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The status of horses in late Avar-period society in the Carpathian Basin

Ilona Bede¹

Abstract

This paper analyses the funeral practice of horsemen and horse burials in the context of late Avar-period social identity. I propose a methodology, tested on six cemeteries, that examines the place of the horse as a central character in burials and agent in the burial ritual, as well as a grave good and faunal deposit. The analysis also demonstrates other instances of the horse's occurrence in the archaeological record of this early medieval culture. This phenomenon is generally associated with the nomadic cultures of the Eurasian steppes and can be seen as a marker of ethnicity. The recent investigations demonstrate the existence of social stratification, although not strictly vertical, which in turn can be connected to the system of values of the elite in early medieval Europe.

Keywords

Avars, early medieval period, central Europe, horse burial

The Avar period takes its name from the Avars, an ethnic group that migrated from the Eurasian steppes into Europe in the second half of the 6th century. The first mention of the Avars in the Byzantine sources dates back to the mid-5th century and follows the death of Attila, about 463 AD. Priskos the Rhetor reports that emissaries from the east came to Byzantium and informed the imperial court about great changes on the steppe: “*The people*

living on the sea coast had driven out the Avars, the Avars had sent the Sabirs into flight, and the Sabirs had attacked the Saraghurs and Ughors who had therefore left their dwelling places and appeared at the entrance to the Caucasus.”² About a century later, Theophylact Simocatta, in his *History of the World* and, shortly after him, Theophanes, described the break-up of the Avars into Europe. Their first embassy arrived in Byzantium around 557-559 AD and their appearance recalled that of the Huns: “*Die ganze Stadt lief zusammen, um sie zu betrachten, da man ein solches Volk noch nie gesehen hatte. Denn sie trugen die Haare hinten ganz lang, gebunden mit Bändern und geflochten, während die übrige Tracht den anderen Hunnen ähnlich war.*”³ (The entire town gathered to see them, as no one had ever seen such a people. Their long hair was plaited and bound, while the rest of their attire was similar to that of other Huns.) Walter Pohl points out that at this time the name ‘Huns’ was used similarly to ‘Scythians’, namely to refer to all nomadic people coming from the eastern steppe. From the beginning the Avars were seen as one of the groups formed on the basis of tribal alliance, with ways of life and traditions that were very similar to those of the Scythians described by Herodotus almost a thousand years earlier in the 4th book of *The Histories*. According to historical and linguistic sources, one of the main Avar tribes was the Juan-Juan, who originated from central Asia and the Mongolian steppes. Following a conflict with Turkic tribes, they allied themselves with the Hephthalite, also known as the ‘White Huns’. These populations jointly migrated west, into Eastern Europe and Byzantium (fig. 1)⁴.

In the archaeological record, the importance of the horse in these Asiatic nomadic cultures appears mostly in horse burials, a custom that first emerges during the Iron Age in the Carpathian Basin. After this time and during the Sarmatian, Hunnic and Germanic periods it becomes increasingly rare. The custom reemerges in the early Avar period (late 6th – early 7th century AD), when it is practised frequently but still less so than in the

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² Róna-Tas 1999, 209.

³ Pohl 2002, 18. Theophanes 6050. In: Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia*, Ed. Karl de Boor, Leipzig, 1887, 232. German translation: Peter

Schreiner, *Bibliothek der griechischen Literatur* 20, Stuttgart, 1985.

⁴ Kürti & Lőrinczy 1991, 4; Grousset 1965, 227.

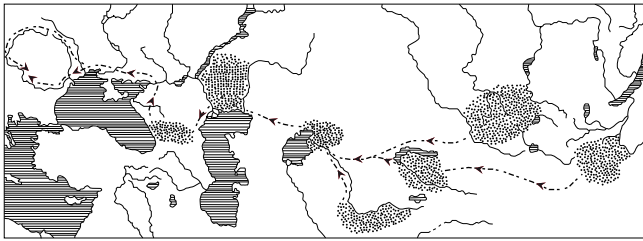


FIG. 1 Avar migration route from central Asia to central Europe (Kürti & Lőrinczy 1991, fig. 2).

Voie de migration avare depuis l'Asie intérieure jusqu'à l'Europe centrale (Kürti and Lőrinczy 1991, fig. 2).

Eastern European Pontic steppes. This difference seems to have disappeared by the end of the 7th century, which is also the beginning of the late Avar period⁵.

The middle and late Avar periods are marked by the emergence of a new material culture, characterised by new object types, such as bronze cast belt mounts decorated with griffons and tendrils, sabres, stirrups with straight foot plates, bits with side-bars, neckrings, and clasps. At the same time, however, cultural continuity can be observed with the survival of certain domestic and costume objects, or burial customs⁶. They present at least very slow variations. Nor did their name change: Avars remained 'Avars'. In contrast to the early Avar period, this phase sees a significant homogenisation in the finds assemblages and a strong cultural unity, while evidence for settlement are becoming more frequent.

