivashovka, Kurgan 3, Grave 2, animal bones were observed arranged on the wooden planks covering the burial pit.⁵⁰

In some cases, graves appear to have been reopened not to remove items, but to add new deposits. Graves 15 and 72 illustrate examples in which donations or later interments were added at a subsequent stage (Fig. 12.1). Grave 51–51a offers a highly illustrative case of secondary burial, where a newborn was most likely placed on top of the mother's coffin, lying approximately 25 cm higher than the adult burial (Fig. 12.2). Notably, the adult woman's skull was found 35 cm away from her body and approximately 45 cm above the recorded skeletal level. This displacement may have occurred during decomposition and could reflect an intentional act, possibly intended to position the skull so that it 'watched over' the infant.

Grave 61, belonging to a newborn, was also disturbed, with only a shinbone preserved in anatomical position (Fig. 12.3). A handmade cup was placed at the distal end of the right shin, accompanied by scattered small bird bones and a larger limb bone, most likely representing a food offering. The deposition of 'adult food' in a child's grave suggests either a belief that the child would exist as an adult in the afterlife, or that the offering was intended for spiritual entities rather than the deceased alone. This phenomenon, while distinctive at Bágyog-Gyűrhegy, was also observed in 13 children's graves at the Táp cemetery.

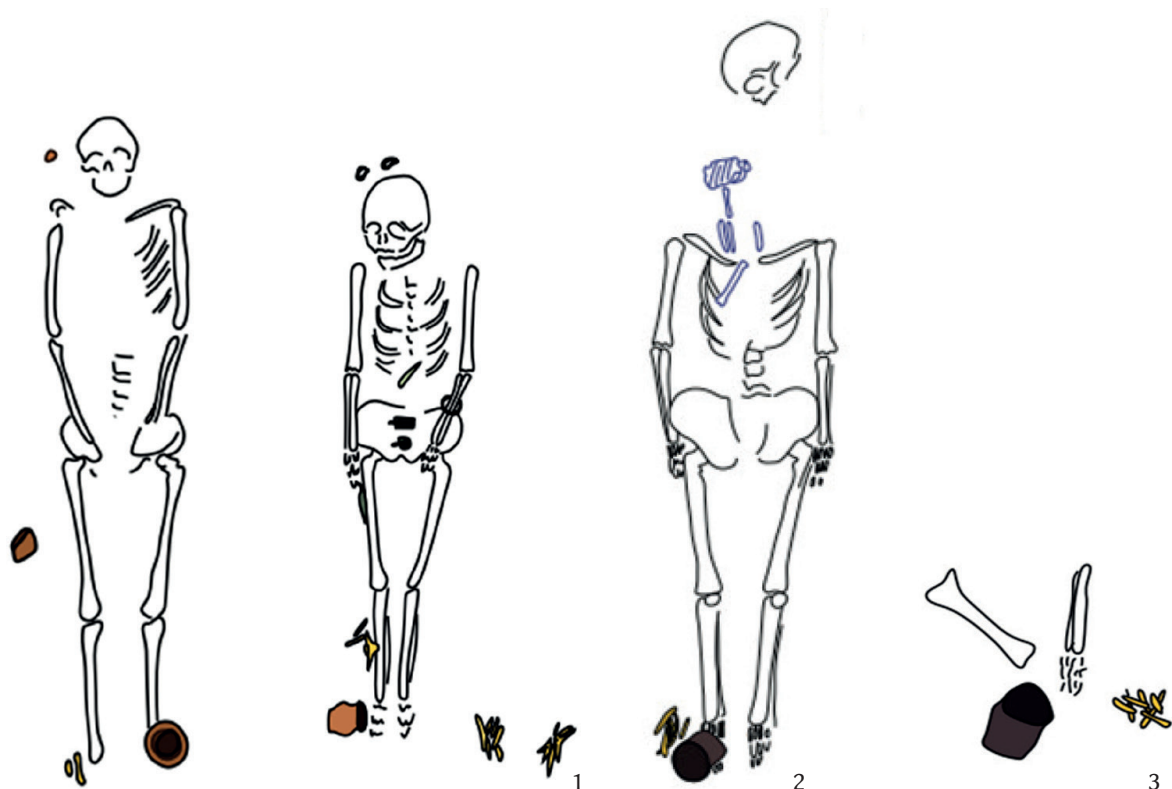


Fig. 12. Bágyog-Gyűrhegy. 1 – Graves 15 and 72, 2 – Graves 51–51a, 3 – Grave 61 (HNM Archive ID: 2351).

