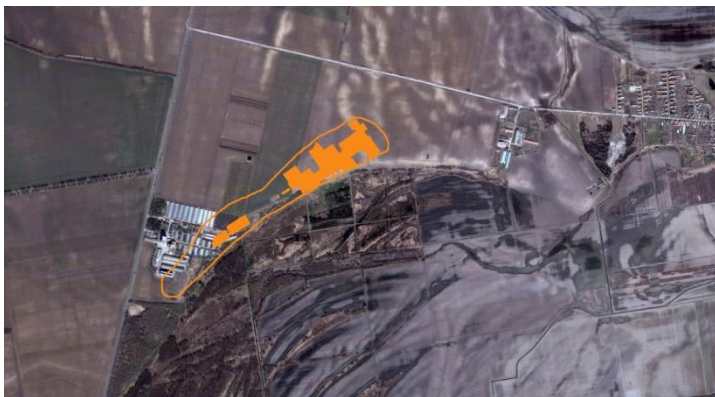


KÖLKED-FEKETEKAPU: THE STORY OF A VILLAGE

The site and its research history

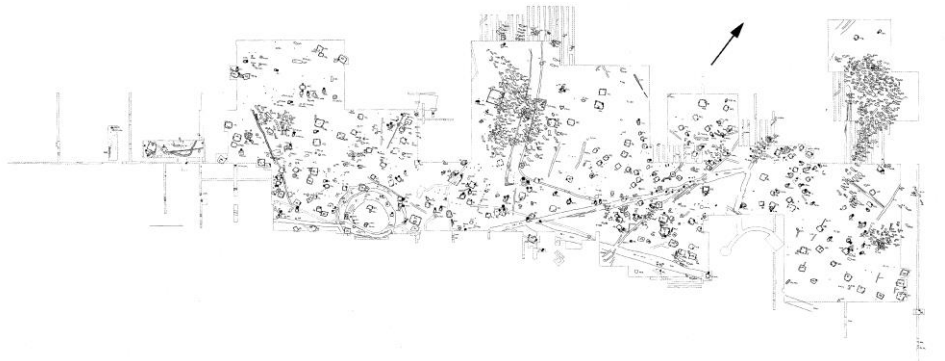
The site extending over some six hectares lay beside the Roman limes road, on the bank of the River Danube. The settlement was occupied from the mid-sixth century until the end of the Avar period. Following the excavation of the first extensive cemetery during a rescue excavation, Attila Kiss conducted a research excavation between 1972 and 1999, uncovering about 80% of the site. A total of 170 sunken houses, 160 pits, 131 open-air ovens, 80 ditches, 5 wells and 4 log houses were unearthed. Almost all the graves of the settlement's occupants were uncovered too: 1225 graves in several cemeteries as well as several grave clusters on the edge of and within the settlement.

The Kölked site marked on a satellite photo



The scale of the excavation and the quality of the archaeological material, reflecting the wealth of a community of non-Avar ancestry living in the Avar Empire, is unique for this period in the Carpathian Basin.

Map of the excavated archaeological features





What was unearthed and how?

The settlement unearthed at Kölked-Feketekapu was an extensive and densely occupied village with a large cemetery and several smaller graveyards at its edge as well as a handful of grave clusters among the houses. The site became known when the large community cemetery was disturbed in 1971. The finds brought to light caused quite a stir in Hungarian archaeological scholarship: previously, only one single similar cemetery had been unearthed at Környe. The Kölked graves called for a re-assessment of the Early Avar period since the finds from the burials included male belt sets of the Western European type, women in Germanic costume and countless objects made in the Late Antique style. Most of the male graves were richly furnished with weapons, but only the horse burials resembled the ones known from Avar cemeteries. Adding to the archaeological confusion was the discovery of richly outfitted female burials during the excavation of the settlement in 1976–1977.

The questions raised by the Kölked site and the community that once lived there are still the subject of heated archaeological debates: Who were they? How did they get there? Why did they choose to settle at Kölked? How did they live under the Avar rule? In the following, we will try to answer these questions based on the archaeological evidence.