Through the examination of the practice of horse burial, I aim to analyse funerary rituals and their significance in Avar society. The underlying assumption is that burial rituals are discourses not only about death itself but also about the deceased, and through them the living society. They emerge and find their significance against a cultural backdrop, which is based on collective representations, a system of values and a techno-economic system.

A 'ritual' is seen as a repetition of coded phenomena. In the course of several generations this repetition evolves into tradition and in the process may lose its original meaning. If the horse burial practice is part of the Asiatic nomadic heritage, the questions arise what beliefs underpinned it, how it fitted into Avar society's own value system, and what it aimed to communicate during the actual funeral. After more than a century of progressive settlement in the Carpathian Basin, to what extent can the presence of the horse in the funerary system be seen as an indication of ethnic identity? Is it a sign of the social identity of the deceased, or at least of what his or her family/community wants to demonstrate to society? Is it a suggestion of a religious belief in an afterlife or in supernatural beings?

A funerary system is the material expression of a society's representations, a way for a society to deal materially and spiritually with death, the dead and the survivors. Elements such as space, time, and ritual are essential components of a community's funerary discourse. Generally these practices are strictly coded, but subtle divergences from the rule can be observed. During

a funeral the deceased effectively becomes the 'possession' of the family or community, and this subgroup of the larger society can diverge from the established custom. The question is what this society aims to express through funerary ritual, and if and how archaeology can reconstruct this discourse. What archaeological tools are available to rebuild all the gestures, the ceremony and the ritual, and what did they mean to the community? We propose a methodology that examines all aspects of the funerary system and attempts to reconstruct them in detail. This type of analysis, which Patrice Méniel and I have called "funerary archaeozoology"⁷, is generally used to study human burials, but can equally be applied to animal burials.

The horse, it is suggested, can be seen as a recognisable individual, a central figure at the very heart of the funeral, and in this investigation horse burials were approached from three different perspectives. Firstly, the shape and size of the burial space, as well as its organisation and complexity, such as traces of a construction or a superstructure or of a coffin, all provide clues as to the significance of the horse burial, as do taphonomy and the state of preservation of the skeleton. Analysis of the *ante-* and *post-mortem* treatment of the horse informs us about how much value the society placed on it. The horse's sex, age, pathologies and cause of death were all taken into account in the investigations. As the assumption was that the animal was at the centre of the funerary ritual, any material associated with the horse burial, the horse's grave goods, also required analysis. Important criteria here were the position of these objects, their quantities and the association of different categories of objects with the horse burial.

Secondly, the horse's relationship with its owner within the funerary space was examined. It appeared that the horse burial is not an animal burial in its own right but rather in direct relation to the human burial. The horse, then, is just another grave good for the dead person, and consequently it was analysed as such: a typology was built based on the form of the 'object', and its position and orientation in the funerary space with respect to the deceased. Although not everyone was buried with a horse, the wider picture was also examined. As a first step, age and gender classes were considered, but the state of health and mortality causes could usefully be examined in a further stage.

Finally the horse was considered as a faunal deposit. Here the main question was that of its role in the funerary system and the differences that can be observed between the horse burials and those of other animals in the same cultural context, in the same cemetery or grave. Animal remains could have been a funeral offering, a sacrifice, or the possession of the dead. In a sacrifice, the 'object' offered is destroyed and the receiver tended to be a deity⁸. The receiver of a simple funeral offering is the deceased. If the offering is not destroyed, the connection between the dead and its offering remains unchanged⁹. A horse offering can have different functions: it can be food; it can fulfill an apotropaic or psychopomp role, be a gift for the gods or indicate social distinction. The assumption is that archaeological analysis has the ability to discern these roles.

The exact number of Avar horse or horseman burials is not known, even during the later phase. At the beginning of the 21st

⁵ Kiss 1996, 387–388; Bóna 1979.

⁶ Vida 2003, 306.

⁷ Méniel 2008; Bede 2008 and 2010.

⁸ Hubert & Mauss 1899.

⁹ Testart 2004, 29–40.

century, Tivadar Vida counted 60,000 Avar burials and for the last few years, the number of Avar horse and warrior burials is estimated at around 6000, ca 10% of the total population¹⁰.

The data presented here are the results from an initial investigation of six cemeteries in Hungary and Slovakia¹¹, complete with a part of the abundant bibliography¹². Statistical analysis has revealed the main trends in late Avar horse-related burial practice, as well as anomalies.

