

EAST CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE IN THE MIDDLE AGES, 450-1450

# The Other Europe in the Middle Ages

*Avars, Bulgars, Khazars and Cumans*



*Edited by*

Florin Curta

*With the assistance of*

Roman Kovalev



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BRILL

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Europe in the Middle Ages,  
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*General Editor*

Florin Curta

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CONFLICT AND COEXISTENCE:  
THE LOCAL POPULATION OF THE CARPATHIAN BASIN  
UNDER AVAR RULE (SIXTH TO SEVENTH CENTURY)

Tivadar Vida

The date of the Avar migration to the Middle Danube region (568) is a turning point in the history of the Carpathian Basin. The Avars conquered and then united under their rule the inhabitants of the region, Germanic and Romance populations, Slavs, and inhabitants of the border provinces of the early Byzantine Empire. The polity established in the Carpathian Basin by the Avar horsemen in the late sixth century survived for two and a half centuries and became one of the most important political and military factors in early medieval Europe.

Recent archaeological excavations in Hungary have produced new evidence for a detailed study of the interaction between the Middle Danube region and the steppe lands north of the Black Sea from which the Avars had come, as well as of the interactions between Avars and other nomadic groups, on one hand, and the natives of the Carpathian Basin, on the other. The remarkable wealth and variety of the archaeological record offers unique opportunities for the refinement of the Early Avar chronology and, as consequence, for the reconstruction of the cultural and possibly ethnic conditions in the Carpathian Basin in the late 500s and during the seventh century. Any attempt at studying the ethnic and cultural interactions within the early Avar qaganate must start from identifying those phenomena and artifact assemblages, which offer new information about dress, spirituality, social stratification, lifeways, and modes of production. This chapter is a survey of the most recent advances in the archaeology of the Avar age.

*A brief history of research*

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Hungarian archaeologists were obsessively and almost exclusively preoccupied with studying contacts between Avars and the East. The political and cultural bias of this peculiar form of Orientalism has only recently become the object

of critical studies.<sup>1</sup> During the second half of the 1900s, most Hungarian scholars had little, if any, interest in the study of the relationships between Avars, on one hand, and the local population of the Carpathian Basin, which they had found in place.<sup>2</sup> This changed in the early 1980s, when Éva Garam began the publication of artifacts of Byzantine origin found in Avar-age assemblages. In doing so, she drew inspiration from a number of prominent studies published in Western Europe at that time.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, Attila Kiss had started the excavation of the large cemetery at Kölked-Feketekapu, which prompted him to approach the problem of the Gepids under Avar rule.<sup>4</sup> The results of his investigations were first presented in a volume of studies and then became the basis for the two monographs on the Kölked-Feketekapu cemeteries.<sup>5</sup> Csanád Bálint, who had initially focused on the steppe traditions in the culture of the Avar age, later became very critical of the overemphasis on, and misuse of, eastern analogies in Avar archaeology.<sup>6</sup> He was the first to study systematically artifact categories at variance with the traditions of the steppe, but he did not draw any ethnic or cultural conclusions from that material.<sup>7</sup> His position later changed, and together with Falko Daim, Csanád Bálint became the staunchest advocate of the idea that from an archaeological point of view, the Avar-age Carpathian Basin was little more than a periphery of the Byzantine cultural world.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, it is equally true that the social structure and power configuration of the Avar qaganate remained “eastern” throughout the two centuries and a half of Avar history.

The collapse of the Communist regime and the re-orientation of Hungary towards the European Union re-directed the attention of Hungarian scholars towards the European traditions of the Avar age, primarily the relations between the Avars, the Merovingian world, and

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<sup>1</sup> Bálint, forthcoming. Worth mentioning in this context are also László 1955 and Bóna 1980, 31–95.

<sup>2</sup> There was of course much interest in the study of Germanic groups that had settled over the course of history in the Middle Danube region. However, the study of the relations between such groups or other segments of the local population in the Carpathian Basin, on one hand, and the Avars, on the other, made little progress, primarily because of the lack of evidence enabling scholars to move beyond the rather simplistic assumptions of Alföldi 1926 and Marosi and Fettich 1936, 63–99.

<sup>3</sup> For a history of research, see Garam 2001, 233–34.

<sup>4</sup> Kiss 1987a and 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Kiss 1988, 1996 and 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Bálint 1989, 176–83.

<sup>7</sup> Bálint 1993, 233–46.

