

## AVAR-AGE HORSE HARNESS FITTING IN SHAPE OF BOAR HEAD FROM BALATONALMÁDI-FELSŐHEGY

### New Parallels and Notes in Connection with Preliminary Research of the Avar-age Burial Ground

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The aim of the paper is to draw attention to a newly discovered locality Balatonalmádi-Felsőhegy, where in winter 2019 was found some Late Avar finds. One of them was a fitting in shape of boar head, which with other new finds of this type from Hungary is analysed and put in our earlier published typology. The ‘boar’ on horse harness had its meaning in Late Avar society or in military hierarchy, but its precise content is uncertain.

Keywords: Carpathian Basin, Early Middle Ages, Late Avar Period, horse harness.

In 2017, the Laczkó Dezső Museum launched a community archaeology program, which includes volunteer researchers contracted with the museum to participate in metal detector field surveys together with museum professionals. As a result, between 2017 and 2021, we were able to identify several new sites. In many cases, previously known sites were found to be much larger and, often, covering more historic eras than previously thought. Metal detectorists with the appropriate knowledge and experience also have the opportunity to conduct independent research within the program with special permission.

In possession of such a permit, in the winter of 2019, one of the most active members of our team, Zsolt Kaszás, discovered Avar finds on the outskirts of Balatonalmádi-Felsőhegy (Fig. 1). Based on the first few pieces, the archaeological assemblage of a cemetery was suspected, which led to field surveys with the volunteers under the direction of archaeologists Zsombor Gyórfy-Villám and Tamás Péterváry. With the work of more than thirty civilians and five archaeologists, the four days of field research provided more than three hundred objects that have been added to the museum’s collection. Summarizing the finds, we can state that a significant group of artefacts from the destroyed part of the Avar period cemetery was collected from the surface from a depth

of 5–30 cm. Based on the metal finds, we may say that the cemetery was associated with a community living there for a longer period, who used it from the end of the Early Avar Age to the very end of the Late Avar Age. The area contained also a small number of artefacts from the Roman period and modern metal material. The evaluation of the finds will be carried out by Ágota Perémi and will be published in full after verifying excavations.

The object that we would like to present in this short contribution is a fitting shaped like a wild boar’s head (Fig. 2: 1).<sup>1</sup> Together with several other finds, this can also be considered a parallel to the Komárno-Lodenica (Komárom-Hajógyár) circle, since its dating and style link it with this broad group of finds. Due to the environmental effects, a large specimen that used to be a part of a horse harness was in significantly worse condition than other objects. The condition of the bronze is critical, so the restoration will provide only an approximate picture. What we know, however, is that the fitting was gilded – remains of gold could still be discovered in the hollows of its patterned surface. Although its plastic details can only be partially examined, corroded remains of plant fibres can be observed on it, which are presumably remnants of the bark or bast layer lining the inner side of the strap.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> We intentionally do not use the phrase ‘phalera’ from a terminological point of view, because we use it only to distinguish big round ornaments on horse harnesses.

<sup>2</sup> The photo of the finding does not show its final state after the restoration. The main reason for that is that unlike other findings from the locality this one was in a bad condition and the restoration also requires other interventions. Moreover, it is questionable what will be saved from the traces on the fitting (gilding and mentioned plant fibres).



Fig. 1. Balatonalmádi-Felsőhegy. Archaeological site during field survey.