The first important thing to note about horse burials is that there appear to be various ways of burying the animal. It can be entirely buried, partially, or even symbolically. The horse can be buried in the same grave as the person, alone in a single grave, or in a grave with a symbolic human burial. Most of the

deceased buried with a horse are male, but there are also instances of females and children with horse burials¹³. In the late Avar period the most common burial type is the full horse inhumation together with the horseman (fig. 2). Single entire horses are not common but well known – this practice existed mostly in Transdanubia in the early Avar period. It becomes more frequent in the second half of the Avar period and spreads to the eastern side of the river Tisza¹⁴. The best example of it is the cemetery of *Tiszafüred-Majoros*, with 70 single horse burials¹⁵. While initially considered ‘individual’ burials (Attila Kiss’s Type VII¹⁶), it has been demonstrated that the horse burials are generally located in the proximity of a human burial¹⁷. These ‘individual horse burials’ have therefore been reinterpreted as ‘horsemen burials’.

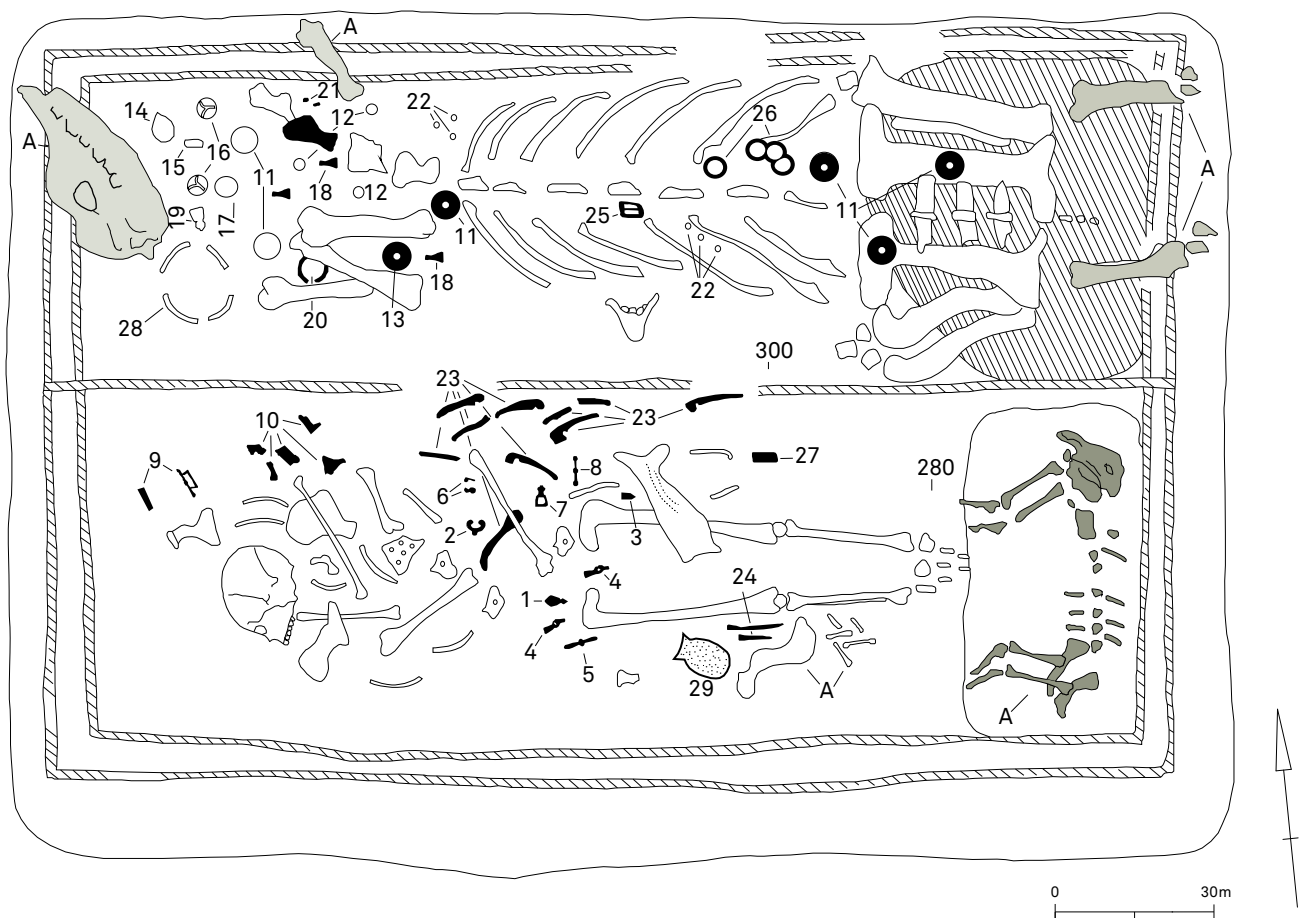


FIG. 2 Entire horse inhumation together with the horseman in grave 114 at *Komárno-Schiffswerft / Komárom-Hajógyár* - Slovakia, County of Nitra (Trugly 2008, fig. 70).

