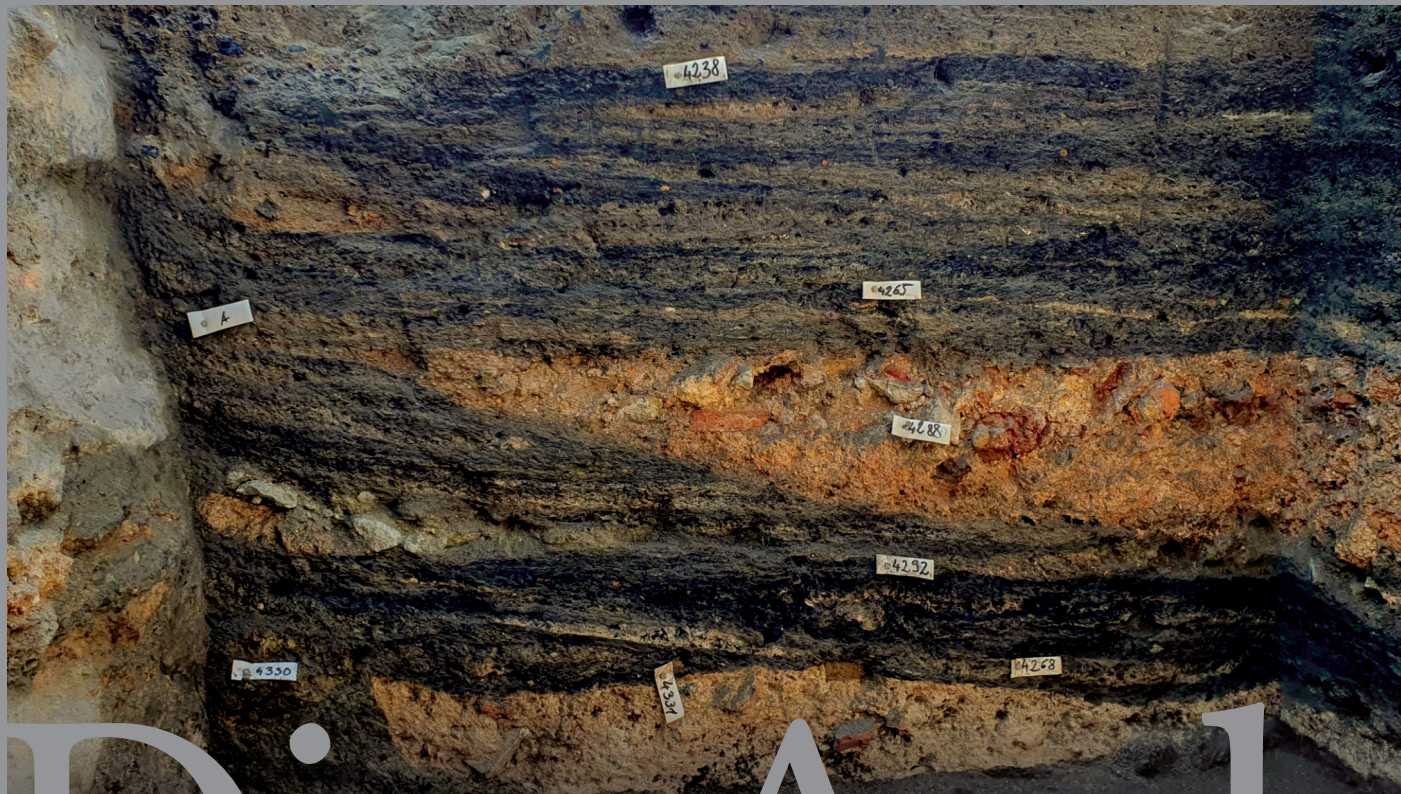


# DISSERTATIONES ARCHAEOLOGICAE

ex Instituto Archaeologico

Universitatis de Rolando Eötvös nominatae



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in light of complex research



## An Early Iron Age cup with unique decoration from Fertőrákos (NW Hungary)

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**Abstract:** The Early Iron Age cemetery at Fertőrákos-Kőhidai dűlő is one of the best-known sites in the vicinity of Sopron. Excavations took place there in 1970, but the material was published only in 2009. During the nearly four decades inbetween, heritage management was reorganised several times, and the excavated material was divided between two separate museums, so reuniting it required a small-scale revision, including a reevaluation of the record. The aim of this article is to present the unique painted decoration of an Early Iron Age cup.