<sup>8</sup> Bálint 2000, 99–162; Daim 2000, 77–204.

groups of population within the neighboring provinces of the early Byzantine Empire. The last two decades witnessed massive excavations of cemeteries in eastern Pannonia (Budakalász, Környe, Szekszárd, and Zamárdi), a region of Hungary in which besides elements typical for the culture of the steppe, archaeologists were able to identify both Roman and Germanic traditions. It has now become possible to rephrase the old questions in the light of both more evidence and a new understanding of inter-cultural and interethnic relations within the Avar qaganate. Particularly relevant in this respect is the ongoing debate about the “ethnic interpretation” in (medieval) archaeology.<sup>9</sup> In a recently published book, Sebastian Brather argues that identifying ethnic groups by archaeological means is neither possible, nor truly significant; archaeologists should concentrate instead on studying economic and social phenomena. Brather’s position may be popular with advocates of a post-processualist critique of both archaeological sources and the methods of the archaeological inquiry, but it rests on wrong assumptions. In fact, quite the contrary seems to be true: refined methods of dating and application of anthropological and sociological models of ethnicity offer today excellent opportunities for a much more sophisticated study by archaeological means of ethnic and cultural traditions. Early Avar burial assemblages are an excellent case in point, for through them we can gain a glimpse into the traditions associated with the steppe, but also with the Germanic or Romance groups known from historical sources to have been in the Carpathian Basin for quite some time before the arrival of the Avars. In what follows, I will attempt to show just how such traditions may be identified by means of an in-depth study of dress and spiritual culture.

### *Avar aliens?*

While building their new empire, the Avars reorganized the population they had found in the region. Political power was unambiguously reserved for the Avar elite. That much results from the uniform distribution within the Carpathian Basin of ‘funerary pyre’ assemblages of Central Asian type (see below), as well as from the central position within cemeteries of the first generations, a position granted to males buried with their horses, composite bows and spearheads. Burials of

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<sup>9</sup> Brather 2004. However, see Curta 2006 and 2007.

high-ranking leaders produced swords with P- and D-shaped suspension mounts of East European type, as well as various symbols of power, such as bird-shaped heads of scepters or staffs, which were carved in either bone or wood and then covered with gold foil. Such symbols of power have good analogies in burial assemblages of the Eurasian steppe lands.

The Avars were pastoralists and the distribution of grave types and goods of East European origin suggests that they first occupied the Alföld (Great Hungarian Plain), with only a few garrisons settled in Pannonia to secure the control of those lands. Archaeologists have long viewed “funerary pyre” assemblages as the hallmark of the first generation of Avars in the Carpathian Basin. These are shallow pits of mortuary sacrificial use, which produced spearheads and horse gear, but no bones. “Funerary pyre” assemblages are evenly distributed within the Carpathian Basin.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, the distribution of lavishly furnished, “princely” burials, such as Kunbábony, Bócsa and Tépe—all dated to the first two thirds of the seventh century—indirectly suggests that the initial center of Avar power was indeed in the initially lay in the Alföld. Chieftains and clan heads were more often than not buried in separate family graveyards, according to their high social standing. The skeletons of the male buried in the “princely” burial at Kunbábony has been anthropologically identified as of Sayano-Mongolid stock, which has further been interpreted as an indication that the Avar elites, especially the members of the qagan’s family and his retinue of warriors had all come from the Eurasian steppe lands.<sup>11</sup>

When the Avars entered Pannonia, the formerly Roman province was already inhabited by groups of population, which, on the testimony of the archaeological record, maintained strong relations with both the Mediterranean region and with Frankish Gaul. Following the migration of the Lombards to Italy, new cemeteries came into being in eastern Pannonia, each with between several hundred and several thousands of graves. No burial assemblage produced so far artifacts, which could be treated as continuing the tradition of the early sixth-century assemblages in the Carpathian Basin attributed to either Lombards or Gepids. However, many of them have good analogies in late sixth-

<sup>10</sup> Németh and Klima 1987–1989, 178–79 with fig. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Tóth and Horváth 1992, 281–91. Not everyone agrees with the interpretation of the Kunbábony burial assemblage as a qagan’s tomb. See Kiss 1995, 131–49 with fig. 1.2.

century assemblages in northern Italy attributed to the Lombards after their migration from Pannonia. As such, these artifacts testify to the spread of late antique tastes and fashions from the Mediterranean region. The graves of Avar warriors buried together with their weapons cluster in separate groups within such cemeteries, particularly during their first phase of occupation (Budakalász, Kölked, Szekszárd). In fact, the very structure of those cemeteries is determined by the central position of warrior burials with horse skeletons.

