

## ANIMAL GRAVES IN THE EARLY MEDIAEVAL PERIOD IN THE CARPATHIAN BASIN

### NÉPVÁNDORLÁSKORI ÁLLATSÍROK A KÁRPÁT-MEDENCÉBEN

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#### Abstract

*Animal graves have no connection with human burials – even though, their pit was dug inside a cemetery or on the border of the cemetery –, these animals deserved burial on their „own right”. However, one can not speak of animal burials in the Avar Period, because we don't have information, on whether these burials were connected to a burial ritual. The three horse-dog graves of Keszthely – Belváros from the 5-6<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the three dog graves found at the site of Szarvas 75, Grave 220 at Ártánd–Kapitány dűlő, and the six dog skeletons at the site of Orosháza–Bónum téglagyár belong to this group from the Avar Period, in addition to those horse graves, which are presumably not connected with human burials. The criterion that distinguishes complete animals buried in pits of a settlement from animal graves is, that settlement features were not dug specifically for the animals, while animal graves were probably made explicitly for the dead animals.*

#### Kivonat

*Az állatsírok nem kapcsolódnak az emberi temetkezésekhez – attól függetlenül, hogy akár a temetőn belül, vagy annak a szélén került sor a sírgödörök kiásására –, ezek az élőlények „saját jogon” érdemelték ki, hogy eltemették őket. Azonban önálló állattemetkezésekről az avar korban belül semmiképpen sem szabad beszélnünk, mivel nincsenek információink arról, hogy az állatok elhelyezése a sírgödörben valamilyen temetési rítussal összekapcsolódhatott-e vagy sem. Ebbe a csoportba tartozik Keszthely–Belváros 5-6. századból származó, példaként bemutatott három ló-kutyasír, valamint az avar korra keltezhető Szarvas 75. számú lelőhelyén talált három kutyasír, Ártánd – Kapitány-dűlő 220. sírja és az Orosháza–Bónum téglagyár lelőhelyén feltárt hat kutyacsontváz, illetve azok a lósírok, amelyeknél feltételezhető, hogy emberi temetkezéshez nem kötődnek. A településeken feltárt gödrökben elhelyezett egész állatoktól az a tényező különbözteti meg a vizsgált sírokat, hogy a települések gödreit nem az állatok számára ásták ki egykor, ezzel szemben az állatsírokat vélhetően az elpusztult egyvedeknek készítették.*

KEYWORDS: ANIMAL GRAVE, SACRIFICIAL ANIMAL, CARPATHIAN BASIN, EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD

KULCSSZAVAK: ÁLLATSÍR, ÁLDOZATI ÁLLAT, KÁRPÁT-MEDENCE, NÉPVÁNDORLÁS KOR

#### Introduction

The arrival of Avars into the Carpathian Basin during the last third of the 6<sup>th</sup> century brought along a new burial custom in the Migration Period: animals were buried in parts or as a whole. Previously there were also some examples for animals being buried next to a deceased person, or in a nearby pit, but this custom became typical on a large scale only during the Avar Period (568–9<sup>th</sup> century).

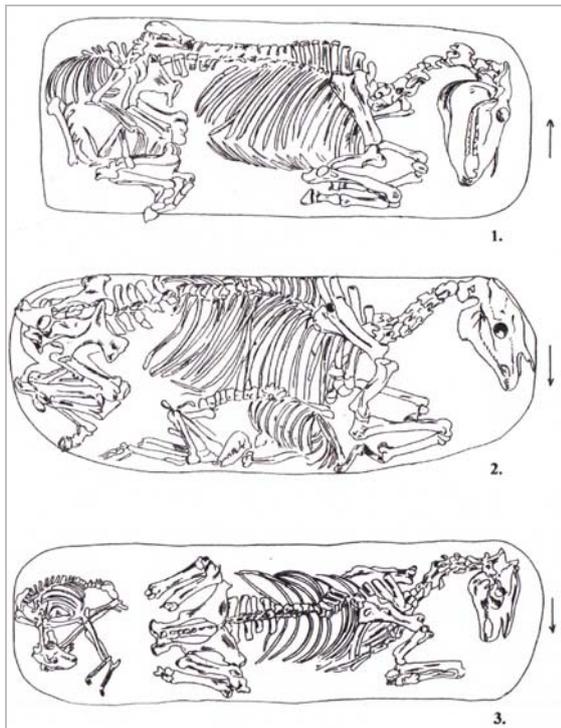
Among the animals buried as a whole, we distinguish those, which could have fulfilled a sacrificial function from those, whose sacrificial meaning are less probable (e. g. natural death). In the latter case we cannot rule out the possibility, that emotional attachment to the animal motivated people to carry out the burial. Sometimes animals were kept alive in spite of chronic degenerative disease (Vörös 1999, 127). On this basis it is