**Keywords:** Early Iron Age, Fertőrákos-Kőhidai dűlő, Hallstatt culture, painted decoration

The first traces of the site came to light on 21 May 1970;<sup>1</sup> the discovery was followed by a small rescue excavation (Fig. 1) by Rezső Pusztai the same year.<sup>2</sup> The material, however, remained unpublished until 2009,<sup>3</sup> and between 1970 and 2009, it remained almost unknown to archaeology. However thorough, the 2009 publication is incomplete, as the author certainly did not know about a large part of the find material. According to our theoretical reconstruction, after the excavation, a part of it was inventoried into the collection of the Museum in Sopron, where the site belongs based on its geographical position, while the other part went to the Hanság Museum in Mosonmagyaróvár, where Rezső Pusztai was director at that time. This was unknown until 2018, when we transported the finds back to Sopron.<sup>4</sup>

That the find material had been thus divided was obviously unknown when the sherds were conserved in Sopron. Accordingly, some vessels have fragments that were not built into them when reconstructed. The inventorying is still in process, and it might take a while. However, publishing at least the most significant finds as soon as possible is important.

This article revolves around a cup from the grave excavated by Péter Tomka on 21 May 1970, before the rescue excavation. Also, the material from Rezső Pusztai's excavation has already been published in 2009,<sup>5</sup> but there are still some details to discuss.

1 Soproni Múzeum Régészeti Adattár [Data Archive of the Sopron Museum] (SOMRA) 393.

2 PUSZTAI 1971.

3 ĐURKOVIČ 2009.

4 I express my special thanks to Tamás Czuppon, director of the Hanság Museum in Mosonmagyaróvár, for his help in arranging the transfer.

5 ĐURKOVIČ 2009, 53.



Fig. 1. Aerial photo from 1971 of the archaeological site Fertőrákos-Kőhidai-dűlő and the mine opened in 1970 (source: [fentrol.hu](http://fentrol.hu), map by Attila Mrenka).

According to Tomka's short report, the first finds came to light when the cooperative farm (Egyesített Soproni Dózsa TSz) started exploiting a new sand quarry.<sup>6</sup> The report says that Mr Jenő Horváth, steward of the mine, had already noticed that sherds were scattered all over the surface of the area. When Tomka arrived at the scene, he noticed a dark soil stain along the western edge of the mine and dated it to the Early Iron Age Hallstatt culture. According to the report by Tomka, the feature was roundish, or better, rounded rectangular, about 70 cm deep and 1.20 m in diameter. Its eastern side had been disturbed by a bulldozer earlier. Above the grave was another one with a skeleton, but this upper one was so shallow that the skull of the deceased sunk into one of the Early Iron Age vessels below. The skeleton in this second, shallower grave had no grave goods at all and lay at such a small depth that even its original position could not be estimated.

The Early Iron Age grave contained eight vessels (Fig. 2), with white ash and dark, charred layers with calcined remains amongst and below them. A large urn (No. 8) stood along the northwestern side of the grave; unfortunately, its upper part had been damaged by earthworks, but it contained a lot of calcined bones. Only fragments of a smaller vessel (No. 5) were found in the disturbed southeastern part, while another bigger pot (No. 7) with a small, handled cup (No. 6) inside was discovered in the southwestern one (the skull from the other,

