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The ‘Headless shepherd’: prehistoric burials of the Kiszombor ‘E’ kurgan from southeast Hungary

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Abstract

During the most recent research of the Kiszombor ‘E’ (former farmstead of J. Kiss) site, first excavated in 1930 by Ferenc Móra, it was discovered in 2003 that the Avar and Hungarian Conquest period’s cemeteries under investigation were established on the top of a prehistoric kurgan. Already in 1930, a prehistoric contracted burial was uncovered, and finally, in 2003, the central burial of the kurgan was found – unfortunately in a ‘headless state’ due to the disturbance by a later grave. The present study attempts to report on these two prehistoric burials associated with the construction of the kurgan based on the available data.

Keywords: Kiszombor ‘E’ cemetery, prehistoric kurgans, Yamnaya burials

2.1 Introduction

It is not uncommon for prehistoric burial mounds in the Carpathian Basin to be re-used in later time periods. Sometimes it is revealed during the excavations of Avar and/or Hungarian cemeteries that the primary feature (low mound) concealed by later burials is a prehistoric tumulus. Sometimes it is revealed during the excavations of Avar and/or Hungarian cemeteries that the primary feature (low mound) concealed by later burials is actually a prehistoric tumulus. Good examples of such sites are e.g. Dusnok-Garáb-halom (Lantos 2018), Hajdúszoboszló-Árkoshalom (Nepper 2002: 58–59), and Csanád/Cenad-Bukovapuszta ‘Nagyhalom’ or Bukovapuszta-Tumulus IX ‘Hunca Mare’ (Kisléghi Nagy 1911: 312–313; 2010: 123–126; Gáll & Tánase 2013: 603). This situation applies to some sites, such as Kiszombor ‘C’ cemetery (‘Nagyhalom’) and Kiszombor ‘E’ cemetery, that locate at the outskirts of village Kiszombor.

The research at the Kiszombor ‘E’ cemetery, or also known as the farm of János Kiss¹, is linked to the person of Ferenc Móra, the legendary Hungarian writer, journalist, museum director and archaeologist (Móra 1932: 57–58). Between September 5th and September 19th, 1930, Móra discovered a total of 49 graves on the site situated around and in the area of János Kiss’s former farmhouse. The burials include one prehistoric, one Germanic, 14 undated, 15 Early Avar burials and 17 burials from the Hungarian Conquest period (10th century AD) (Banner 1936: 258; Langó & Türk 2004a: 207; Kürti 2007: 104). Later, Márta G. Vizi reidentified the site during her fieldwork in 1984–1985 (Vizi 2008: 93, 106).

In the frame of a special research programme (‘Application of Historical Genetics in the Reconstruction of Hungarian Ethnogenesis’), led by the Archaeological Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Science (Budapest) and the Genetics Institute of the Centre for Biological Research (Szeged), P. Langó and A. Türk carried out a verification excavation at the site between April 3rd and May 20th, 2003. The primary aim of their excavation at the Kiszombor ‘E’ site was to archaeologically re-evaluate the burials dated to the Hungarian

¹ Site ID: 36984, <https://archeodatabase.hnm.hu/hu/node/55086>. The site was also mentioned as ‘on the road to Óbéba, on the land of András Kiss’, since, according to the former Habsburg cadastral map (from 1876), András Kiss Jr. was the owner of the farm and the land at the end of the 19th century.

Conquest period excavated earlier by Ferenc Móra through completing the excavation of the cemetery, combined with the objective to collect aDNA samples from the unearthed graves.

During their excavation 122 features were excavated over an area of 2032 m². This recent research has resulted in the identification of another prehistoric grave, two Germanic ones, altogether (with those already unearthed by Móra) 20 graves from the Hungarian Conquest period (10th century AD), of which 13 were horse burials, and finally 51 Avar burials (Langó & Türk 2004a: 207–209; 2004b).

Apart from the two prehistoric burials mentioned above, no other prehistoric phenomena have come to light (Langó & Türk 2004a; 2004b). Obviously, the site is known mainly for its cemetery dating to the Age of the Hungarian Conquest (especially given the surprisingly high proportion of the horse burials!), but our present study deals with the two prehistoric burials excavated in 2003 and 1930.