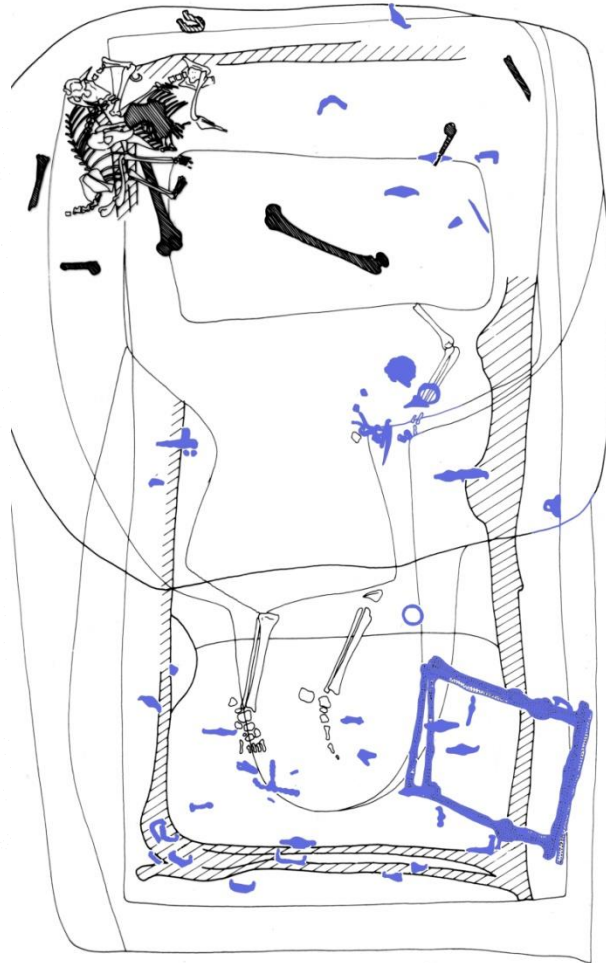
Excavation photoes (with the archaeologist Attila Kiss in front of the scraper and on the ladder)



Graves



Grave B 85



Grave B 119



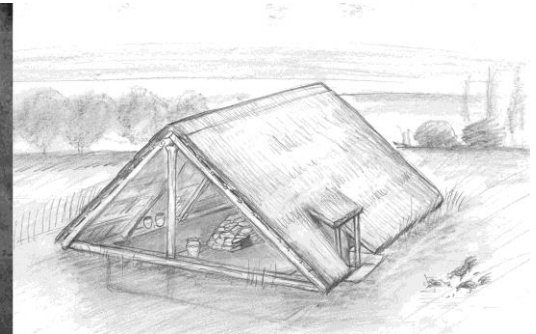
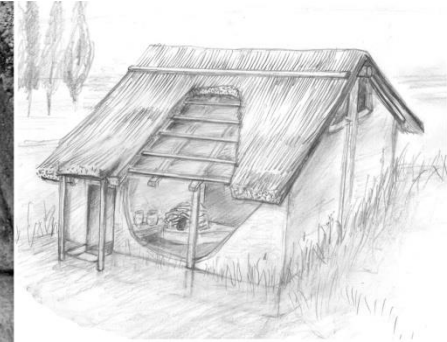


Houses

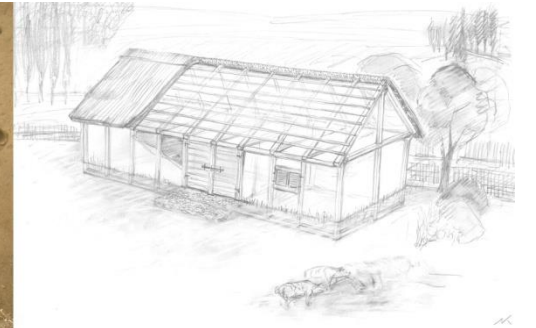
The most widespread house type in the Carpathian Basin during the early medieval period was a single-roomed sunken-floor house whose roof was supported by two to six wooden posts. The house had a timber framework and walls of clay or of wattling daubed with clay. At Kölked, these sunken buildings were used not only as dwellings, but also as cellars, storage facilities, weaving houses and workshops.

The buildings uncovered at Kölked also included a type that is unparalleled on other settlements of the Avar period, namely above-ground log houses enclosed within a fence or a ditch. Seventh-century households at Kölked were made up of a log house and two to five sunken-floor buildings beside them.