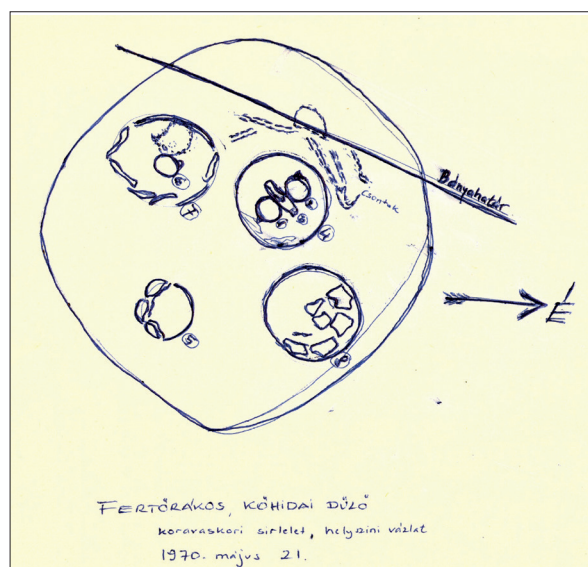


Fig. 2. Original survey drawing from Péter Tomka's field report (© Sopron Museum).

6 SOMRA 393, 1.





Fig. 3. Curved red motif on the upper part of the handle (photo by Attila Mrenka).



Fig. 4. Lower part of the handle with a white stacked square motif with a forked, hooked tail. The black line accompanying the white one is perhaps the remain of some kind of applied decoration (photo by Attila Mrenka).

younger grave had been sunken into this pot). A ram-headed moon idol (also called firedog, No. 3) had been placed on a shallow pedestalled bowl (No. 4) into the grave and, as close as possible, two one-handled beakers (Nos. 1 and 2) stood between the two large pots, slightly southwest of them.

The grog-tempered cup in focus (Inv. no. 2007.1.22.) is dark red and reddish-brown; its curved, slightly everted rim is somewhat chipped. A wide, undecorated channel runs around the neck under the rim, giving, together with the bulging, barrel-shaped belly, a lightly undulating S-profile to the vessel. A divided line of pyramid-shaped knobs runs around the shoulder; under that, the body of the cup is covered by an incised, continuous line of three stacked, open triangles, while the base is flat. The band handle, connecting the rim and the shoulder, arises slightly above the rim.

Péter Tomka gave the No. 1 to the cup in focus from Grave A. The vessel is easy to distinguish from the other cup in the grave, as its decoration is different. The cup in focus has similar dimensions as cup No. 6 from Grave 1:<sup>7</sup> its body is 7 cm high (with the handle 8.4 cm), the diameter of the rim is 8.6–9.7 cm (so it is slightly oval), and the diameter of the bottom is 5.6 cm. Nothing indicates that the cup was part of a twin cup, as it was assumed in another case.<sup>8</sup>

A closer look reveals that at least the handle was painted; the pattern is long gone, but some persisting traces are still discernible.

The site clearly belongs to the Early Iron Age and has strong connections with the territory of Eastern Austria.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the motifs on the cup should have analogies there.

The persisting motifs include an easily recognisable and a fainter one. One must differentiate between the smallest decorative units (motifs) and their combination (ornament), as Ursula Brosseder did.<sup>10</sup>

At least two different motifs can be identified on the handle: one of curved, red lines painted on the joining of the handle and the rim (Fig. 3), and a second, painted in a white line accompanied by red ones on both sides and consisting of two stacked, rotated squares attached at their tips and forked, tail-like, open ends (Fig. 4). Without scientific analysis it cannot be decided whether the white mo-

7 ĐURKOVIČ 2009, 53.

8 ĐURKOVIČ 2009, 53.

9 ĐURKOVIČ 2009, 79.

