

DOI: 10.53737/2713-2021.2024.17.22.025

Sz. Rosta, Gy. Gulyás, Zs. Gallina, I. Pánya, A. Türk

**SIGNIFICANT RESULTS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH THE PAST 30 YEARS  
ON THE MONGOL INVASION (1241—42) IN MEDIEVAL HUNGARIAN KINGDOM\***

The article presents the latest results of archaeological research into the events of the Mongol invasion against the Kingdom of Hungary in the Carpathian Basin in 1241—42. Despite the wealth of written sources, archaeology could not provide any serious evidence of the events of the Mongol invasion in Hungary for a long time. However, for a long time there was no clear and reliable evidence of massacres and widespread destruction, which could be judged from the descriptions of contemporaries, often of an apocalyptic nature. The archaeology of the invasion period, the youngest field of Hungarian archaeology to become an independent discipline, is today one of the most dynamically developing fields. The full development of the archaeology of the Mongol invasion period is connected with the appearance of new sites as a result of recent targeted and planned research.

**Key words:** archaeology, Hungary, Mongol invasion, Middle Ages, treasures, eastern-type weapons, defence ditch system, geophysical methods.

**About the authors:** Rosta Szabolcs<sup>1</sup>, PhD (History), Kecskeméti Katona József Museum; Gulyás Gyöngyi<sup>2</sup>, Ásatárs Ltd; Gallina Zsolt<sup>3</sup>, Ásatárs Ltd, Pánya István<sup>4</sup>, PhD (Geography), Kecskeméti Katona József Museum; Türk Attila<sup>5</sup>, PhD (History), Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Institute of Archaeological Sciences.

**Contact information:** <sup>1,4</sup>6000, Hungary, Kecskemét, 1. Bethlen boulevard, e-mail: <sup>1</sup>rosta@kkjm.hu; <sup>4</sup>Panyaistvan@gmail.com; <sup>2,3</sup>6000, Hungary, Kecskemét, 12. Futár St., e-mail: <sup>2</sup>ggyongyi77@gmail.com; <sup>3</sup>gallinazsolt@gmail.com. <sup>5</sup>1088, Hungary, Budapest, 1. Mikszáth sqr., e-mail: turk.attila@btk.mta.hu.

С. Рошта, Дь. Гуяш, Ж. Галлина, И. Панья, А. Тюрк

**ВАЖНЕЙШИЕ РЕЗУЛЬТАТЫ АРХЕОЛОГИЧЕСКИХ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ  
ПОСЛЕДНИХ 30 ЛЕТ, ПОСВЯЩЕННЫХ МОНГОЛЬСКОМУ НАШЕСТВИЮ (1241—42)  
В СРЕДНЕВЕКОВОМ ВЕНГЕРСКОМ КОРОЛЕВСТВЕ**

В статье представлены новейшие результаты археологических исследований события монгольского нашествия против Венгерского королевства в Карпатском бассейне в 1241—42 гг. По сравнению с богатством письменных источников, археология долгое время не могла предоставить никаких серьезных свидетельств событий монгольского нашествия в Венгрии. Однако долгое время не было четких и достоверных свидетельств массовых убийств и широкомасштабных разрушений, о которых можно было судить по описаниям современников, часто апокалиптического характера. Археология периода нашествия, самая молодая область венгерской археологии, ставшая самостоятельной дисциплиной, сегодня является одним из наиболее динамично развивающихся направлений. Полноценное развитие археологии периода нашествия связано с появлением новых объектов в результате последних целенаправленных и плановых исследований.

**Ключевые слова:** археология, Венгрия, монгольское нашествие, средневековья, клады, оружие восточного типа, система оборонительных рвов, геофизические методы.

\* The study was carried out in the framework of the project PPKE-BTK-KUT-23 and the HUN-REN BTK MÓK 2024 programme. The illustrations were edited by Péter Óvári in the framework of the PPKE-BTK Mester és tanítványa project. The English translation was proofread by Attila Weldon, the Russian translation by Igor Kim.