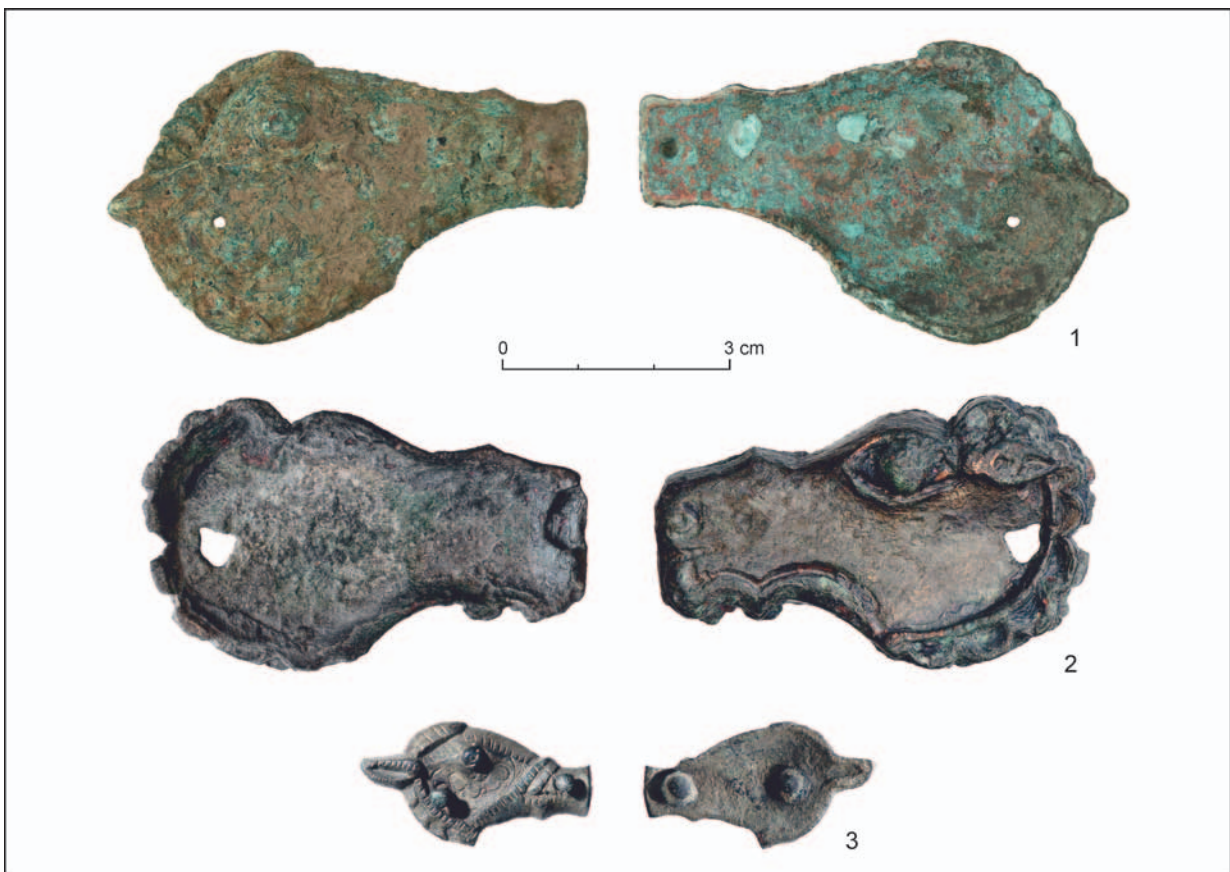


Fig. 2. Boar head fittings. 1 – Balatonalmádi-Felsőhegy; 2 – Kunpeszér-Tűzoktelek; 3 – Orgovány-Ürögi-tanya.

The big horse harness fitting resembling a boar head (67 × 39 mm) that got recovered in Balatonalmádi as a stray find, despite the limits of analysability, most likely belongs to A type big fittings, without spherical ornaments on the mouth. This stray find is the only one among type A fittings showing marks of gilding (Fig. 3; for the description of the types, summary and analysis see Csuthy 2019).

The boar head fitting from Balatonalmádi is not the only recently found horse harness fitting of this type (depicting the head of an animal). At the end of April 2020 in Vinkovci-Groblje (Croatia) excavations recovered three slightly different sized boar head fittings in one line on each side of the horse skull (altogether six pieces, approx. 30–32 × 18–20 mm, and 38–40 × 24–25 mm) in a rider's grave. The assemblage contained middle-sized and small fittings and all of them are precise parallels of the exemplars from Radvaň nad Dunajom-Žitava and Museum in Komárno, based on which this can be categorized as types a) and I. Importantly, it indicates that the fittings were well-documented in situ, which – based on the literature – is quite exceptional. There have been plate phaleras with cast rosettes and additional hemispherical ornaments on the horse skull. The findings are under restoration.<sup>3</sup> This finding asserts the presumption that boar head fittings may have important connotations on horse harnesses of the social group of Late Avar horsemen warriors, but its precise meaning remains unknown.