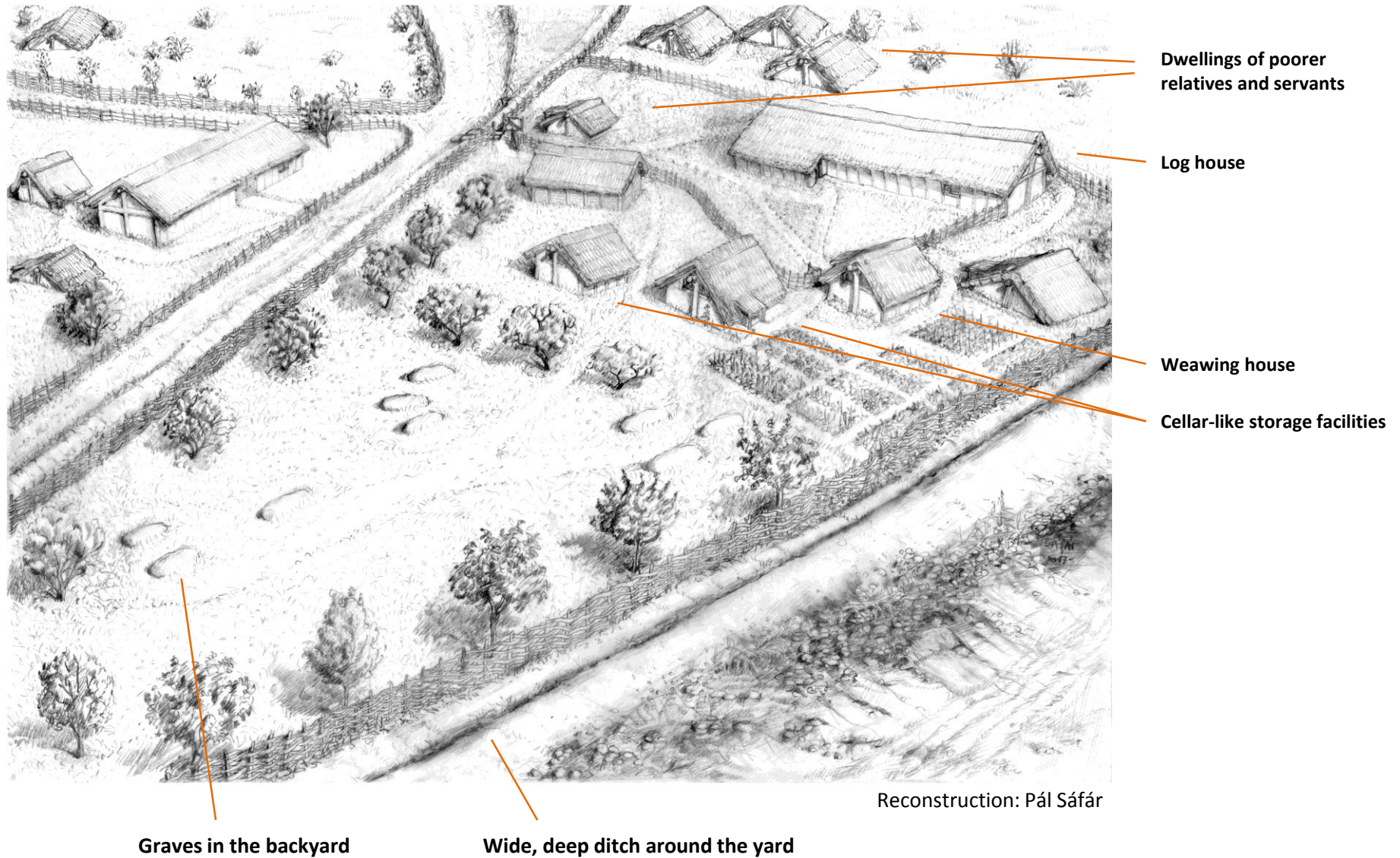
Sunken-floor houses and their reconstructions
(drawings by Katalin Nagy)



Above-ground log house on the excavation and a sketch how it was looked like once
(drawing by Katalin Nagy)