Статья поступила в номер 11 апреля 2024 г.

Принята к печати 12 мая 2024 г.

**Сведения об авторах:** Рошта Сабољч<sup>1</sup>, PhD (History), Кечкемети Катона Йожеф Музеум; Гуяш Дьёнды<sup>2</sup>, Ашатарш ООО; Галлина Жолт<sup>3</sup>, Ашатарш ООО; Панья Иштван<sup>4</sup>, PhD (Geography), Кечкемети Катона Йожеф Музеум; Тюрк Аттила<sup>5</sup>, PhD (History), Институт археологии Католического университета Петера Пазманя.

**Контактная информация:** <sup>1,4</sup>6000, Венгрия, г. Кечкемет, 1. Bethlen бульвар, e-mail: <sup>1</sup>rosta@kkjm.hu; <sup>4</sup>Panyaistvan@gmail.com; <sup>2,3</sup>6000, Венгрия, г. Кечкемет, 12. Futár ул., e-mail: <sup>2</sup>ggyongyi77@gmail.com; <sup>3</sup>gallinazsolt@gmail.com; <sup>5</sup>1088, Венгрия, г. Будапешт, 1. Mikszáth пл., e-mail: turk.attila@btk.mta.hu.

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## Introduction

The Mongol invasion of 1241—42 (Fig. 1: 1) was a defining and poignant event of our past, which still persists in the collective memory of Hungarians nearly 800 years later. These few years are the best documented short period in the history of Árpád-era Hungary, as the attack of unprecedented power and the brutal destruction it caused attracted great attention both at home and abroad. For generations of historians, the question of the usability of contemporary sources and the extent of the devastation, as well as its short- and long-term effects, have been a constant source of debate. Throughout the past century, Hungarian historiography gave very different answers to these questions.

Despite the plenitude of written sources, archaeology has for a long time been unable to produce any serious evidence of the events of the Mongol invasion. The only tangible evidence of the invasion was the horizon of sporadic finds of coins in the ground. However, for a long time there was little clear and credible evidence of the mass killings and widespread destruction that could be inferred from contemporary descriptions, often of an apocalyptic nature, and which were accompanied by gangrenous ruins. One of the few exceptions was an artefact complex in Esztergom, discovered in 1952, where a victim identified as a goldsmith lay in a burnt and collapsed building (Fettich 1968). The other phenomenon came to light during excavations in Kiszfalud near the castle of Szabolcs in 1971—74, where the death of an individual thrown into a grain storage pit of an Árpád-era settlement was linked to the Mongol invasion by István Fodor (Fodor 1975).

The low number of clear phenomena related to the Mongol invasion, the lack of direct evidence and the paucity of finds seemed to support the view that contemporary eyewitness accounts are fundamentally exaggerated in terms of the scale and intensity of the destruction and cannot be used to reconstruct events, or can only be used through a strong filter.

With the increase in the quantity of archaeological excavations, and then in the 1970s and 1980s, the number of sites where — still mostly based on settlement phenomena — a destruction horizon of the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century could be archaeologically detected began to increase. This indirect evidence is provided by villages of the Árpád period where burnt buildings and hidden valuable objects suggest that the abandonment of the settlement was not peaceful, or at least hasty.

## Breakthrough in the archaeological research of the Mongol period in Hungary

Since the mid-1990s, new horizons have opened up for archaeology, resulting in the provision of large-scale projects that allow the survey of large, mainly linear surfaces. And in the mid-2000s, in parallel with the increase in the volume of infrastructure works, there has been a major breakthrough in the field of the Mongol period. From then on, complex sites with indirect evidence, previously unknown to Hungarian archaeology, came into view.

In 1996, at the Hejőkeresztúr-Vizekköze site on the M3 motorway, Mária Wolf discovered for the first time in Hungary a site where weapons, other utensils and fragmentary human remains were found in a building in a context clearly related to the Mongol invasion. In addition, other skeletal fragments were scattered in settlements. The moment of destruction was linked by the excavator to a very specific event, the Battle of Muhi (Wolf 1997; 2014).