Earlier Croatian parallels, only partially known, were also published in an exhibition catalogue. One gilded bronze fitting stray find from Sotin is not very large (24 × 14 mm) but can be categorized as middle-sized a) type (cf. Csuthy 2018, 8; Dugonjić/Rapan Papeša 2019, 90),<sup>4</sup> and another bronze fitting (57 × 30 mm) has been recovered near Sisak from the Kupa river (Filipec 2003). Its elongated form makes it similar to middle-sized fittings. However, based on its size, it can be categorized as a big fitting, specifically as type A, comparable to fittings without round ornaments on the mouth.<sup>5</sup>

Another big fitting has been recovered in 2019 in Kunpeszér-Túzoktelek as a stray find (Fig. 2: 2). This fitting shows the closest resemblance

to big type D fittings (59 × 35 mm), which do not show a boar head, since the depiction of tusks is also missing. This type is often characterized as horsehead. Because of that, it has no place among boar head fittings. However, because of the resemblance of animal head shaped fittings, it still deserves mentioning here. The other two known parallels of this find are richly decorated with plant motifs on a punched background, which is missing on the piece from Kunpeszér. A middle-sized fitting with plant motifs has been also recovered in 2020 in Orgovány-Űrögi-tanya (Fig. 2: 3). It is comparable to type a), but because we do not know decorated specimens of this type, maybe this one is akin to the single representatives of type b), the Komárno-Lodenica finds. The cuttings also indicate this, though it slightly differs in design and no traces of gilding has been found. It is special in the detailed shaping of the eye, which distinguishes it among the boar head fittings.<sup>6</sup>

Since our last summary Naďa Profantová published new boar head finds from the Czech Republic, including another small-sized fitting from Podbořany-Dolánky (Rubín) and two different (probably) small fittings from Senohraby. Most likely, they belong to type I, but one of them is missing the depiction of a tusk. The typological division of small fittings might need further refining. Profantová in her analysis proposes that these small fittings might have been also produced locally (Profantová 2020, 30, 31). Additionally, an image of a small fitting from Břeclav-Lány (type II) has been also published, which draws attention to the tiny differences between the small fittings (position of the ear, the number of spheres imitating the upper mane etc.). The authors characterized it on the spot as *Altmetall* intended to be recycled, but the details of the finding are not known (Eichert/Macháček/Brundtke 2020, 55, fig. 2; see also Macháček et al. 2021, 40, fig. 9: 7, 8; 33; 48).<sup>7</sup>

However, in most cases, it is impossible to determine even the relative chronology of the finds. Consequently, we do not attempt to define the dating frontiers or differences between the subtypes of boar head fittings of horse harnesses. We just repeat that based on the datable finds, the group

<sup>3</sup> We are grateful for the information provided by the courtesy of Anita Rapan Papeša.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to the generous assistance of Anita Rapan Papeša these were already known, although were not included in the last summary (2019).

<sup>5</sup> The find from Sisak is in the collection of the Sisak City Museum.

<sup>6</sup> Kecskeméti Katona József Múzeum, inv. no. 2021.8.1. (Kunpeszér), 2021.3.1. (Orgovány). This way we truthfully thank to director Szabolcs Rosta and to Bernadett Kovacsóczy and István Pánya for bringing this to our attention, for giving us information about them and for agreeing to publicize the unpublicised finds.

<sup>7</sup> The second published find is not included in this analyse. Also, we have new information about small boar head fitting from Vrbová nad Váhom (Slovakia).