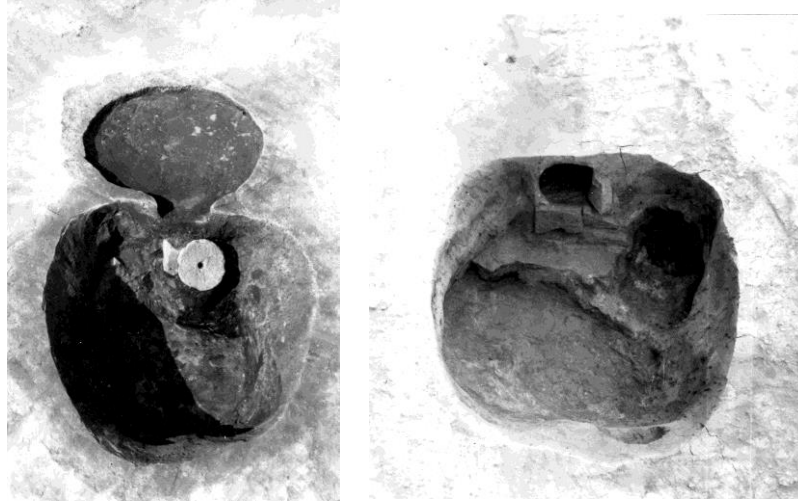
The leading family's living quater in the 7th century



Outbuildings and other structures

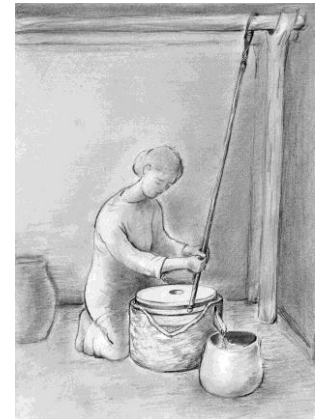
Open-air ovens were built among the houses: women prepared food in shallow pits covered with some kind of protective roofing. In several cases, the mouth of the oven was preserved, yielding evidence of baking smaller loaves or of drying and roasting food. The still glowing embers were scooped out into a shallow pit beside the oven and a porridge-like dish was prepared in small pots.

Open-air ovens dug into the soil



After the disappearance of the large log houses, round pits were dug for storing cereals. The clay used as building material, for example for plastering the floors and for daubing the wattling of the walls, was mined from large irregular pits. The two stones of a hand-mill were found in their original position in one of the pits: the two stones had been set inside a hollowed-out log and the lever of the upper stone was anchored to one of the beams of the roof structure, making grinding easier.

Pair of mill stones found in their original place and the reconstruction how they were used (drawing by Katalin Nagy)



Outbuildings and other structures

During the Early Avar period, the settlement's occupants drew their water from the River Danube. However, a series of cylindrical timber-lined wells were dug on the settlement for some reason in the eighth century.

Excavation process of a well and the documented remains of its wooden structure



The seventh-century settlement featured an elaborate system of ditches, of which the deeper and wider ones served for draining water, while the smaller, shallower ones enclosed the village's houses and their yards.

A large ring ditch with a diameter of 40 metres and a rampart around it lay in the settlement's centre. This ring ditch was cleaned from time to time. However, there were no traces of any buildings in the area enclosed by the ditch. Its location, its regular maintenance and the outstanding early Avar period finds recovered from it attest to its importance in the life of the community. It can perhaps be interpreted as a place where men gathered, and where rituals and religious ceremonies were held.

Uncovering the large ring ditch and a sketch how it was looked like once (drawing by Pál Sáfár)



THE STORY OF KÖLKED: FROM DAWN TO DECAY

The beginning

The Kölked settlement was established at the time when the Avars conquered the Carpathian Basin. However, at least one part of the village's occupants was of Germanic stock, a population that lived in the area already before the Avars' arrival. First, the area of the village was carved up and a plot was assigned to each family, who enclosed their plot with fences and ditches. The first large log houses were built alongside the handful of sunken houses around them. The large ring enclosure was constructed in the village centre, possibly used as a gathering place and a setting for religious activities.

At first, the villagers buried their dead in a costume adorned with jewellery and other accessories resembling the ones known from the graves of the earlier Pannonian Langobard cemeteries. The new belt buckle and belt mount types reflect a familiarity with Western European fashion and Byzantine types make their appearance as well. In addition to the traditional clothes fastened with a belt with pendent straps around the waist, women started wearing a gown-like robe fastened with a single disc brooch.

The vessels used in the households are known from the broken vessel fragments that were discarded in the refuse pits. Larger pots were used for cooking meals, mugs and jugs served for drinking. These vessels differed but slightly from the ones used by the Pannonian Langobards during the previous era.