possible that there was an emotional relationship between the owner and the animal. This is why some diseased animals were buried later with their owner. This type of attachment can be found even today: some owners choose their pets' grave near their home or in a designated animal cemetery.

Because of the length of the topic and limitations of this paper, apart from the horses, I will deal only with animal graves in the Late Avar Period (turn of the 7-8<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> century). In my research I studied the territory of the former Avar Khaganate, primarily on the basis of the published literature.

#### Animal graves

Animals buried in a separate pit – which can thought to be a grave for the animal – are not always associated with human burials. These pits can be interpreted as animal graves, although their burial pattern is not systematic, they don't form groups but can be found scattered over the site.



**Fig. 1.:** Horse-dog graves in Keszthely–Belváros (from Vörös 1999, 141)

**1. ábra:** Ló-kutya temetkezések Keszthely–Belváros lelőhelyén (Vörös 1999, 141 nyomán)

However, we have to distinguish between animal graves from the burials of animals that probably died of disease, which can be noticed in the settlements of the Avar Period. Animals that died of natural reasons were placed presumably in ordinary settlement pits used at the time. The most important aspect may have been the prevention of the spread of disease and the maintenance of some basic hygiene by these forms of animal disposal. The reason for the digging such pits had no cultic or religious motivation.

It is really hard to find out the reason of the animal's death, because there are several methods of slaughtering, which leave no mark on the bones (e.g. suffocation or heart disruption). Such animals could end up being interpreted as animals which died in a natural way, even if archaeozoologists would study their remains in every detail. If the research would show, that the animal were kept alive long despite a major trauma or chronic disease, then it would be easier to decide whether it died a natural death or not.

Horses in gear were buried together with dogs in the cemetery of Keszthely-Belváros (**Fig. 1.**). This habit is unusual among horse burials in the Avar Period, where horse skeletons placed on their sides are not characteristic, Ilona Kovrig (Kovrig 1999, 104-105) and István Vörös (Vörös 1999, 126-127) called attention to this rite, which was unknown

with the Avars. Horse skeletons placed on their sides can be found in the Carpathian Basin as well, in horse, horse-dog graves from the Roman Imperial Period. Vörös mentioned analogies to this custom, such as the graves of the Germanic horseman from the 5-6<sup>th</sup> century as well as independent horse and horse-dog graves. In his explanation, the 3 horse-dog graves from the cemetery of Keszthely are analogous with the Germanic burial ritual of the 5-6<sup>th</sup> century (Vörös 1999, 126-128; a custom extended to the Rhein-Main territory; see Blaich 2005).

István Vörös drew a conclusion after the osteological study of the animals: all six animals were fully-grow males. Evidence for the way the animals were killed was not found on the fragmentary horse skulls, but it was noticeable in the case of dogs, that the injuries found on the atlas could be contemporaneous; fractures on the cervical vertebrae seemed consistent with the animals having been strangled (Vörös 1999, 126-127). Because of this we may presume, that a burial was arranged for the horses, in which dogs played a subordinate role – as their deaths were not natural, as may have been the case with the horses. The dogs seem to have been killed on the occasion of the horse burials.