10 BROSEDER 2004, 18.

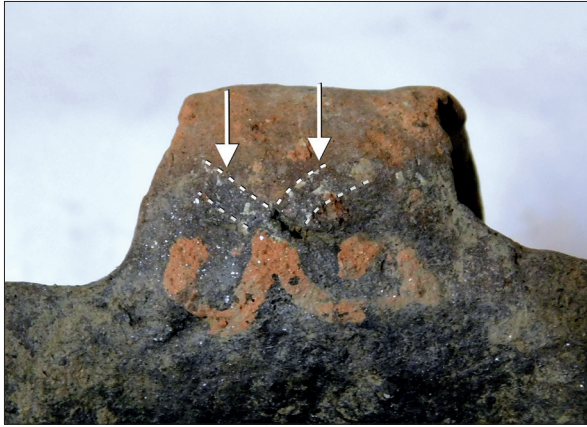


Fig. 5. Remains of the painted pattern on the upper part of the handle. The white lines show a connection with the lower part of the handle (photo by Attila Mrenka).

The handle of a bowl from Tumulus II of Vaskeresztes is also decorated but with a meandric pattern<sup>13</sup> instead of a geometric one. A combination of different diamond-based motifs appears on the handle of a bronze vessel from Grave 400 of Salzburg-Maxglan,<sup>14</sup> a site dated to the Ha C phase, with Late Bronze Age preludes and strong connections with the north Pontic region.<sup>15</sup>

The white motif on our cup is very faint but discernible: a square standing on its corner, with a forked 'tail' with hooked or rolled ends, pointing towards the cup's belly below; this motif is likely repeated mirrored upwards, but the 'mirror image' is so faint that one cannot be absolutely sure about that. A red dot and perhaps a short line are visible inside the squares, marking perhaps the intertwining of the red and the white ornaments. Either way, the pattern seems to have a direct composition. The rotated square or diamond motif appears in the find material of Sopron-Várhely on large vessels with a conical neck (*Kegelhalsgefäße*)<sup>16</sup> and, with a dot-circle in the middle, the handle of a bowl,<sup>17</sup> meaning it is not completely absent from the largest known Early Iron Age fortified settlement in the region.

The case of the red motif seems more complicated, mainly because it is in rather poor condition, marked only by red dots appearing all over the handle like a patchwork, seemingly arranged in a pattern completing and linking with the white motif (Fig. 5). If we accept that the two motifs are connected, a complex pattern emerges instead of two separate motifs.<sup>18</sup>

The assumption that the two motifs are connected is corroborated by the upper part of the red motif on the handle. A V motif with rolled ends can be seen where the handle joins to the rim (Fig. 6). Considering the decoration of the handle as a single unit, a complex pattern emerges, the white, hooked or rolled, forked end of which on the vessel belly is repeated on the upper part of the handle in red, while a combination of stacked squares fills the space between them, painted with white lines accompanied by red ones.

tif is painted or is the remain of some natural glue once bounding an applied metal foil decoration or something like that onto the surface, an extremely rare but existing solution in the period with only one documented case in the closer area of Fertőrákos (and even that from a much older period, the end of the first epoch of the Hungarian Late Bronze Age in the Br D phase).<sup>11</sup> Besides, a single Early Iron Age example is known from Vaskeresztes.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, we are cautious about the identification of the material of the white motif, but we believe that it is likely some kind of paint.

Decorating the handles of cups was not quite common in the Early Iron Age Eastern Hallstatt culture, but neither is without precedent.

11 FISCHER 1993, 19.

12 FEKETE 1985, 48.

13 FEKETE 1985, 52. Abb. 17.2.

14 SCHÄFER 2019, 199. Abb. 4.

15 SCHÄFER 2019, 198.

16 EIBNER-PERSY 1980, Taf. 18–19.

17 EIBNER-PERSY 1980, Taf. 44.1, Taf. 103.

18 BROSEDER 2004, 18.





Fig. 6. 1 – pattern sketch of the handle, 2 – possible reconstruction of the pattern, 3 – the cup (photo by Attila Mrenka, drawing by Krisztina Balassa).