In 2001, Tamás Pusztai, also in connection with the Battle of Muhi, discovered the skeletons of two men buried in a pit at the medieval settlement of Mohi (Pusztai 2014).

In 2005—2006, Gyöngyi Gulyás unearthed what is perhaps the most well-known and heart-wrenching moment of the Mongol invasion in the Bűrgeházi field near Cegléd, during a road construction excavation (Fig. 2). The image of two small children and their mother's skeleton crawling into the oven of a house buried in the ground received national publicity through the press. In other buildings in the Mongol-ravaged settlement, other unburied skeletons lay in disarray (Gulyás 2014).

During the construction of the 47<sup>th</sup> road between 2004—2006, several longitudinal sections of an Árpád-era settlement were excavated at the Orosháza-Bónum site. On the surface of the trail, 23 buildings with rich artefactual material, victims of a fire during the latest phase of the village's life, were identified. In some of these, as well as in additional trenches and pits, archaeologists found the abnormally lying bodies of 22 individuals (Gyucha, Rózsa 2014).

In 2009, an excavation led by Gábor Serlegi was carried out on the right bank of the Danube, on Dunaföldvár-Ló hill, prior to the construction of the M6 motorway. In the area of the destroyed Árpád-period village, phenomena essentially similar to the previous ones were found: thick layers of burnt remains, human remains in an anomalous position, partial and complete anatomical order in the settlement objects. Anthropological analysis was able to isolate the remains of 33 individuals (Szilágyi, Serlegi 2014).

In 2009, on the route of the DN 800 natural gas pipeline, Gábor Wilhelm uncovered one of the most prominent monuments of the Mongol invasion. In a burnt-out, small building buried in the ground next to the Haladás Tsz at Szank, alongside bone material belonging to 34 individuals (17 women and 17 children), were jewellery, coins and other valuables from the period's treasure horizon. In addition to the fittings of the building and objects typical of the period, a spur and an oriental spear enrich the finds. Following the excavation, the exact location of two Mongol-period medals from decades earlier were also recovered nearby (Wilhelm 2014).

In 2013, Zsolt Gallina and Gyöngyi Gulyás uncovered clear traces of the murderous events on the outskirts of Csanádpalota. The site, according to *Rogierius'* data, was located near the village of Pereg, which was certainly destroyed by the Mongols. In addition to the skeletal remains of two young individuals lying in an anomalous position, which can be accurately dated by coins, a very interesting phenomenon was also found and linked to the events of the Mongol invasion. In the area of the destroyed settlement, a harnessed horse was found buried alone, undoubtedly in accordance with Eastern custom. The archaeologists who excavated the site have raised the plausible possibility that tangible traces of the Mongol invasion, including the burial of the horse, which is said to have been a major source of the area's fierce influence, could be linked to one of the nomadic groups fighting in the area (Gulyás, Gallina 2014).

In 2011, a conference was held in Kiskunfélegyháza to present these new types of sites, focusing on the Mongol period. This meeting introduced a new perspective to the study of the archaeological remains of the Mongol period. In 2014, arranging the lectures of the conference, a volume entitled "*Carmen Miserabile*" — *A tatárjárás magyarországi emlékei* processed and presented the excavation results of these sites, which, unlike the previous ones, were able to show the shocking reality of the destruction by archaeology (Carmen Miserabile 2014).

### **Targeted research of the Mongol invasion sites in Hungary**

The recent archaeological successes have therefore been largely due to the large-scale excavations associated with road building and other above mentioned projects. The archaeology of the Mongol period, the youngest field of Hungarian archaeology to become an independent discipline, is now one of the most dynamically developing areas. However, this also required a qualitative improvement of quantitative indicators. The full development of Mongol archaeology is due to the emergence of new sites as a result of recent targeted and planned research. In recent years, the authors of these pages in particular have had the opportunity to investigate sites where, in

addition to the traces of mass killings, there has been an opportunity to identify the various characteristic patterns of destruction.