Inhumation d'un cheval entier avec le cavalier dans la sépulture 114 de Komárno-Schiffswerft / Komárom-Hajógyár - Slovaquie, Comitat de Nitra (Trugly 2008, fig. 70).

¹⁰ Vida 2003, 304: estimation based on the cadastre edited by József Szentpéteri (Szentpéteri (ed.) 2002). The evaluation of horses' and horsemen's burials is from Miklós Makoldi, whom I would like to thank for this information.

¹¹ Bede 2010.

¹² *Tiszafüred-Majoros* (Hungary, County of Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok): Garam 1987 and 1995; Makoldi

2008. *Orosháza-Bónum téglagyár, Orosháza-Béke TSz homokbánya* and *Szarvas-Grexa téglagyár* (Hungary, County of Békés): Juhász 1995; 2000; 2004. *Komárno-Schiffswerft / Komárom-Hajógyár* (Slovakia, County of Nitra): Trugly 1987; 1993; 2008. *Kassa-Zsebes / Kosiče-Šebastovce* (Slovakia, County of Kassa): Budinský-Krička & Točík 1991; Csiky 2006.

¹³ Čilinska 1990.

¹⁴ Balogh 2009, 17.

¹⁵ Garam 1987 and 1995.

¹⁶ Kiss 1962.

¹⁷ For a recent review of research on this question, see: Makoldi 2008.

A few examples are known of single burials of entire horses which are not associated with a human burial¹⁸. They are considered 'individual', or seen as the remains of a sacrificial offering by the community¹⁹. While the way in which the animal is buried is exactly the same as the one used for the other horse burials, these burials could also be seen as symbolic human graves. This type is also known in the late Avar period, and takes several forms: a single horse with grave goods for the horseman, such as belt fittings (fig. 3.1)²⁰, or a burial of an entire horse with the space for the human deceased left empty (fig. 3.2), or even occasionally without any skeleton²¹. The interpretation as symbolic burial is generally based on the observed ritual of the wider cemetery context.

Another late Avar period practice is the partial inhumation of a horse. This is well known for the early Avar period²² but remains uncertain for the late phase. One late Avar cemetery where it was significant is *Orosháza-Béke TSz. homokbánya*. However, due to the absence of archaeozoological analysis of the bones it is impossible to establish the type of burial. Irén Juhász considered them partial horse burials (fig. 4)²³, but some could have been entire horses and just one is certainly partial²⁴. Single skull burials are rare but also known²⁵ and one example of a symbolic horseman burial with a partial horse is known²⁶.

The symbolic horse burials are mostly inhumations of the horse's harness. In the late Avar period these harness burials