50 GULYÁS et al. 2022, 303.

Finally, Grave 75 contained two complete turtle shells positioned above the skeletal level, one near the shoulder and the other near the knee (Fig. 13.1). The burial also included a handmade pottery, around which poultry bones were scattered. During conservation, it was established that the bones found inside the vessel were not avian but belonged to a human infant. This finding adds a further layer of complexity to the interpretation of this burial and highlights the multiplicity of meanings that may be embedded within such depositional practices.

Structured deposits at Bágyog-Gyűrhegy

In the Bágyog-Gyűrhegy cemetery, structured deposits were identified in eight graves. One of the most notable examples is provided by Graves 16–17–17a, which together form a triple burial (Fig. 13.2). According to Gyula Dezső, this arrangement may reflect familial relationships, as the adult woman and the older child displayed Mongoloid cranial traits (this could not be assessed in the case of the younger child owing to poor preservation).⁵¹ All three individuals were interred with rich grave goods.

In Grave 16, a young girl (*infans II–juvenis*) was buried together with the complete skeleton of a small ruminant, described as “likely a large animal’s whole skeleton”,⁵² with the skull placed on the girl’s shinbones. The animal remains were not deposited within a pottery vessel, although a vessel was recorded near the adult woman in Grave 17. A smaller vessel was found near the girl’s feet in Grave 16, while Grave 17 contained a partial animal deposit consisting of a small ruminant’s sternum and the shinbones of two animals. These observations suggest that the complete small ruminant skeleton in Grave 16 represents a structured deposit, whereas the animal bones found in association with potteries in Grave 17 are more plausibly interpreted as food offerings.

Grave 38, of a juvenile boy (Fig. 13.3), contained—in addition to grave goods such as a ceramic vessel placed above the head and a bronze strap end—a cattle shinbone and the complete skeleton of a large bird placed at the feet of the deceased. The bird skeleton is most likely to represent a structured deposit,⁵³ while the cattle bone is interpreted as a food offering.

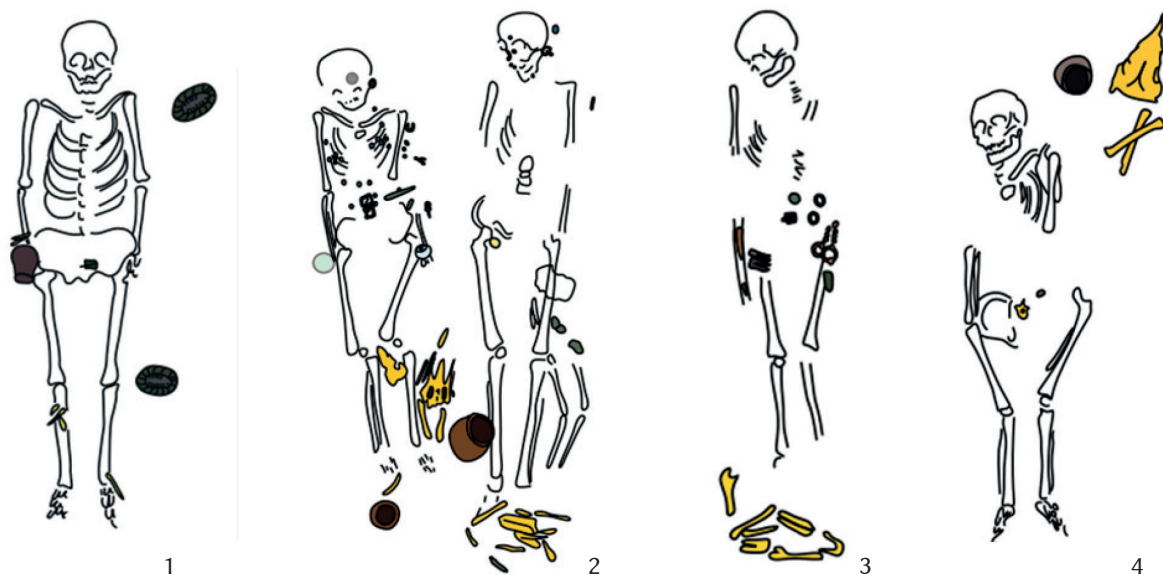


Fig. 13. Bágyog-Gyűrhegy. 1 – Grave 75, 2 – Graves 16–17–17a, 3 – Grave 38, 4 – Grave 60 (HNM Archive ID: 2351).

51 DEZSŐ 1968, 86.

52 From the original field documentation, translated by the author.

53 KROLL 2013, 208–212. Because of its rare occurrence in cemeteries, it is more likely to be treated as a deposit, but no definite answer can be given.