The central region of the country, the Kiskunság, which stretches along the Danube-Tisza river, is of particular importance in the study of the Mongol invasion in Hungary. This part of the country, which includes today's Bács-Kiskun county and the southern, flatland part of Pest county, was the area most exposed to the devastation of the 1241—42 Mongol invasion. Kiskunság is a natural geographic unit on the one hand, and a historical-cultural unit on the other. The settlement of the nomadic Cumans in 1246 in a region that had become essentially empty as a result of the Mongol devastation played a decisive role in its development. Recent interdisciplinary research on the history of settlements shows that the destruction of settlements with churches during the Mongol invasion reached 90—100% in some parts of the Kiskunság (Pány, Rosta 2024: 159). Thus, it is no coincidence that the most recent findings are concentrated in this region.

In 2016, an excavation at Kiskunmaja revealed a ploughed-out coin and two concentrations of large quantities of burnt human bone. Although the deep ploughing that preceded the planting of the vineyards had caused significant destruction of the features, important observations were nevertheless made. Two buildings, buried in the ground about 100 m apart and burnt down, contained both complete and partial human skeletons. The coins recovered during the excavation led by Szabolcs Rosta, belonging to two medals, can all be classified as Mongol-period coins. Silver jewellery and items of costume jewellery, as well as objects belonging to the fittings of the building, are also common components of Mongol-period artefact assemblages (Rosta 2018a). Anthropological analysis has isolated the remains of 15 children and 16 adult women, as well as 3 men, i.e. at least 34 individuals. Besides post-mortem animal chewing, several of the human bones showed signs of undoubtedly deliberate 'flaying' with a cutting instrument (Fig. 3: 3). These latter traces can be interpreted as evidence of starvation anthropophagy in the sources (Buzár, Bernert 2018). The complexity of the site is compounded by the presence of a church, 1 km from the site, also destroyed and fortified by a triple system of defensive ditches (Rosta, Pány 2022: 281, 286).

The former Pétermonostora, located in the upper Monastery of the present-day Bugac Municipality, is an important site for research into the Árpád period. A series of excavations started by Szabolcs Rosta in 2010 and continuing almost continuously since have revealed the details of an urban settlement of the Árpád period on an area of 200 hectares. Pétermonostora, established in the 1040s on the royal road connecting Szeged with Pest, passing through the central part of the country, is identified as the economic and sacral centre of the Homokhátság region. The destruction of this important centre can be linked to the Mongol invasion of 1241—1242, for which there is multiple direct evidence. During an excavation in 2016, the remains of children and a young woman were found lying in an abnormal position in a row among burnt buildings in the central part of the civil settlement. This destruction horizon also included the anatomically arranged carcasses of several slain young animals. In the double ditch system (c. 600 m long) built around the monastery for protection, the skeletons of dead children and animals lying in an anatomical order but in an abnormal pose mark the destruction horizon. In addition, in the sections of trench excavated between 2020 and 2023 lay a huge quantity of partially processed animal remains (Rosta 2018a).

The Abaújvár Castle, built in the first half of the 11th century, was one of the important centres of the Árpád-era Hungarian Kingdom. During excavations in the 1970s, an iron deposit of agricultural tools had already been discovered. But clear evidence of the Tartar invasion was only uncovered in 2019, thanks to the research under the Árpád dynasty Programme (2018—2023). During the excavation led by Mária Wolf, a large amount of metal objects were found with the help of metal detecting volunteers from the Herman Ottó Museum. In addition to another iron deposit, an extremely valuable treasure trove buried in a pot was unearthed. Furthermore, three buried individuals could be linked to the events of the Tartar invasion. The name of Abaújvár is mentioned in a letter of 2 February 1242, which lists the castles in Hungary that could potentially be the starting point of a counterattack against the Mongols (Bakos et al. 2020).