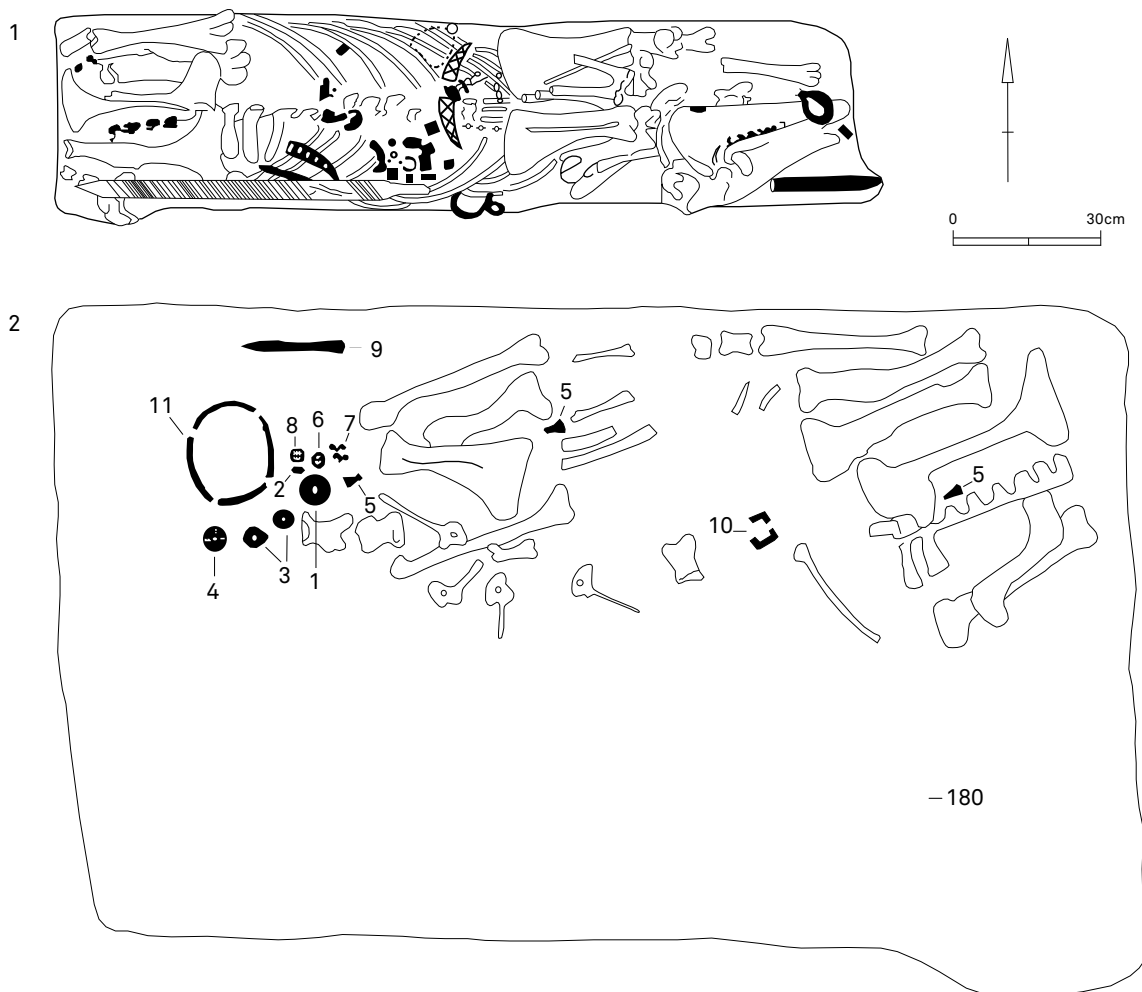


FIG. 3 Symbolic horsemen burials: 1. Individual entire horse burial with three arms and a belt fitting in grave 186 at *Tiszafüred-Majoros* – Hungary, County of Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok (Garam 1995, fig. 11); 2. Burial with an entire horse near an empty place left for the horseman in grave 129 of *Komárno-Schiffswerft / Komárom-Hajógyár* - Slovakia, County of Nitra (Trugly 2008, fig. 73.3).

Sépultures symboliques de cavaliers : 1. Sépulture individuelle de cheval avec 3 armes et une garniture de ceinture dans la sépulture 186 de Tiszafüred-Majoros – Hongrie, Comitat de Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok (Garam 1995, fig. 11) ; 2. Sépulture avec un cheval entier et une place laissée libre pour le cavalier dans la sépulture 129 de Komárno-Schiffswerft / Komárom-Hajógyár - Slovaquie, Comitat de Nitra (Trugly 2008, fig. 73.3).

¹⁸ *Tiszafüred-Majoros*, Gr. 705 and 183; Makoldi 2008, 131, n.70; *Orosháza-Bónum* 132; Juhász 2000, 73.

¹⁹ Balogh *ibid.*

²⁰ *Tiszafüred-Majoros*, Gr. 186; Makoldi 2008, 115.

²¹ *Komárno-Schiffswerft*, Gr. 122 and 129; Trugly 2008, 83; *Košice-Šebastovce*, Gr. 374; Budinský-Krička & Točík 1991.

²² Kiss 1962; Némethi † & Klima 1992.

²³ Juhász 2000, 73-74.

²⁴ *Orosháza-Béke*, Gr. 73; Juhász 1995.

²⁵ For example in *Orosháza-Bónum*, Gr. 221; Juhász 1995.

²⁶ *Tiszavasvári-Petőfi u. 49*, Gr. 10; Makoldi 2008, 136.

appear mostly in the south-eastern region between the Maros, the Körös and the Tisza rivers. The cemetery in which this type is the most relevant is *Szarvas-Grexa téglagyár*²⁷. Livia Bende noted that this type is often associated with so-called “niche graves” (*Nischengräber*) (fig. 5)²⁸.

The grave pits’ analysis provided an usual picture of the well known Avar graves. The most common shape is a rectangular grave with vertical walls in which the size of the pit corresponds to the size of the dead. The latter does not necessarily apply to the single entire horse burials, which seem to be shorter and

narrower than the human ones, as well as shallower. It also appears significant that single horses are almost always buried in simple grave pits. The complex pits, with steps, niches or alcoves, are – barring a few exceptions – reserved for human burials.

Regarding the interior structure of the grave, the presence of funerary chambers or coffins in the human graves demonstrate a reality also observed in other Avar burials. It is thought here that what is more relevant is the presence of coffins and postholes in the single horse burials in *Tiszafüred-Majoros*. The horses buried alone have been given a grave configuration, which was normally reserved to selected human deceased.