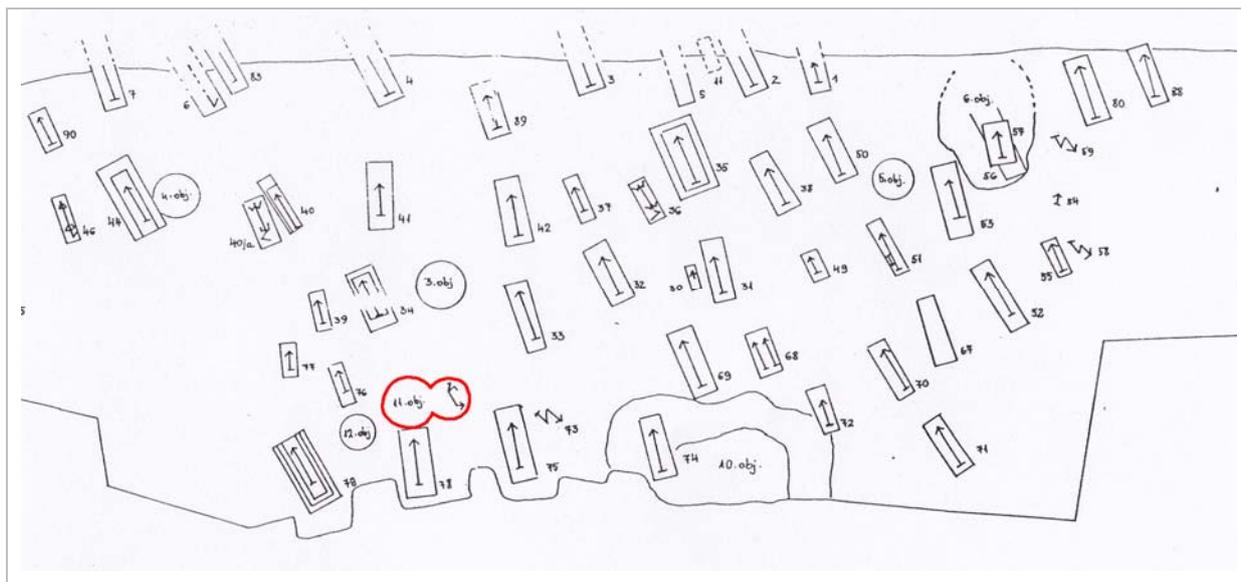
The horse from Grave 1 at Keszthely was kept alive for years in spite of the massive fusion between 17 of its vertebrae. Probably following repeated episodes of acute inflammation, the animal's spine stabilized and the animal could be spared in spite of this debilitating condition. Animals suffering from serious diseases can be interpreted from this point of view as:

1. Animals could easily contract arthritis which may have been exacerbated by overworking

2. During the disease some received careful treatment and were spared. In the case of this horse – one may suppose that there was a demand to keep the animal alive, healing knowledge must have been in place and the existence of redundant horses may also be supposed (Vörös 1999, 126-127).

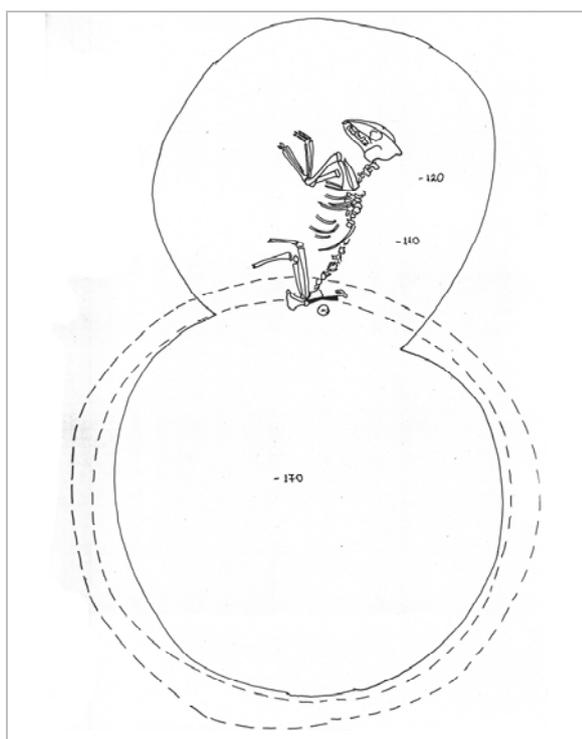
We can find several examples for animal graves in the Avar Period, for example the Grave 220 at Ártánd–Kapitány dűlő (Kralovánszky 1996, 61), the six graves at Orosháza – Bónum téglagyár and the three dog skeletons found at the site of Szarvas 75. Their common attribute is that these dogs were buried separately from humans.