THE STORY OF KÖLKED: FROM DAWN TO DECAY

The heyday of the settlement

The spectacular flourishing of the Kölked settlement coincided with the commencement of the Avars' regular military campaigns as allies of the lawful Lombard prince of Pavia. At Kölked, new houses were erected on the previously occupied plots, while the buildings no longer fit for living were left to decay and were filled up with household refuse. High-ranking families started to bury their dead within the village.

Western European fashion was followed quite closely: belt mount sets in the Merovingian style, female shoes with leather straps and new mounts for the female belts with pendent straps appeared. Some elements of the Avar style were combined with the Germanic taste: strap ends were added to the belt sets and a local decorative style can be distinguished. The number of Late Antique jewellery items increased significantly. Only the horse burials indicated that the Kölked settlement lay in the Avar Empire.

The growing prosperity is reflected in the settlement material too: a great variety of bowls, jugs, jars and flasks were used, and in addition to the small cooking pots, larger ones appeared in which meals for larger families could be prepared. Previously unencountered shallow baking trays and storage jars began to be used. Fragments of Late Antique amphoras, which had once contained imported wine and oil, were also discovered. Curiously enough, were it not for the lavishly furnished burials by the plot boundaries, the households of high-status families could have hardly been identified based solely on the archaeological material from their households.





THE STORY OF KÖLKED: FROM DAWN TO DECAY

Changing times

In the next period, both the extent of the settlement and the overall villagescape changed as a result of a long transformation process. By the end of this phase, the former plot system disappeared. The round gathering place for men still existed, but most of the ditches became infilled. Only a few above-ground log houses remained, most buildings were sunken houses. These sunken houses, earlier used as cellars, storage facilities, weaving houses or workshops, attained a residential function. Even the way of preparing food changed: open-air ovens separate from the houses were built and cooking was mostly performed in these.

Men began to wear Avar-type belt sets, although a few belt sets in the Merovingian style remained in use. Women preserved their belts with the pendent straps and their earrings of the Late Antique type. However, the tokens of spectacular wealth gradually disappeared. New cemeteries were opened by the end of this period and the overall changes are reflected in the burial grounds too.

Not only the place where food was cooked, but also the vessels used for preparing meals changed: food was prepared in tall conical baking bowls, baking bells and cauldrons, and the large cooking pots were replaced by smaller ones suitable for making a single portion of porridge.





THE STORY OF KÖLKED: FROM DAWN TO DECAY

New settlers and integration

The transformation was speeded up by the arrival of a new population group of genuine Avar stock to the settlement in Kölked. The newcomers demolished the buildings still standing in their part of the village to make space for their houses. The ditch enclosing the gathering place that had played an important role in the life of the earlier occupants was filled up, possibly an indication that the new settlers had been sent on the orders of a central political power. The extent of the settlement grew, but its overall layout became more dispersed. The new community opened new cemeteries too.

The villagescape of the Kölked settlement no longer differed from that of the average Avar village. The cast bronze belt sets in the burials were typical Late Avar pieces, as was the jewellery in the female burials. There was nothing to indicate that the settlement had not been occupied solely by Avars during the preceding century.

Randomly scattered sunken houses with open-air ovens and storage pits among them: the village now had a dispersed layout with barely identifiable households that were gradually abandoned by the end of the eighth century.

The refuse pits yielded little else than small cooking pots and mugs alongside the fragments of a few baking bells and clay cauldrons. The handful of yellow mugs and bowls typical for the Late Avar period represent the tableware.



ANSWERS

The questions raised by the Kölked cemeteries can only partly be answered on the basis of the archaeological finds and the scanty written sources.