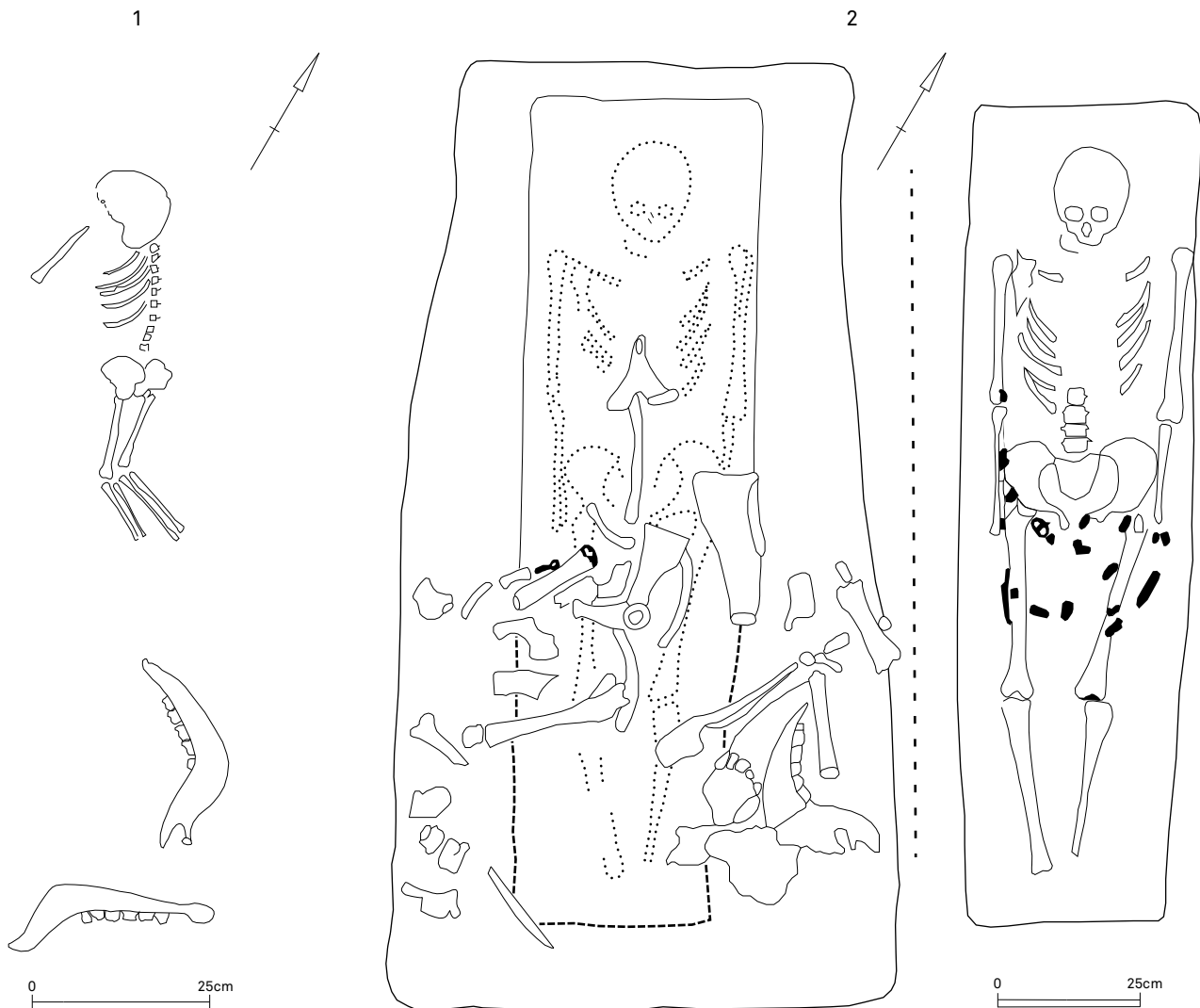


FIG. 4 Partial horse burials: *Orosháza-Béke TSz homokbánya* – Hungary, County of Békés 1. Child burial with a horse mandible in grave 73; 2. Adult burial with a (partial?) horse above him in grave 142 (Juhász 2000, Tab. 5.1, 6.1).

Inhumations partielles de chevaux : *Orosháza-Béke TSz homokbánya* – Hongrie, Comitat de Békés 1. *Sépulture d'un enfant avec une mandibule de cheval dans la sépulture 73* ; 2. *Sépulture d'un adulte avec une inhumation (partielle ?) de cheval au-dessus de lui dans la sépulture 142* (Juhász 2000, Tab. 5.1, 6.1).

²⁷ Juhász 2004.

²⁸ Bende 2000, 253-254, fig. 18.

The relationship between horse and horseman depends on their association or separation, but also on the orientation and position of the horse relative to the human burial. Where they are located in separate graves, the two 'individuals' have been clearly separated, but even within the same grave they can be separated by a wooden panel. This can be a horizontal panel laid on the grave wall steps, a timber wall inside the funerary chamber, or even a separation made by the coffin of the human burial. The horse never lies in a coffin when it is buried together with the human deceased.