In Grave 60, a juvenile boy was buried with a partial small ruminant skeleton placed along his left side (Fig. 13.4). A reddish pottery vessel was found in the upper left corner of the grave. The spatial separation between the deceased and the animal remains suggests that the animal represents a structured deposit, whereas the vessel may have contained a boneless food offering.

Grave 80 was undisturbed and contained the burial of a juvenile (Fig. 14.1). Partial skeletons of three animals were discerned within the grave: two were positioned on the individual's left side, while a third extended beneath the body from the hips to the feet. The two animals placed alongside the deceased were arranged behind one another, parallel to the body, with their heads oriented towards the individual's head. These animals may have been a ram and a lamb and were situated approximately 25 cm above the level of the skeleton in clean yellow sand. On the right side of the deceased, outside and adjacent to the skull, a slender, brownish-grey pottery was found, unaccompanied by animal bones. The animals placed beneath and beside the body are best interpreted as structured deposits, whereas the pottery most likely contained a food offering.

Horse teeth

Animal teeth as grave additions are not common, but neither are they unknown in archaeological contexts. During the Migration Period and the Early Middle Ages, certain amulets were made from animal teeth, to which magical or apotropaic powers had been attributed since antiquity.⁵⁴ In her study of early and late medieval graves in Britain, Roberta Gilchrist observed that during the transitional period of the 7th and 8th centuries—coinciding with the spread of Christianity—a range of artefacts began to appear in burials that suggest changing conceptions of the afterlife. These finds include Roman coins, fossils, and animal teeth.⁵⁵

At the Bágyog-Gyűrhegy cemetery, an animal tooth was found *in situ* in Grave 57, placed next to the head of the deceased (Fig. 14.2). This object may have served a protective function, conferred by the community for the journey into the afterlife.⁵⁶ Animal teeth, together with Roman coins and fossils, have often been associated with female healers and practitioners of magic or herbal medicine, who were frequently buried with objects connected to their activities.⁵⁷ Owing to its placement, the horse tooth from Grave 57 is more likely to represent a funerary gift rather than an amulet, as amulets are typically worn on the body or attached to it, for example, as part of a necklace. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the object as a gift does not preclude its amuletic function, as it would still have been believed to possess the same magical properties.

Within the framework of Inner Asian belief systems, animal bone amulets are sometimes interpreted in connection with the *ongon* cult, which explains their presence through the concept of animal spirit helpers.⁵⁸ From this perspective, the deposition of such objects may be understood as an attempt to secure the protection of these spirits for the deceased. However, this approach is problematic, owing to the overly generalised use of the term *ongon* and the difficulty of applying it uncritically to the Avar context.

According to the excavation documentation, horse teeth were recovered from Graves 46 and 57. In the case of Grave 46, the association with the burial remains uncertain, as three teeth were recovered from the surface of the cluster comprising the intersecting Graves 44 to 47 rather than from a clearly defined grave context.