2.2 Geographical setting: the landscape

The site Kiszombor ‘E’ is located in the southwestern outskirts of Kiszombor. The village of Kiszombor is geographically situated in the Lower Tisza region, on the southern part of the Great Hungarian Plain, directly on the left (southern) bank of the Maros River, within the territory of so-called Marosszög which extends further south to the Aranka River (Fig. 1:1). The northern part

◀ Figure 1. 1 – Kiszombor on the hydrological map of the Carpathian Basin before the large-scale river regulation and drainage works. Source: original map by ‘A Magyar Királyi Földművelésügyi Minisztérium Vízügyi Intézete’ in 1938 © Magyar Bányászati és Földtani Szolgálat; 2– Kurgans in the vicinity of Kiszombor on the map of the 1st Habsburg military survey. Source: cutout from the 1st Habsburg military survey: Temesi Bánság/Banat of Timis [B IX a 577] (1763–1787) © Arcanum Adatbázis Kft.

of the Marosszög was a marshy area in riverine contact with the Tisza (Kókai 2021: 30–33, 52–53, Figs. 9–10). The surveyed area is a low-relief alluvial plain between 78–85 m above the Baltic Sea level in absolute elevation (Kókai 2008: 19–20). The Tisza and Maros formed this landscape leaving ancient riverbeds and cutting loess islands during their meanderings, creating smaller loess islands south of the Maros (Deák 2008: 334–336; Kókai 2008: 17). In the case of Kiszombor this loess island is the ‘loess terrace island of Kiszombor-Porgány’, which is a highly suitable area for human habitation cut off by ancient Tisza and ancient Maros Rivers. Before the drainage works, it was bordered by the Maros River to the north, the Stara Torina Swamp (extensive marshland in the Tisza floodplain) to the west and the Porgány Brook (a former Maros riverbed) to the east.

The landscape use of the northern part of the Marosszög – and thus also the area surrounding the site – was determined by the natural hydrological conditions before the beginning of integrated environmental transformation, river regulation and drainage works (from the 1840s). According to the historical maps (e.g. the 1st Habsburg Military survey), three quarters of the Marosszög were covered by water for at least part of the year (mainly in spring and autumn), with the exception of small islands and flat ridges formed by loess or coastal dunes (Kókai 2021: 30, 51, 65, 74, 91) (Fig. 1:2).

The environment of the study area is dominated by hydromorphic soils, which, together with the high groundwater level, may not have provided the most ideal conditions for farming, leaving the elevated areas covered with chernozem-type soils as the most suitable for cultivation (Kókai 2008: 25–27; 2021: 44–47).

In the northern part of the Marosszög, prehistoric communities may have practised complex and differentiated floodplain management based on the special natural-environmental conditions, similar to medieval-Early Modern conditions, in which large-scale animal husbandry (mainly cattle grazing) may have played a significant role. But the importance of farming in flood-free fertile areas, the role of floodplain gallery forests (wood harvesting, hunting) and the use of extensive marshes and wetlands (fishing) in the subsistence

strategy should also be mentioned (Sümegei et al. 2012; Kókai 2021: 68–80, Figs. 17–18).