## New perspectives on the archaeological research of the Mongol period in Hungary

The number of Mongol period sites in the Kiskunság region is extended by two important sites, which offer even more realistic phenomena than the example of Csengele. Tázlár-Templomhegy and Szank-Kápolnahely, only 14 km apart, are currently the best researched and best known Mongol sites in Hungary. They have several features in common that closely link them, the most striking of which is the series of tangible phenomena that indicate the siege of their former fortified churches.

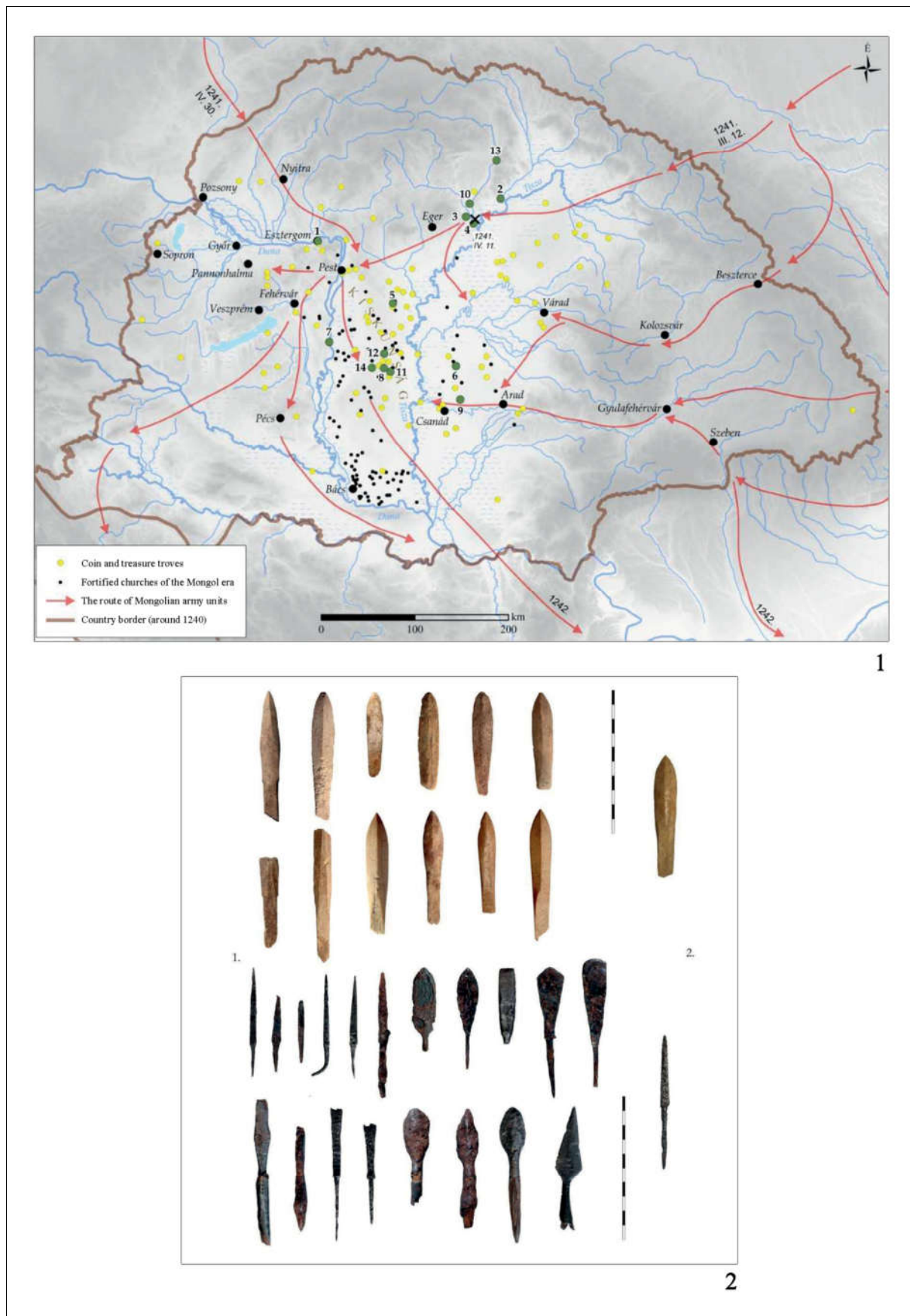
From 2003, Zsolt Gallina and Gyöngyi Gulyás, during their excavations at Tázlár, came across a triple system of ditches, very similar in size and structure to the one on Csengele (Horváth 2001), and which was also built around a church with Árpád-period antecedents. Although the excavation series, which is still ongoing, has yet to fully investigate the phenomena, the defensive nature of the ditch system during the Mongol period and the complete destruction of the settlement at that time are beyond dispute. In fact, in one of the largest triple moat systems known to date, a complex gateway defence system has been excavated, with tangible traces of a siege. The lower, burnt decay layer of the ditches contained a large number of Árpád-period artefacts and building rubble. Dozens of skeletons of individuals who had undoubtedly died violently, lying in an abnormal position, animal remains and elements of oriental weaponry are all evidence for the events of the Mongol invasion. The excavation archaeologists, and the authors of these lines, have also reconstructed some of the details of the attack, based on the structural features of the fortifications, the spatial distribution of weapons and the dead (Gallina et al. 2021).