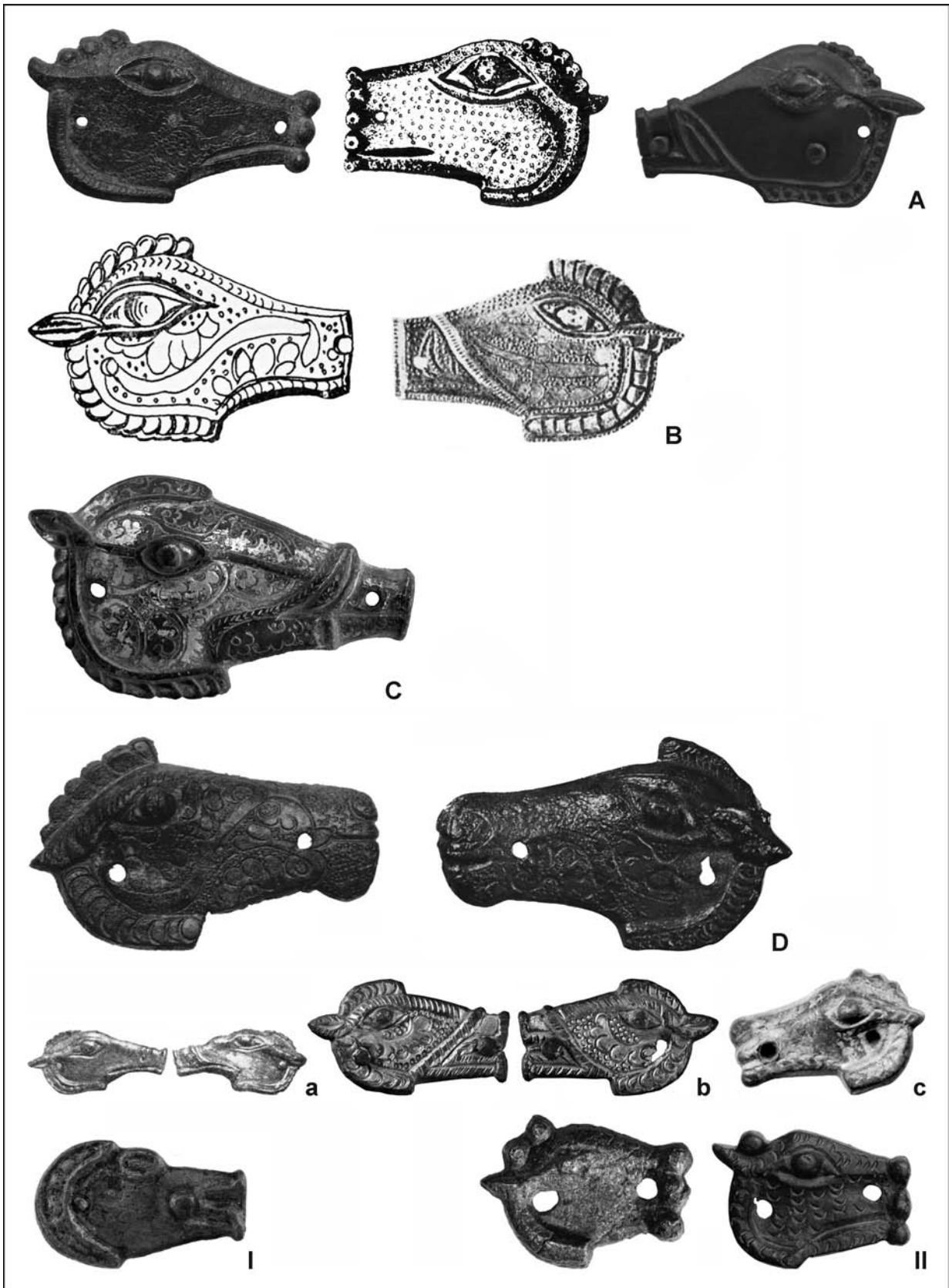


Fig. 3. Typological table of the head fittings. A–D – large fittings; a–c – middle size fittings; I, II – small fittings. A – Mezőhegyes, Kaposvár, Baja; B – Čelarevo; C – Vysoká Pec-Podhůří; D – Bócs, Mikulčice; a – Békés; b – Komárno IX; c – Nepřevázka; I – Komárno museum; II – Břeclav, Solt. Without scale. Credits: see catalogue.