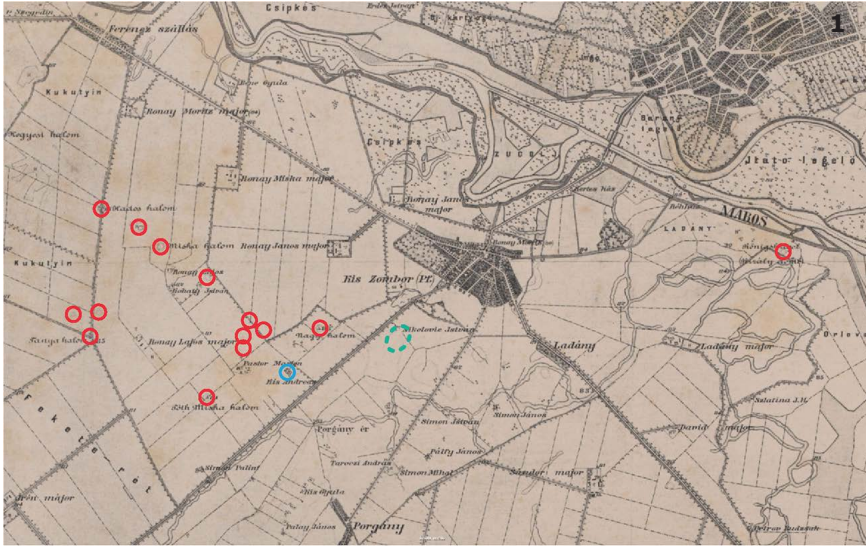
Biogeographically the Marosszög belongs to the Pannonian forest-steppe zone which is characterized by long and severe summer droughts, floodplain/gallery forests and swamps alternated with island-like loess-steppe patches and small patches of saline or salt-affected grasslands. This mosaic is well reflected in the diverse flora (Kókai 2008: 27; 2021: 37–39; Sümegei et al. 2012). This former steppe environment is still attested by some remnants of loess grassland vegetation preserved on the kurgans Malvin and Tóth Miska-halom (Local Agenda 21 Programme of Kiszombor 2012: 17).

2.3 Description of the burials

2.3.1 Grave 38 (1930)

The first and only prehistoric burial excavated in 1930 by Móra was Grave 38. Unfortunately, as there are no drawings or photos of this burial left, we can only rely on the contemporary description: ‘Round grave, contracted skeleton, probably prehistoric. Right leg slightly raised, left arm extended, right arm raised in front of the mouth. A thick piece of deer antler was placed to the foot.’ As the skull was completely crushed (into small pieces) by the earth, the excavator noted: ‘Big bones, cranial bone is twice as thick as usual.’

Length of the skeleton: 167 vs 110 cm (measured length of skeleton vs. the length in grave pit in contracted position). Relative depth of the grave pit: 117 cm. Based on the hand-drawn overall map, Grave 38 was found on the southeast side of the farmhouse and was not superposed by later burials (Fig. 2:2). Since the anthropological material of most of the burials from later periods was not collected by Móra, this burial was probably not collected either.



○ Kurgans ○ The kurgan under study ○ Baden settlement

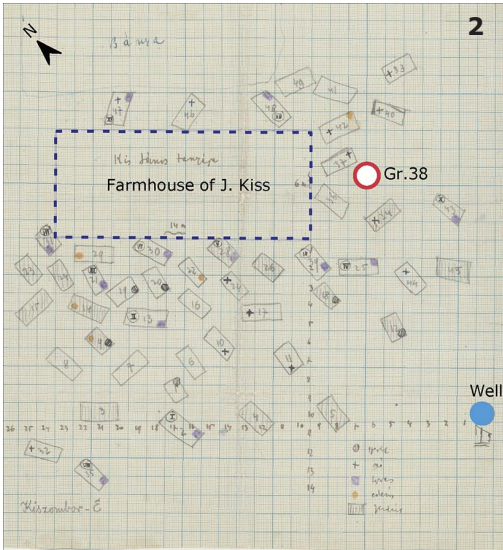


Figure 2. Kurgans. 1 – The kurgan from J. Kiss’s farmstead and the only localised Baden settlement in the vicinity of Kiszombor on the map of the 3rd Habsburg military survey. Source: cutout from the 3rd Habsburg military survey: Habsburg Empire (1869–1887) © Arcanum Adatbázis Kft.; 2 – Overall plan of F. Móra’s excavations at the site with the Grave 38 from 1930. Source: cutout from the original handmade map by Ferenc Móra (1930) © Archaeological archive of the Móra Ferenc Museum, Szeged (original document amended by J. Dani).