54 VIDA 2018, 211.

55 GILCHRIST 2008, 121.

56 KOVRIG 1963, 77–78; VÖRÖS 2017, 104.

57 MEANEY 1981; MEANEY 1989, 9–40; GILCHRIST 2008, 147.

58 CSIKY 2016, 158; ZELENIN 1936.

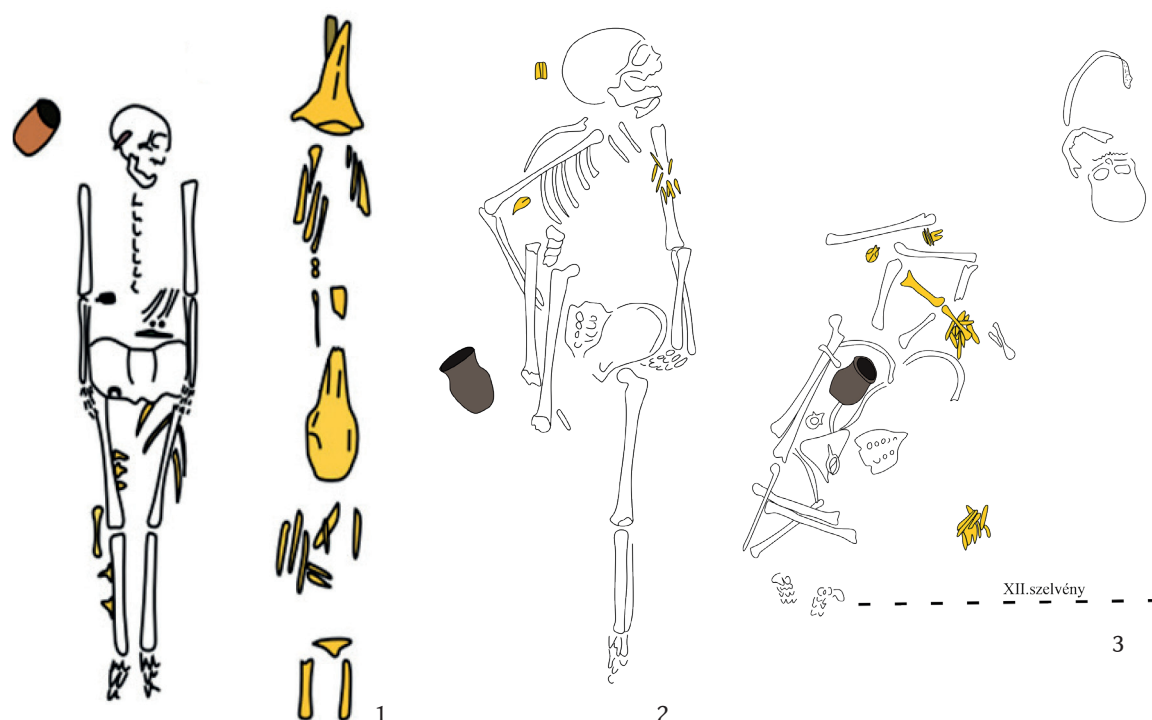


Fig. 14. Bágyog-Gyűrhegy. 1 – Grave 80, 2 – Grave 57, 3 – Grave 56 (HNM Archive ID: 2351).

Bird skulls

Bird skulls were identified in Graves 56 and 57 (Fig. 14.3), with multiple skulls recorded in the former and a single specimen in the latter. This represents an exceptionally rare phenomenon, as the paper-thin cranial bones of poultry are among the first skeletal elements to decay completely during taphonomic processes, particularly in the case of young animals.⁵⁹ As no archaeozoological analysis was carried out, it is not possible to determine the exact species to which the field documentation refers.

In both graves, the skulls were found at a distance from the remainder of the bird skeleton, or in the absence of any other avian remains. This pattern finds close parallels at the Táp cemetery, notably in Grave 208, where a single chicken skull was recovered without the rest of the skeleton, and in Grave 222, which contained two chicken skulls alongside a goose skeleton.

These finds may indicate that the skulls served a ‘sacrificial’ role as grave goods, although their use in healing or protective magic cannot be excluded. In such contexts, objects encountered in nature—plants, stones, or animal body parts—were often believed to possess occult virtues or miraculous powers. Through healing magic, it may have been hoped that the deceased, particularly if they had suffered from illness during life, would be restored as a healthy individual in the afterlife.⁶⁰

Conclusion

A more comprehensive understanding of Avar burial customs ultimately requires a deeper investigation of Avar religion and belief systems. Despite the data presented in this study, the precise rituals associated with the funeral feast, as well as the specific dishes served, cannot yet be fully reconstructed. The scale of the funeral feast and the foods prepared were likely influenced primarily by the economic

⁵⁹ Personal communication by László Bartosiewicz.

⁶⁰ GILCHRIST 2008, 135–136, 149; PAGE 2014, 18.

means of those organising the burial. It should also be considered that, as in the present day, particular dishes may have been associated with specific festive occasions or rituals; in this sense, the deceased's former food preference may likewise have played a role. Moreover, agricultural production and animal husbandry are seasonally determined, meaning that the dishes served at funerals may have differed between spring and summer on the one hand, and autumn and winter on the other.

The two cemeteries examined here should therefore be regarded as a first step within a broader and more comprehensive research programme. Animal remains, structured deposits, and other artefacts indicating food or drink offerings from Avar Period cemeteries in the Little Hungarian Plain will be analysed further in future studies. As an initial outcome of this research, it has been demonstrated—based on the assemblages from Bágyog-Gyűrhegy and Táp-Borbapuszta—that the terminology traditionally used to interpret animal remains is not always precise and, in many cases, requires revision. Establishing a systematic classificatory framework for these deposits was essential, as it provided the only reliable basis for comparative analysis between the two cemeteries.

The six categories defined in the section on site statistics apply not only to additional Early and Late Avar Period graves in the Little Hungarian Plain but may also be extended to the Avar Period more generally and potentially to Migration Period contexts across the Carpathian Basin. Based on the two cemeteries analysed here, it is evident that practices of food offering and the range of animal species selected for this purpose are broadly similar. Nevertheless, further archaeozoological investigations—such as microscopic analysis of cut marks and the identification of traces of thermal processing, including cooking or roasting—are required to achieve a more precise differentiation between structured deposits and food offerings.

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