The hooked or rolled ends seem easy to distinguish amongst the motifs appearing in the Eastern Hallstatt culture, as the diamond motif with such tails at its opposite ends is unique. But what if we break it down, as did the maker by using two different colours? The two ends of the pattern were distinguished simply by using different colours (and/or perhaps also different materials) and placing the hooked ends on the opposite sides of the handle. The basic motif is nothing more than a triangle with a hooked or rolled, forked motif attached to its upper tip. Sándor Gallus reports on a similar motif from the Early Iron Age tumulus field of Sopron-Várhely,<sup>19</sup> referring to it as a ‘crooked triangle’ (i.e., with a forked tail consisting of crooked lines); the inner part of the triangles he mentions was divided into smaller triangles.

Opinions about the meaning and elements of the motif differ. Claus Dobiát thinks it to be a highly simplified human figurine,<sup>20</sup> while Alexandrine Eibner-Persy describes it in her monumental work published in 1980 as ‘serrated triangle’,<sup>21</sup> just like Ursula Brosseeder,<sup>22</sup> although she distinguishes between the triangles with serrated and those with rolled line additions.<sup>23</sup>

19 GALLUS 1934, 8.

20 DOBIAT 1982, 306.

21 EIBNER-PERSY 1980, 58.

22 BROSEDER 2004, 263.

23 BROSEDER 2004, 264.

The breaking down helped us to analyse the structure of the motif<sup>24</sup> and identify that its basic element is a triangle with two forked lines attached to its tip and any other appearing form being a variation or combination.

Despite the many variations, a respective typological or a typochronological framework cannot be built because the inner chronology of the Eastern Hallstatt, especially the Kalenderberg culture, is also to be developed. A same cup type with a special handle was already in use in the Late Bronze Age,<sup>25</sup> i.e., the start of the Kalenderberg culture at the turn of the Ha B–C phases.<sup>26</sup> Although Erzsébet Patek outlined an internal chronology for the Várhely settlement<sup>27</sup> and cemetery,<sup>28</sup> that is of only little help in this case. Based on its pottery record, É. Đurkovič dated the Fertőrákos cemetery to the end of the Late Bronze Age and the dawn of the Early Iron Age,<sup>29</sup> which means it started at the same time as Várhely.<sup>30</sup> However, the almost total lack of metal finds makes this chronology somewhat uncertain.<sup>31</sup> A single iron harp brooch<sup>32</sup> points to a newly emerging Early Iron Age fashion,<sup>33</sup> while the pottery record reflects Late Bronze Age traditions,<sup>34</sup> which is important because, as E. Patek has also noted, many motifs of the Kalenderberg culture have a Late Bronze Age origin.<sup>35</sup>

The new motifs spread over only a limited area,<sup>36</sup> at least at the beginning of the Early Iron Age. C. Metzner-Nebelsick believes their spread to be connected with the arrival of Eastern nomadic tribes around 1000 BC,<sup>37</sup> the strong impact of which brought about a fundamental change in settlement structure, triggering the emergence of a new settlement type, hillforts, which became the “focus of identity of the ruling elites.”<sup>38</sup>

If this was the case, then the cemetery uncovered at Fertőrákos should have belonged to the roughly outlined Sopron group<sup>39</sup> of the Kalenderberg culture.<sup>40</sup> However, neither the material culture nor the territory of the group has been identified yet. The similarity of the find material of sites between the Leitha and Lake Fertő<sup>41</sup> seems to be a good starting point, but one must keep in mind that besides the Kalenderberg triad (a combination of double vessels, firedogs, and Kalenderberg vessels), all elements of the funerary costume in this area point to the Lusatian culture.<sup>42</sup>

24 MRENKA 2020, 424.

25 ĐURKOVIČ 2009, 70.

26 EIBNER-PERSY 1980, 83.

27 PATEK 1982, 151–161.

28 PATEK 1982, 161–172.

29 ĐURKOVIČ 2009, 80.