At Szarvas 75, a dog was found during the 1987-1990 excavations of the site. It came to light from a complex of two adjacent pits forming a "8" shape (Feature 11; **Figs 2. and 3.**). The dog was placed in the smaller, circle-shaped eastern pit on its right side, slightly stretched out but with the legs contracted (Juhász 1990).



**Fig. 2.:** Part of the cemetery plan from Szarvas 75 showing Feature 11

**2. ábra:** Szarvas 75 temető-térképének részlete a 11. objektummal



**Fig. 3.:** Szarvas 75, Feature 11

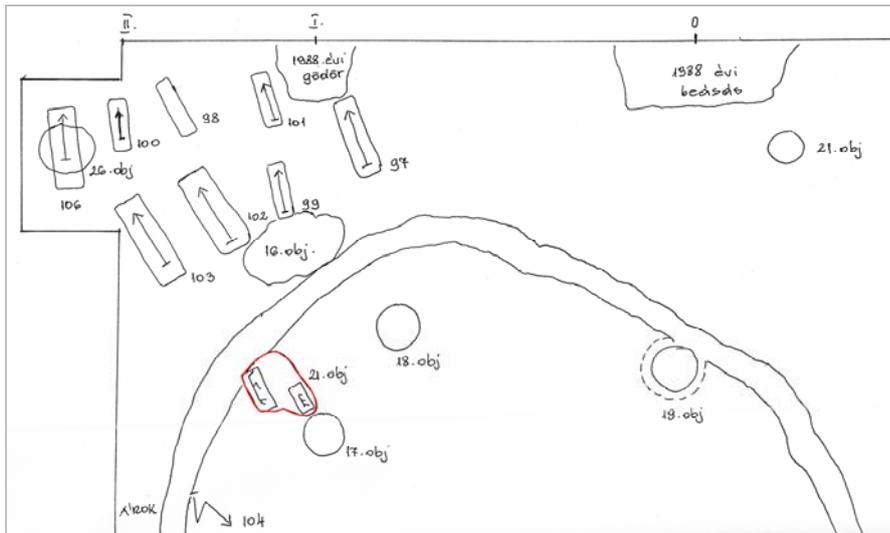
**3. ábra:** Szarvas 75, 11. objektum

No objects were found in the pit, so we are unsure about the dating of this skeleton. It was probably carried out using a settlement feature inside the cemetery. None of the graves are in a superposition around it, they follow its outline. This pit therefore can be dated to the late Avar Period, according to the use of the surrounding cemetery. However, the role played by this feature within the cemetery is unclear. It can be assumed, that the pit was not dug for the animal. On this basis we cannot declare this

burial an animal grave. The 8 shape of the double feature also indirectly supports this hypothesis, because nearly the half of the feature was left unused.

The other two dogs were buried into separate pits, oriented the same as the other graves (Fig. 4). The animals were buried in an irregular-shaped pit (Feature 21). The feature was found in the southwest part of a semicircular ditch (pen?), and it is connected with the ditch directly. The ditch is datable to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The section of an enclosure was explored here, whose entrance could not be clarified. Features 19 and 21 may be assigned to the Avar Period, although no artifact was found at the other features or they were dated to prehistoric periods. Animals were buried inside Feature 21 a settlement (?) feature of two proper, rectangular pits, aligned with the orientation of the rest of the graves from the Avar Period (northwest-southeast direction). The skulls of the dogs were placed in the same direction as those of the humans' (Juhász 1992). It is unclear, whether these independent dog graves belonged to the cemetery or to the settlement, neither of these two possibilities can be ruled out.

At the site of Orosháza-Bónum téglagyár, the dog graves were opened in a separate territory – which was said to be a huge according to Irén Juhász (Fig. 5). In her opinion, this reflected the religious concerns of their owners (Juhász 1995, 44). According to the field documentation, however, the fact that these animals were buried in a separate territory becomes really uncertain. Only Graves 112 and 122 are marked in the documentation's cemetery plan, but they are flanked by human graves.