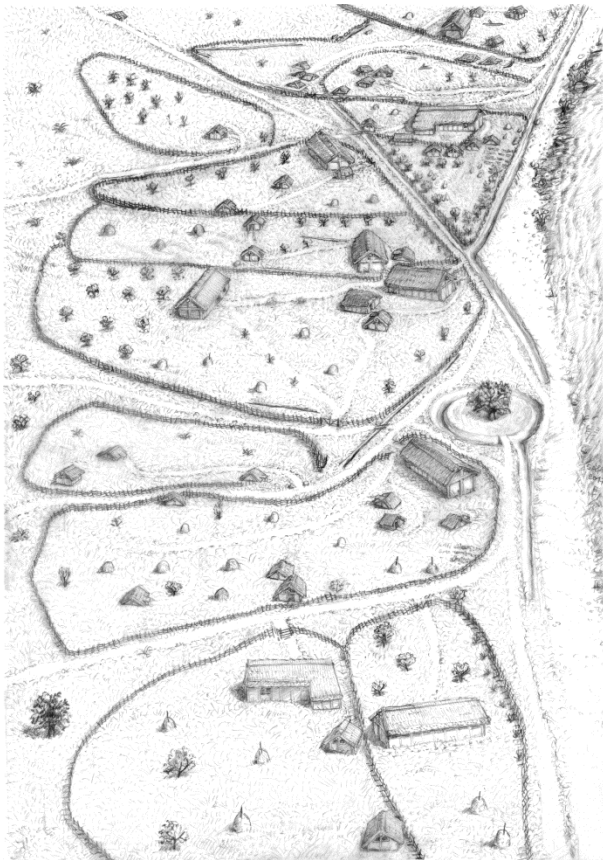
Who were they? How did they get here?

The clothing and jewellery as well as the ceramic vessels of the first generation living at Kölked in the Avar period were highly similar to those of the Langobards, the Germanic population that lived in the area before the Avar conquest. It was also suggested that the Kölked population could perhaps be identified with western Germanic groups such as Alemanns, Bajuvars or Franks who had sought refuge among the Avars for political reasons, but this contention was not supported by the archaeological record.

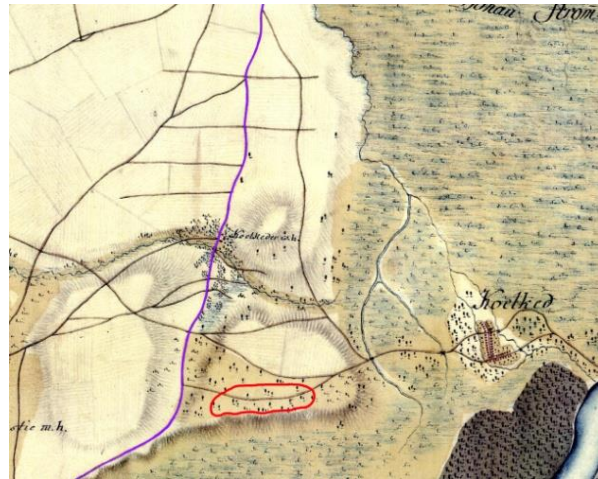
While the Germanic nature of the material culture is quite obvious, finds do not display striking Late Antique traits so as to suggest captives from Byzantium, who had been settled in the Avar Empire. Another fanciful theory assumed that the occupants had been Langobards who had returned from Italy, but it would be hard to be prove on the strength of the archaeological evidence whether they had spent some time in Italy before returning and founding their village at Kölked.

Why Kölked?

The Roman military road, which remained an important route up to the Late Middle Ages, and the River Danube both played a pivotal role in the Avar Empire's trade with Italy and Byzantium as well as a route of march during campaigns. Their proximity explains the wealth of the Kölked settlement and the choice of a high-ranking family to establish its home here. The golden mounts and buckle of a weapon belt, one of the magnificent finds of an eastern Transdanubian population of Germanic origin living under Avar rule, was presumably made in this region.



Bird's eye view reconstruction of the Kölked village around the mid 7th century (drawing by Pál Sáfár)



The Kölked site marked on a 18th century map with the Roman road

ANSWERS

How did they live under Avar rule?

The sites with a strong Germanic character and a large array of objects made in the Late Antique style stand out from among the early Avar cemeteries of the sixth–seventh centuries. These sites form a closed unit in the Keszthely region only, while in other regions, mainly in eastern Transdanubia and in the Middle Tisza region, they are scattered among the period's Avar settlements. Almost every site has its own story regarding the origin of its occupants and the process of their integration and assimilation. Depending on who the founders were – nobles, high-ranking warriors or common folk also engaged in various craft activities – and on whether they mixed with groups of other ancestry or remained a closed community, they each responded in their own way to the social, economic and political challenges and changes of the Avar Empire in the last third of the seventh century.

The community settling at Kölked was made up of noble families of Germanic origin who retained their social status and their power over their own people under the Avar rule. Perhaps they also led their people in the military campaigns, serving as auxiliary troop to the Avar khagan. At the time of the profound social and political changes known as the Middle Avar period, these high-ranking families became archaeologically invisible and the village at Kölked became one of the many similar villages of the Avar Empire.