The most common positions of the horse relative to the horseman for the late Avar period seems on the left hand side of the horseman (Kiss's Type III) with the same orientation and on the right hand side of the horseman with the opposite orientation (Kiss's Type I)²⁹. Attila Kiss noted that if we look at these two types from the horse's point of view, the horseman is always on the horse's left which is the side from where he mounts³⁰. Types II, where the horse is on the right facing in the same direction, and Type IV, where the horse is on the left facing in the opposite direction, are rarer and tend to occur on the margins of the Avar Khaganat territory³¹.

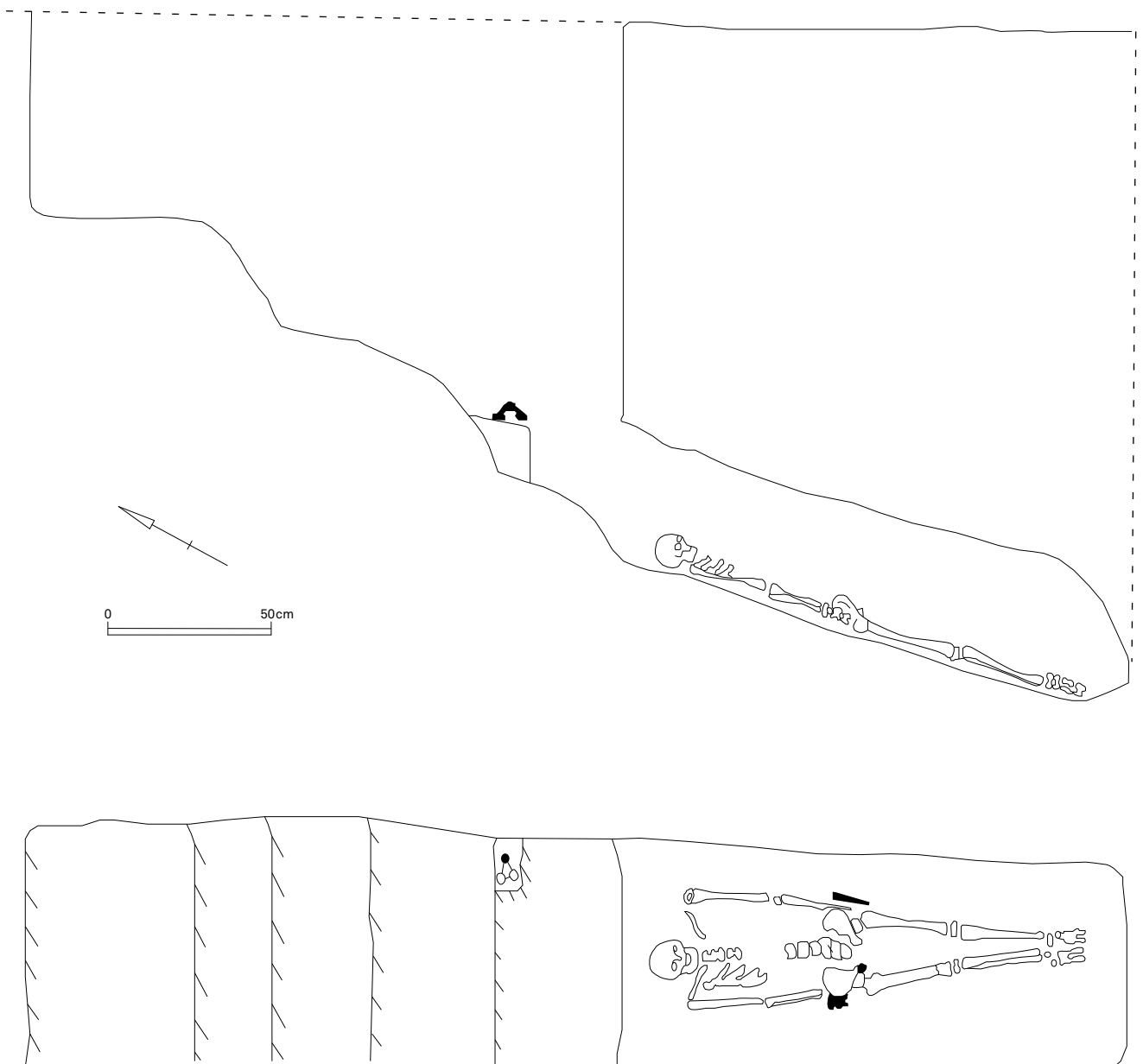


FIG. 5 Harness in a horseman burial in niche grave 209 at Szarvas-Grexa téglagyár – Hungary, County of Békés (Juhász 2000, Tab. 8.1). *Harnachement de cheval avec l'inhumation d'un cavalier dans la sépulture 209 de Szarvas-Grexa téglagyár – Hongrie, Comitat de Békés (Juhász 2000, Tab. 8.1).*

²⁹ Kiss 1962; Kiss 1996, 390.