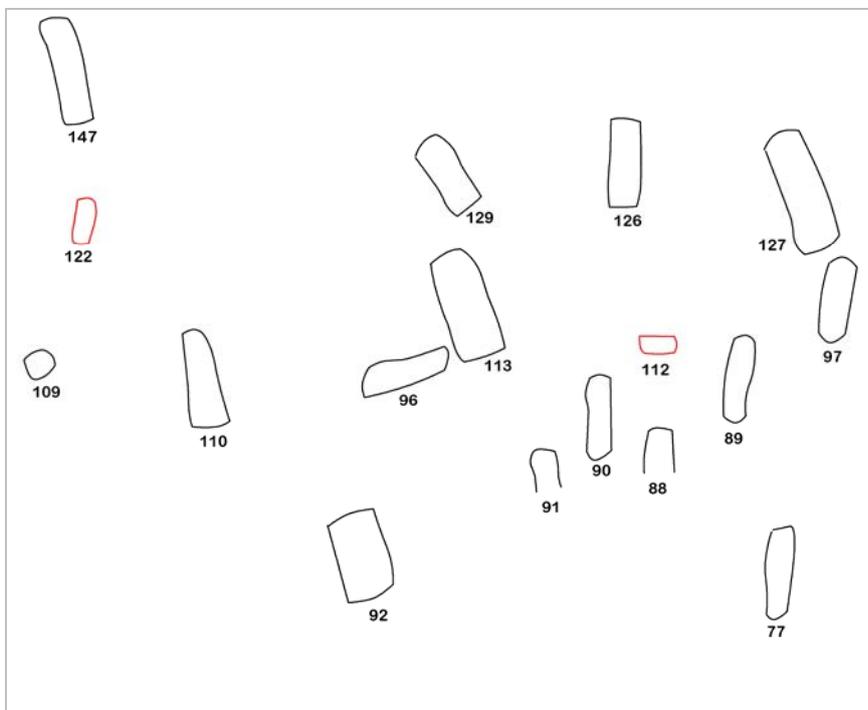


**Fig. 4.:**

Part of the cemetery plan from Szarvas 75 showing the two dog graves (Feature 21)

**4. ábra:**

Szarvas 75 temető-térképének részlete a két kutyatemekezéssel (21. objektum)



**Fig. 5.:**

Part of the cemetery plan from Orosháza-Bónum téglagyár, showing the dog burials in Features 112 and 122

**5. ábra:**

Orosháza-Bónum téglagyár temető-térképének részlete a két kutyatemekezéssel (21. objektum)

Four other dogs may have been buried near Grave 122 – a major empty area was left in the environment of this feature. This is, however, only a suggestion. In this case the animals would not have been interred in a separate territory, and they would belong to the cemetery made for human graves. It is possible therefore, that some of these dogs – or possibly all six of them – were associated with human burials (Juhász 1967). On the basis of these two graves, the statement according to which these graves were of significant size can be doubted. In the plan of the cemetery – we can only draw conclusion from spatial distributions because of the lack of grave markers – the size of the pits in question is approximately only the half of the

human graves. They are similar in size to a child's grave. In other words, the sizes of these pits may be correlated with the size of the animals.

Parallels to the 5-8<sup>th</sup> century animal graves can be found among the Langobards, Friesians, Toringi, Saxons and in South-Scandinavia – even between the 5-12<sup>th</sup> century. They were placed in cemeteries independently of human graves, dog graves thus came into existence, where the skeletons were found in an anatomical order (Makiewicz 2000, 227).

### Summary

The animal graves have long been known to researchers of the Early Medieval Period. These graves can be interpreted in numerous ways. Overall interpretation as animal sacrifice is unlikely, because sacrificial animals would have been more likely to be buried into graves that were dug up for people, or at least near human burials (as e. g. some of the horse graves). Animal graves may be found inside or on the border of cemeteries, as well as in settlements. A major criterion for animal burials set out in this paper is that the body is not simply deposited in an already existing settlement feature, but a special grave is opened in which the body is laid to rest.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Irén Juhász for sharing information on the sites of Orosháza–Bónum téglagyár, Szarvas 68 and Szarvas 75. She showed me relevant documentation of the excavation and gave me permission to use the data on dog graves in my thesis.

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