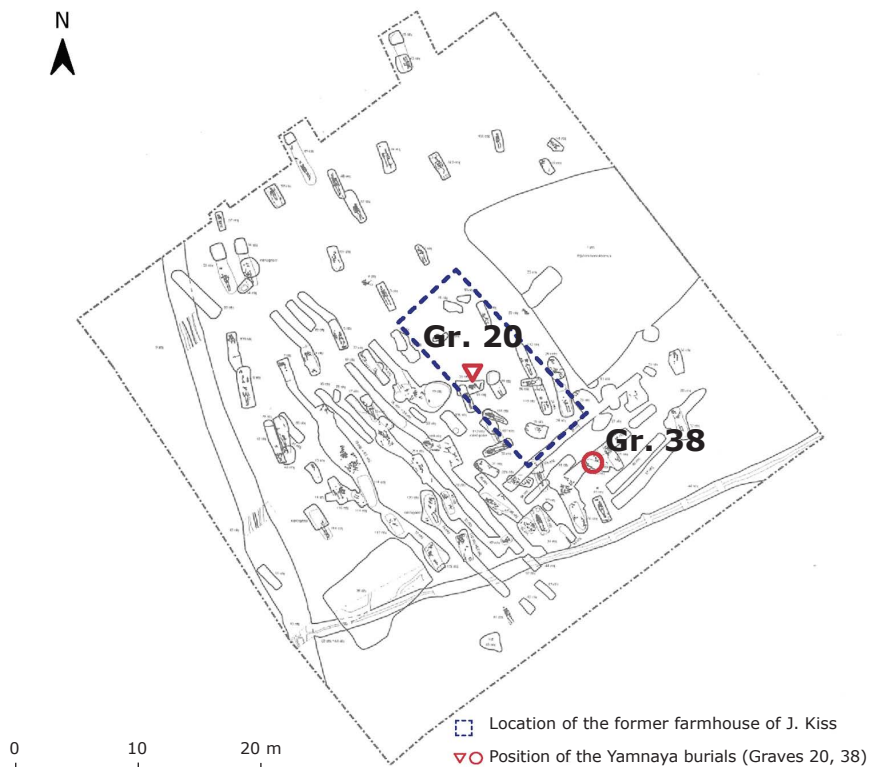


Figure 3. Overall plan of the most recent (2003) excavations in Kiszombor 'E' cemetery with the Grave 20 and possible location of the Grave 38. Map Z. Viemann after the overall map of the 2003 excavations in Kiszombor 'E' site by P. Langó & A. Türk (original document amended by J. Dani).

2.3.2 Grave 20 (2003)

A rectangular (90 × 150 cm in size) dark patch of humic infill was observed in the southern half of the section next to Feature 19. The original length of the grave pit cannot be reconstructed, due to later disturbances (Fig. 4:1–2).

The deceased was lying in supine position, oriented W–E (with head to the west). The legs were originally drawn up at the knees; as a result of the decomposition, both tilted to the right. Both arms were bent, forearms crossed over the pelvis. After the excavation, clearly visible traces of red ochre paint were observed on the bones. At the same time traces of white organic material were also observed, particularly strong on the femur and the pelvic bone. These observed traces may have come from a textile or leather clothing (trousers) or perhaps from a blanket or a shroud. Analogues to similar organic imprints are known e.g. in the case of Derékegyház-Ibolyásdomb, Szentes-Besenyőhalom, Sárrétudvari-Őrhalom Grave 4 and 8, Hajdúnánás-Tedej-Lyukashalom, Balmazújváros-Kettőshalom etc. (Dani & Horváth 2012: 25, 27–28, 50–51, 70–71). No grave goods were found (Fig. 4:1–3). The grave was superposed by Feature 59, an N–S oriented Avar niche-grave. This disturbance can explain the absence of the skull, although in the northern (niche) part of the Avar gravel pit a mandible – probably belonging to Grave 20 – was found in secondary position (Fig. 4:2).

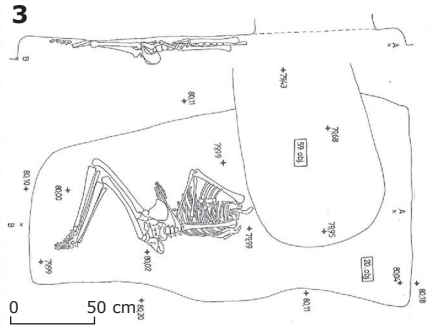
Based on a comparison of the 1930 and 2003 overall maps, it appears that Grave 20 was found under the former farmhouse, roughly in the middle of the low mound (Fig. 3).