30 PATEK 1981a, 95.

31 TORBRÜGGE 1992, 472.

32 PATEK 1981b, 191.

33 NOVINSZKI-GROMA 2018, 123.

34 TORBRÜGGE 1992, 459.

35 PATEK 1991, 287.

36 PATEK 1991, 287.

37 METZNER-NEBELSICK 2017, 352.

38 METZNER-NEBELSICK 2017, 358.

39 PATEK 1976, 3.

40 ĐURKOVIČ 2009, 80.

41 PATEK 1982, 107.

42 NEBELSICK 1992, 401.

Geographically, the wide zone west and north of the Rába River is not part of Transdanubia,<sup>43</sup> and there are only two or three natural, accessible passages in the area of the Burgstall and the vicinity of Sopron.<sup>44</sup>

The region might be closed geographically, but the Kalenderberg culture was not an isolated phenomenon at all.<sup>45</sup> Many signs point towards the emergence of new religious habits, but these are not easy to capture today. The odd, small, red-painted motif on the rim of the cup in focus might be one of them.

Iron-oxide-based paints were used during the Early Iron Age,<sup>46</sup> often on relatively small vessels.<sup>47</sup> Red painting also appears on vessels from the Fertőrákos cemetery;<sup>48</sup> not only on the cup under study but on a pedestalled bowl, too. The crooked triangle motif was widespread in the Eastern Hallstatt culture, frequently appearing on pottery in central Silesia, north Bavaria,<sup>49</sup> and, of course, Sopron.<sup>50</sup>

As we see it today, prehistoric art was full of ideological/religious content; therefore, the presence or lack of a particular motif is always the result of a conscious decision.<sup>51</sup> However, one cannot be absolutely sure whether a motif is present on a site, as the preservation of painted motifs in our climate is extremely contingent. We do not want to go into detail about theories reading Early Iron Age graves as depictions of a one-time world-order<sup>52</sup> where every single find in the grave has a definite meaning;<sup>53</sup> it seems likely that a certain motif recurring in various artefacts made using diverse techniques indicates a semantical connection between them.<sup>54</sup> The appearance of the ‘crooked triangles’ in the archaeological record might mark a shamanistic conception<sup>55</sup> or simply a new horizon in symbolic expression,<sup>56</sup> but that has yet to be proven. Connecting every prehistoric religious phenomenon with shamanism is certainly a way to interpret them, but it seems to be an oversimplification.

As the possible meaning of the crooked triangles has already been discussed in another study,<sup>57</sup> we only discuss it here briefly. The appearance of the Sun Ship motif<sup>58</sup> marks the outset of a new religious ideology,<sup>59</sup> an innovation of the Urnfield culture,<sup>60</sup> which had its heyday at the dawn of

43 PATEK 1982, 108.

44 LANGENECKER 1996, 227.

45 EIBNER-PERSY 1980, 89.

46 EIBNER-PERSY 1980, 53.

47 PATEK 1982, 163.

48 In contrary what É. Đurkovič says (ĐURKOVIČ 2009, 73).

49 BROSEDER 2004, 264.

50 MRENKA 2020, 427.

51 HANSEN 2015, 141.

52 HUTH 2017, 174.

53 LOCHNER 2012, 37.

54 YAKAR 2005, 112.

55 YAKAR 2005, 112; PÁSZTOR 2015, 217.

56 TARPINI 2010, 321.

57 MRENKA 2020.

58 The name might be misleading as the Sun Ship (*Vogelsonnenbarken*) does not have any certain connection with the Egyptian motif with the same name. Their similarity was noticed a long ago by Åke Ohlmarks (OHLMARKS 1963), whose shamanism theories face criticism today (ÅKERLUND 2006, 218). Obviously, observing the sun’s journey was not a privilege exclusive to Egyptians (WIRTH 2010, 508).