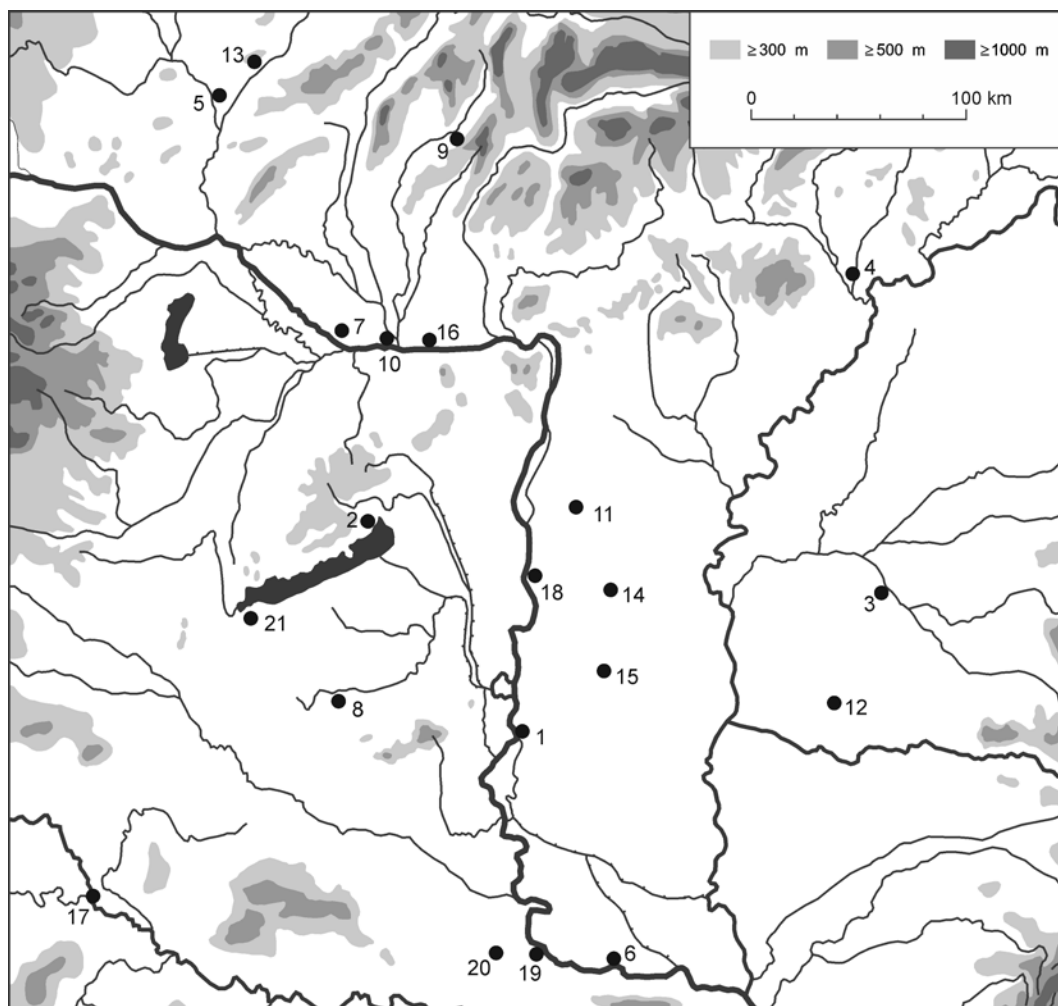


Fig. 4. Map of sites with boar head fittings from horse harness: 1 – Baja-Lóckerti szőlők; 2 – Balatonalmádi-Felsőhegy; 3 – Békés-Vizesbánom; 4 – Bócs-Sárgaföldes part; 5 – Břeclav-Lány; 6 – Čelarevo-Čipska suma, ciglana; 7 – Holiare-Halomdomb; 8 – Kaposvár-Toponár; 9 – Klátova Nová Ves; 10 – Komárno-IX Lodenica; 11 – Kunpeszér-Tűzoktelek; 12 – Mezőhegyes, site 5; 13 – Mikulčice; 14 – Orgovány-Űrögi-tanya; 15 – Pirtó (Kiskunhalas); 16 – Radvaň nad Dunajom-Zitava; 17 – Sisak-Kupa; 18 – Solt-Révbér; 19 – Sotin; 20 – Vinkovci-Groblje; 21 – Vörs-Papkert B.