2.4 Physical anthropological description of the Grave 20

The commingled skeletal remains of two people were found in the packaging of the Grave 20 from the Kiszombor ‘E’ site (however, several bones from the material of Features 18 and 19 were intermixed with them and presumably, the mixing may have taken place during the primary anthropological examination and the aDNA sampling). Despite the high degree of mixing, the individuals were separated to some extent. However, the intra-individual



Figure 4. Photos and drawings of the Grave 20, the 'Headless shepherd' of Kiszombor 'E' site. Illustration A. Türk, sources: digital photos of the Grave 20 from Kiszombor 'E' cemetery by P. Langó (1–2), digitalised drawing of the Grave 20 from Kiszombor 'E' cemetery by A. Türk (3).



association of separated bones is uncertain, particularly with those that are not directly attached to each other.

Male, adult (35–39 years old) – very incomplete skeleton. If the mandible from Grave 59 belongs to the indicated individual, it is possible that his age will change slightly. Bones currently assigned to the individual: Left scapula: well preserved with strong dark brown colour; Clavicles: well preserved with medium dark or light brownish/yellowish colour, the sternal ends are fused (age indicator); Ribs: generally well-preserved with light to medium brown colour; Sternum: missing post-mortem; Vertebrae: four cervical, 12 thoracic, four lumbar (4th lumbar is missing) with all dark brown colour; Sacrum: well-preserved, the first transversal line (between the first and second sacral segment is half open (an indicator of age), the colour of the sacrum is dark

brown; Right humerus: well-preserved with light brownish-yellow colour, rather long (maximum length: Martin No 1: 369 mm), slight enthesopathic changes on the deltoid tuberosity; Right ulna: fragmented, the distal epiphysis is post-mortem damaged and the colour of the bone is yellowish; Right radius: well-preserved (Martin No 1: 274 mm), yellowish; Right pelvic bone: fragmented, the facies auricularis is post-mortem damaged, slight osteophyte formation on the edge of the acetabulum, however, there is no alteration on the femoral head (the pathological alterations in this joint did not likely cause problems or severe pain in the individual's life); Right femur: well-preserved, yellow in colour (Martin No: 485 mm), linea aspera is pronounced; Left tibia: very fragmentary, proximal epiphysis severely damaged post-mortem, the bone colour is yellowish; Fibulae: the fibulae have the same length (Martin No 1: 392 mm), traces of mild osteochondritis is observable on the joint surface of distal epiphysis, the bone colour is dark brown; Calcanei, tali and metatarsal bones: slight enthesopathic traces on the calcaneus (on the calcaneal tuberosity).

The estimated height based on the measurements of the long bones (radius and femur) is 178 cm (177 cm based on the maximal length of the fibula) which differs considerably from the estimated height based on the maximum length of the humerus (189 cm). It is possible that the humerus does not belong to the investigated individual.

In summary, the skeleton of Grave 20 (male, around 35–39 years old) is very incomplete. The skull and most of the long bones of the left side were lost post-mortem. The femur and radius were suitable for estimating the height (178 cm), the ulna and the tibia are preserved in fragments. The signs of enthesopathy are not pronounced, they reflect a slight strain on the muscles of the indicated area. No pathological change can be observed on the identified bones, the osteophyte formation around the acetabulum only indicates mild osteoarthritis.

2.5 Discussion

Based on the distinctive W–E orientation, the specific burial rite of Grave 20 and its stratigraphical relationship to Grave 59, it was already clearly recognizable during the excavation that this grave could not be either an Avar or a 10th century Hungarian burial. This burial was first interpreted as a ‘Copper Age burial’ by T. Marton (Langó & Türk 2004a: 208). However, the W–E orientation (head to the west), the specific positioning of the body in the grave pit (supine position, drawn up legs) and other elements of burial ritual (as intense use of red ochre, white remains of organic material on the bones) make it clear that Grave 20 relates to the Yamnaya community. The deceased was originally buried under an earthen mound (so-called kurgan), but nowadays this burial mound was eroded and worn down, so hardly recognizable. Seeing beyond this particular kurgan, the Kiszombor ‘E’ was a part of a system, a prehistoric kurgan field located on the Kiszombor-Porgány loess island.