In the area at Szank, the Mongol-era coin hoards, the earlier inspected massacre unearthed in 2009 and the destroyed fortified churches showed a strong involvement in the events of 1241—1242. In Szank-Kápolnahely, the excavation of a medieval church and its surroundings was launched for touristic purposes. During 2017, 2021 and 2022, the fortification with a double concentric ditch, situated around the Árpád-era church, was fully excavated. At the bottom of the burnt trenches, a large number of both western-type weapons of the defending Hungarians and eastern-type weapons of the attackers were found (Fig 1: 2). Beside them lay the remains of dozens of human skeletons belonging to individuals in various states of complete and partial anatomical order. In several cases the bones showed signs of perimortem combat injuries (Fig 3: 1, 2). The trenches also contain coins and treasure finds that provide a firm indication of the time of the atrocities (Rosta 2018a: 151—196; 2018b: 186—192).

The scientific impact of the above-mentioned sites in the Kiskunság region point far beyond themselves. The results obtained from these sites will allow general conclusions to be drawn and will significantly influence the direction of future research. One of the most spectacular conclusions drawn from the above examined evidence is the recognition of the system of lowland forts which now comprises more than 100 sites, built up from necessity in 1241 (Rosta, Pány 2022). The archaeological legacy of the Mongol period can be precisely delineated on the basis of complex sites identified by means of characteristic artefact assemblages and the development and widespread availability of technical and technological tools over the last decade such as geophysical methods, drone photography, metal detectors and certain IT programmes. In addition to the treasure troves, the main group of Mongol heritage finds, other types of objects and phenomena indirectly linked to this horizon can now be identified. Furthermore, the new archaeological findings allow a deeper historical analysis of the authenticity of contemporary accounts. The new results also highlight the growing museum-friendly and civilian use of metal detectors throughout the country (model of community archaeology in Hungary), which assists tremendously in finding treasures day after day, which were once hidden from the Mongol army. Today, reconstruction work is also under way at several sites (Bugac, Szank and Tázlár) to make the remains of the Mongol invasion accessible to the public and to preserve its tragic memory for later generations.