of boar head (and horse head) fittings of horse harnesses can be dated to the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> c. and the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> c. It can be put in phase SPA III–IV in Jozef Zábajník's relative chronological system (Zábajník 1991, 248). Recently, however, the upper frontier of the Avar Khaganate is being shifted upwards by authors in related fields (cf. Szentpéteri 2020, 565; also see Chorvátová 2018; Robak 2017). Consequently, relative chronological dating might have a comparative advantage over its absolute counterpart.

The spread based on the new finds is more intense between the Danube-Tisza, on the NE shore of Balaton and the lower section of the Danube, mainly the Vuka influx (Fig. 4; cf. Csuthy 2019, 337). The last one, if also correlates in dating, may be

connected to the late Avar elite group of Čelarevo-Bačka Palanka-Donji Petrovci (cf. Szenthe/Gáll 2021, 13, fig. 10; The authors' concepts of the elites also do not exclude that; cf. Szentpéteri 2020, 565, tab. 12). The find from Sisak recovered at an undisputable strategic point (confluence of Sava and Kulpa) cannot be interpreted as confirming the Avar presence. However, as we previously mentioned, numerous Bohemian and some Moravian finds, resp. the fragmentary piece from Klátova Nová Ves is striking. If we were to interpret the phenomena with historical constructions, we could say this could refer to their time of depositing or creating, but probably it was intended to be used as raw material or for recycling (cf. Pieta/Robak 2019, 448; Profantová 2020, 31; Profantová et al. 2020, 230 see the dating of

the piece from Tismice; *Robak/Pieta 2016*, 132, 133). In some Bohemian localities, Profantová assumes local copies, for example, the horse harness fitting from Senohraby, respectively based on the horse harness fittings she assumes also the presence of mounted warriors (riders; *Profantová 2020*, 31; *Profantová et al. 2020*, 229, 230).<sup>8</sup> The number of the localities even with new finds (including finds from unknown locations) is split equally within the Carpathian basin and outside of it (cf. *Csuthy 2019*, 337; *Profantová et al. 2020*, 230). There is also a new find from the eastern Balkan, which is not included in this analysis (cf. *Türk et al. 2021*, 132, 133, pl. 60: 5; inv. no. Б-1516; 2.9 × 1.5 cm).

Considering the iconography, though figural depiction probably was on the yellow-painted ceramics from the Carpathian Basin, we cannot state yet with certainty that boar heads were portrayed (cf. *Bognár 2016*, 23, 26, note 9; *Csuthy 2019*, 333–335; another objection with other parallels of silks depicting boar heads: *Overlaet 2018*, 146, 147, fig. 7) in the medallions.<sup>9</sup> The presumed mediator materials are also not known to us (cf. *Szenthe 2020*, note 386). The background content of the depictions on ceramics was though questioned (*Csuthy 2016*, 182; *Szenthe 2020*, 71), the application on horse harness refers certainly to some relevant meaning. The question of what the boar represented in the late Avar community or military hierarchy is unanswered because we cannot lean on written sources about the mythology of the Avar society. Although we know numerous domains of interpretation from different times outside of the Carpathian basin from Scandinavian mythology (cf. *Kovárová 2011*; *Oxley 2019*) to depictions of boars of some empires of the steppe, respectively far east (afterlife; *Dastan/Kazemi 2016* with other iconographical parallels). However, these parallels cannot be yet more than comparable base points for some theoretical concepts (*Csuthy 2019*, note 22; *Szenthe 2020*, 71).

Last but not least, we want to say special thanks to Ágota Perémi, József Szentpéteri and all those who drew our attention to the new finds and shared the information with us.