59 ILON 2009, 153.

60 KOSSACK 1954, 43.

the Early Iron Age.<sup>61</sup> Accordingly, the Sun Ship motif is linked with the emergence of the Urnfield ruling elite, for whom it was a component of their special cosmological and religious language.<sup>62</sup> The social and geographic distribution of this motif could be outlined, although new results continuously expand the respective areas.<sup>63</sup> Simplifying a complex symbol may make its meaning inscrutable.<sup>64</sup> Many scholars take it for granted that the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age motifs have additional meanings,<sup>65</sup> and the crooked triangle variants are no exception. The triangles with two ‘arms’, a successor of the Sun Ship motif, refer to the ‘man between two animals’ motif,<sup>66</sup> a god-like visual canon in prehistoric times.<sup>67</sup> The ‘man between two animals’ is depicted as a triangle with two arms and can be identified with the crooked triangle. The triangle holds an extra meaning, and the concentration of these symbols at Várhely is peculiar.<sup>68</sup> The crooks are representing the prow and the stern of the Sun Ship,<sup>69</sup> while the triangle gives a solid base for it. This paper does not discuss the exact meaning of the triangle, and the explanation would be exceedingly long—if one can be given at all. I believe such a complex issue should be studied from the perspective of ‘situated semiotics’, and the indirect meaning of a motif or an artefact shall be cognised through associations of the respective culture.<sup>70</sup>

Graves can be a field of communication,<sup>71</sup> but “we should accept that not all actors within a society accept the norms and values of »their« culture in the same way.”<sup>72</sup>

The Early Iron Age cemetery in Fertőrákos is a site of the Eastern Hallstatt culture and the Sopron group.<sup>73</sup> However, its archaeological record includes some characteristics which might indicate that the users of certain artefacts belonged to the elite of Várhely. The crooked triangle motif indicates strong connections with Várhely,<sup>74</sup> even if its painted version is not yet known from there. Decoration on vessel handles is not common amongst the finds from Várhely, the biggest lot of painted handles coming from Tumulus 147 (149/1891),<sup>75</sup> a feature indicating connections with Nové Košariská, where painting was much more common. The basic components of the graves indicate a connection so strong between Sopron-Várhely, Dunajská Lužna (earlier Nové Košariská), and Fischau that the three sites can be interpreted as belonging to a single group,<sup>76</sup> as indicated not only by vessel forms<sup>77</sup> but also the painted decoration of the cup in focus.

61 PATEK 1976, 7.

62 KRISTIANSEN 2014, 85.

63 For example, the first Sun Ship motif in the area of eastern Sweden only came to light in 2009 (WIKELL *et al.* 2011, 181).

64 WIRTH 2010, 508.

65 EIBNER-PERSY 1980, 91; YAKAR 2005, 116; PÁSZTOR 2015, 216.

66 KOSSACK 1954, 58.

67 This topic is rather problematic because many ancient depictions are interpreted as those of certain gods. For example, the ‘man between two animals’ motif refers to both the ‘Lady of Animals’ (EGG 1986, 69) and the famous depiction from Cave Trois-Frères (ELIADE 1995, 22).

68 PATEK 1991, 281.

69 MRENKA 2020, 423.

70 KNAPPETT 2012, 88.

71 AUGSTEIN 2013, 108.

72 GRAMSCH 2015, 345.

73 ĐURKOVIČ 2009, 80.

74 EIBNER-PERSY 1980, Taf. 44.1; MRENKA 2021, 388. 3. ábra.

75 EIBNER-PERSY 1980, Taf. 80–81.

76 STEGMANN-RAJTÁR 2002, 202.

77 STEGMANN-RAJTÁR 2002, 202; ĐURKOVIČ 2009, 80.



The partial Kalenderberg-triad (a shallow pedestalled bowl, a firedog and the two cups, which are certainly not separated parts of a twin vessel) in the grave is remarkable. The triad is usually interpreted as a phenomenon related to high-status women;<sup>78</sup> although nearly a hundred tumulus graves have been excavated at Várhely,<sup>79</sup> only three complete and nine partial sets are known from the site.

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