Due to the specific hydrographical conditions of the Marosszög, which includes also the Kiszombor-Porgány loess island, the location of the kurgans on it practically outlines the physical framework of prehistoric landscape use. The location of prehistoric tumuli always follows the edges of marshy areas and the ridges following the watercourses (e.g. the Porgány Brook), or in some cases (in the northwestern part of Kiszombor Municipality) these are found on flood-free islands (Fig. 1:2).

The topography of the Late Copper Age (LCA) sites is crucial for understanding the spatial distribution of the (at least partially) contemporaneous kurgans, the interactions between the local LCA farmers and the kurgan-builder Yamnaya herders (Dani 2020: 7–8).

Unfortunately – mainly due to lack of research – little information is available on the local LCA population: only two sites related to the Baden culture are known from the outskirts of Kiszombor (Fischl & Kürti 2008: 48). And only one of these can be localised: Kiszombor-Új Élet TSz 50. telep, or Site Nr. 29, in the site register of Kiszombor compiled by Vizi (2008: 96; see Fig. 2:1). Therefore, the full system of LCA settlements vs. Yamnaya kurgans

in this micro-region is currently poorly visible and can only be analysed to a limited extent.

This site register mentions seven kurgan sites (Vizi 2008), while K. Fischl, referring to the 2002 survey of J. Szatmári and C. Szalontai, lists nine prehistoric kurgans in her summary regarding the archaeology of the village (Fischl & Kürti 2008: 48). On the other hand, the Local Agenda 21 programme document of Kiszombor writes about 13 mounds on the outskirts of the village (Local Agenda 21 Programme of Kiszombor 2012: 17) while Bede's most recent detailed survey, including archival documents and historical cartographic material, lists 11 kurgans from the 6581 ha administrative area of Kiszombor (Bede 2014: 125, 147, Appendix 5, 7; 2016: 59–64, Appendix Table 129; see Fig. 2:1).²

2.6 Conclusions

The location of the only well-identified Late Copper Age settlement suggests that a similar topographical situation can be observed as on other areas of the Great Hungarian Plain where the local farming population and the nomadic Yamnaya community meet: the Baden settlements are more likely to be found in the cultivated areas, but the pastures (including periodically/partially flooded areas) suitable for livestock were occupied by the newcomers from Eastern Europe (Dani 2020: 4–8, Figs. 9–10; Dani & Kulcsár 2021: 344–348, Figs. 10–11).

The characteristic burial rite (W–E orientation, supine position, legs drawn up at the knees, sprinkling with red ochre, presence of white organic remains, the robust, tall build of the deceased) clearly identifies the Grave 20 (2003) as a Yamnaya burial. Moreover, the position of the burial suggests that it could be the main or central burial of the kurgan (Fig. 3).

At the same time, this interpretation made it clear that this site on a low elevation or hill secondary used by the Avars and the Hungarians was origi-

² Á. Bede's list of kurgan does not include the mound we are discussing in the present study.

nally a prehistoric kurgan erected by a Yamnaya community that was eroded over the millennia.

However, in the absence of a more detailed description and/or photo and drawing documentation, the ‘Prehistoric contracted burial found in a round pit’ (Grave 38 from 1930) cannot be interpreted with 100% certainty as Yamnaya. It must be noted though that the skeletal robustness observed by the excavating archaeologist is characteristic of people originating from Eastern Europe during the second half of the 4th millennium BC and the first half of the 3rd millennium BC. If it was a Yamnaya, its location suggests that it could be a secondary burial, but we cannot rule out the possibility that it was a pre-Yamnaya burial either. Furthermore, the deer antler placed at the foot of the deceased cannot be considered as a usual Yamnaya grave good.

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