## CATALOGUE

(site, literature; amount × type)

1. Baja-Lőkerti szőlők (HU), unpublished; 1 × A; 1 × a.
2. Balatonalmádi-Felsőhegy (HU), unpublished (Fig. 1: 1); 1 × A.
3. Beroun-Hostim (CZ), *Profantová 2015b*; 2020; 1 × II.
4. Békés-Vizesbánom (HU), *Garam 1981*; 2 × A; 7 × a.
5. Bócs-Sárgaföldes part (HU), *Garam 1981*; 1 × D.
6. Břeclav-Lány (CZ), *Eichert/Macháček/Brundtke 2020*; 1 × II.
7. Čelarevo-Čipska suma, ciglana (RS), *Bunardžić 1985*; 2 × B (gr. 5) + 2 × B (gr. 247).
8. Holiare-Halomdomb (SK), *Čilinská 1961*; *Točík 1968*; 1 × C; 3 × II (gr. 778).
9. Kaposvár-Toponár (HU), *Bárdos 1978*; 1 × A; 5 × II (gr. B–14).
10. Klátova Nová Ves (SK), *Robak/Pieta 2016*; 1 × A.
11. Komárno-IX Lodenica (SK), *Trugly 1987*; 2008; 4 × b (gr. 33).
12. Komárno, múzeum (SK), *Trugly 1987*; 2008; 2 × I.
13. Kunpeszér-Túzoktelek (HU), unpublished (Fig. 2: 2); 1 × D.
14. Mezőhegyes 5. lh. (HU), *Csuthy 2018*; *Hergott 2021*; 1 × A; 1 × II.
15. Mikulčice (CZ), *Profantová 1992*; unpublished; 1 × D (gr. 821) + 1 × a + 1 × II.
16. Nepřevázka-Chloumek-Hrádek (CZ), *Profantová/Krásný 2016*; 1 × c.
17. Nová Ves I (CZ), *Profantová 2015b*; 2020; 1 × a + 1 × II.
18. Orgovány-Űrögi-tanya (HU), unpublished (Fig. 2: 3); 1 × b(?).
19. Pirtó, 'Kiskunhalas' (HU), *Hampel 1905*; 1 × a.
20. Podbořany-Dolánky-Kaštice, Rubín (CZ), *Profantová 1992*; 2020; 1 × a + 1 × I.
21. Praha-Šárka (CZ), unpublished; (?).
22. Radvaň nad Dunajom-Žitava (SK), *Budinský-Krička 1956*; 1 × I (gr. XLIII).
23. Semčice (CZ), unpublished; 1 × I/II(?).
24. Senohraby (CZ), *Profantová 2020*; 1 × I + 1 × I.
25. Sisak-Kupa (HR), *Filipec 2003*; 1 × A.
26. Solt-Révbér (HU), unpublished (*Csuthy 2019*); 1 × II.
27. Sotin (HR), *Dugonjić/Rapan Papeša 2019*; 1 × a.
28. Tismice (CZ), *Profantová 2015b*; 2019; 1 × I(?).
29. Vinkovci-Groblje (HR), unpublished; 2 × a; 4 × I(?).
30. Vitice-Lipany (CZ), *Profantová/Krásný 2016*; 1 × C.
31. Vörs-Papkert B (HU), *Szentpéteri 2016*; 1 × II (gr. 371).
32. Vysoká Pec-Podhůří (CZ), *Profantová 2015a*; 2020; 1 × C.
33. Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, *Garam 1981*; 1 × a.
34. Dobrič (BG), *Fiedler 2008*; 1 × II; 1 × I/II.
35. Vraca (BG), *Fiedler 2008*; 1 × I.
36. Coll. Deutschland (Hermann-Historica), unpublished (*Csuthy 2019*); 1 × a.
37. Coll. Stara Bulgaria, *Türk et al. 2021*; 1 × c(?).

<sup>8</sup> Noteworthy, N. Profantová is using her own typology for fittings in the shape of an animal head, including the gryphon head fittings and intends to publish it in near future.

<sup>9</sup> For using 'medallions' on metal dishes in the Carpathian basin two parallels can be mentioned: the Nagyszentmiklós treasure and the fragment from Bratislava castle (die for pressing), which can have also an artistic connection to plate no. 20 from Nagyszentmiklós. Of course, the designs of these medallions are different and the depictions are much more complex than known paintings on ceramics.

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