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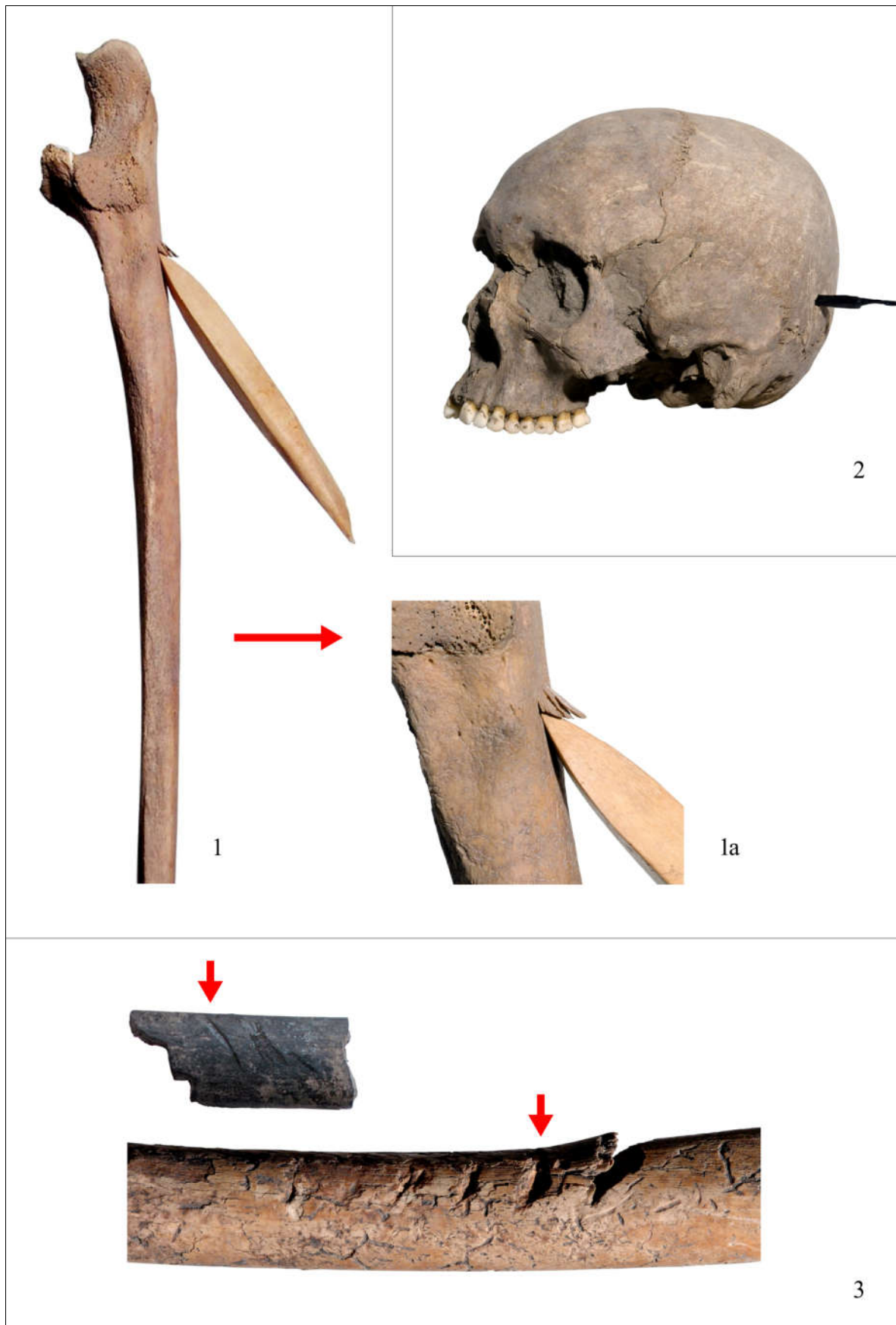
**Fig. 1.** The Mongol invasion of the territory of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary (1) (1241—42) and the geographical location of the archaeological sites related to it (map by I. Pány); 2 — Eastern type bone and iron arrowheads (Photos by Sz. Rosta).





**Fig. 2. Human remains excavated from an Árpád-era house after the Mongol invasion: 1—2 — Cegléd, Bűrgeházi-dűlő (Photos by Gy. Gulyás).**





**Fig. 3. Battle injuries caused by Mongol weapons: 1–2 — Szank-Kápolnahalom (Photos by Sz. Rosta); Traces of cannibalism on human bones, as mentioned even in written sources, as a result of starvation of population: 3— Kiskunmajsa-Jonathermál (Photos by Sz. Rosta).**