³⁰ Kiss 1962, 158.

³¹ Bóna 1979, 17.

Relative to the horsemen, entire horses can be buried on their right or left hand side, near their head, their feet or above them. All these five positions can overlap one another and are not strictly distinguished from one another. As Bóna István noted, that the relationships between the horsemen and their horses buried near them cannot be strictly categorized³². Partial and symbolic horse burials are often near the head or feet of the deceased, but it is unclear what if anything this signifies, nor how it related to the position of entire horse burials.

In general the funerary rituals for the horses fit in with the rituals for the cemetery as a whole. This also applies to the grave goods. What is specific to the horse is its harness, but this does not appear in all horse burials. One wonders whether these horse played the same role in the funerary system as harnessed horses. Another specific aspect of graves with horses buried alongside their owners is the association with arms and belts, but these materials do not appear in the same proportion in each cemetery. For example, in some of them, an abundance of arms suggests the presence of a warrior class³³, while in other ones, a rare occurrence of arms relative to the wealth of the graves points towards an economic or political elite³⁴. Other cemeteries and horsemen graves are less rich, but the horse is still an indicator of social distinction. Nevertheless it cannot be asserted that it shows the existence of a vertical structure, because numerous rich graves of the late Avar period are not associated with horse burials.

The other sources that inform us about the role of the horse in the late Avar period come from the depictions of horses or horsemen on archaeological remains. Several fragments of belts, harness or jewellery show horse heads, a warrior, an archer on a horse or on a mystical harnessed animal. Well known examples are the figures on pot number 2 of the 'treasure' of Nagyszémtiklós / Sânnicolau Mare (Romania)(fig.6).

Among the written sources, the *Strategikon* is the most important for our knowledge of early Avar cavalry. It is a military book written by – or on the orders of – the Emperor Maurice (582 – 602 AD). It mentions many details about the Avar cavalry, how they were trained from a very young age and the close relationship between horse and horseman³⁵. Unfortunately there is no specific mention of late Avar period horseriding, or indeed about the practice of burying horses.

The significance of the horse in late Avar funerals could be a sign of their nomadic heritage which may eventually have come to define their ethnic identity when faced with other European cultures. The fact that not all Avars were buried with their horses is a indication of social stratification found in strongly hierarchical societies. The horse may also have had a religious meaning in the funerary ritual; the mystical horse-like figures and the horse teeth found in some graves could support this idea. Rather than being mutually exclusive, these aspects of the funerary ritual can be said to interact. The specific place of the horse in Avar society can only be determined by relating it to the part it played in the late Avar cultural system.



FIG. 6 'The triumphant prince', Detail of pot no. 2 in the Nagyszémtiklós / Sânnicolau Mare Treasure – Rumania (Kovács (ed.) 2002).

'Le prince triomphant', Détail du vase n°2 – Trésor de Nagyszémtiklós / Sânnicolau Mare – Roumanie (Kovács (ed.) 2002).

Résumé

La place du cheval dans la société de la période avare tardive du Bassin des Carpates

Les Avars, nomades des steppes asiatiques, arrivent dans le Bassin des Carpates à la fin du 6^e s. Leur domination perdure jusqu'au début du 9^e siècle. Cette étude propose une réflexion sur la société de la période tardive (8^e s.-9^e s.) à travers les tombes de chevaux et de cavaliers. Après plus d'un siècle de sédentarisation progressive et de relations avec les cultures européennes voisines, le cheval « bien le plus précieux des nomades » reste l'objet d'un geste funéraire spécifique et codé, réservé à une certaine population. Nous proposons ici une méthodologie plaçant tout à tour le cheval au centre du rituel, tel un individu à part entière, puis en tant que mobilier du défunt, et enfin en tant qu'animal. Les tombes de chevaux et de cavaliers sont estimées à 6 000 sur environ 60 000 sépultures avares connues. Les résultats qui ne peuvent être définitifs proviennent d'une première étude menée sur six nécropoles. Nous y soulignons la diversité des types d'inhumations pratiquées et montrons les recoupements possibles entre ces rituels. Ceux-ci associés à certaines catégories de mobilier permettant de relever la présence de différentes couches économiques et sociales, au sein desquelles le cheval est un marqueur distinctif. La présence de tombes contemporaines d'une certaine richesse sans association avec un cheval ne permet pas de conclure catégoriquement à un signe de structuration verticale.

32 *Ibid.*, 18.

33 For example in *Tiszafüred-Majoros* and in *Košice-Šebastovce*: Makoldi 2008, 140.

34 For example in *Komárno-Schiffswerft*: Trugly 2008.

35 Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998. Mauricius XI 2, 19. In: Mauricii *Strategicon*, Ed. Haralambie Mihaescu, Bucarest, 1970.

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