The rather conservative features of the male dress in which Avar warriors were buried are in sharp contrast with much lavish clothing employed for female burials, elements of which betray more influence of late antique fashions than their male counterparts. Grave 107 of the cemetery A in Kölked-Feketekapu contained a male skeleton, most likely an Avar warrior, judging from the sword with which he was buried. The man's wife was buried next to him, in the neighboring grave 108, which produced an amazing variety of costly and richly decorated dress accessories, such as gold earrings with croissant-shaped pendant of Byzantine origin, a typically late antique disc-fibula, two pins, as well as a folding iron chair. In sharp contrast to the male burial, the grave goods from the female burial assemblage bespeak the quick adoption of almost everything that was at that time in fashion across the European continent.<sup>12</sup> This could be interpreted as an indication either that the woman was a member of one of the local communities with ties to the Empire or to Frankish Gaul, or that not long after their arrival to Pannonia, the women of the nomadic conquerors were quick to adopt the local fashions. The archaeological record strongly supports the idea of ties between communities in Western Europe and the Carpathian Basin shortly after the arrival of the Avars. The beginning of the Avar age witnessed a unique blending of steppe, Mediterranean, and Merovingian traditions, a phenomenon that is especially prominent in assemblages, the territory of the formerly Roman province of Pannonia.

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<sup>12</sup> Kiss 1996, 448–50 and pls. 34–36.

*The local "Germanic" population*

During the last thirty years or so, excavations of cemeteries in western Hungary produced a large number of cultural elements for which the only or the best analogies are in the western Merovingian region of early medieval Europe. In a now often cited paper, Attila Kiss has selected just fifteen artifact categories and traced their origins back to assemblages in the Carpathian Basin attributed to either Gepids or Lombards, with only a few analogies in *Reihengräberkreis* assemblages of Western Europe.<sup>13</sup>

Such artifact categories (*spathæ*, strap ends and belt mounts with embossed decoration, iron belt mounts, combs, planes, earrings with twisted end, ceramic wares with stamped decoration, etc.) do indeed stand out as different from the artifacts associated with burials of Avar warriors or with contemporary burial assemblages in the East European steppe lands. Attila Kiss's conclusion was that there was a substantial population of Germanic origin in Pannonia during the first century of Avar rule. He further suggested that these were communities of Gepids forcefully resettled by the Avars from their native lands in the Alföld.<sup>14</sup>

Kiss was certainly right in tracing the origin of those categories of artifacts to the early Merovingian age. However, his lists of "Germanic" traits are based exclusively on typology and stylistic analysis. Perhaps because such methods were viewed as insufficient, his conclusions were met with a lot of scepticism, even though several German scholars had already substantiated Kiss's ideas by pointing to striking parallels between Avar- and Merovingian-age assemblages.<sup>15</sup>

The close examination of many of the "Germanic" artifacts have meanwhile revealed that they were often parts of a dress inspired by the Merovingian fashion of the age. Moreover, other artifacts are directly related to the ties between the spiritual life of the Avar-age inhabitants of the Carpathian Basin and similar phenomena in the Merovingian world.

<sup>13</sup> Kiss 1992.

<sup>14</sup> Kiss 1992, 1996, and 2001.

<sup>15</sup> For a critique of Kiss's ideas, see Bóna 1987, 129; Bálint 1993, 242–43. For a reply to such criticism, see Kiss 1999–2001. For German scholars endorsing of Kiss's ideas, see Martin 1973, 110–12; Werner 1986, 26. The very chronology of the Avar age is based on accepted dates of artifacts most typical for Merovingian assemblages (see Martin 1990, 65–90; Daim 1998, 97–135).

*“Germanic” male fashions*

For male graves, most relevant for this discussion are belt sets and weapons, as well as the particular ways of wearing or attaching them (Fig. 1,6). Burial assemblages with male skeletons in Pannonia as well as Transylvania produced belt sets typically including a buckle, a buckle counter plate and a rectangular belt mount.<sup>16</sup> Such sets were very popular during the last third of the sixth century, particularly in the western areas of Merovingian Europe. This is also true for other categories of artifacts with which the belt sets were associated, such as *spathae*, sax-like short swords, or shield bosses. In Western Europe, the three-piece belt set is dated to the Early Merovingian II phase, namely between 570/580 and 620/630.<sup>17</sup> Oftentimes, belt sets in Pannonia also included wide strap ends, an element otherwise not present in West European assemblages of the Early Merovingian II phase, but well documented in contemporary assemblages in northern Italy. The strap end from Vác was decorated in the so-called Martynivka style otherwise inspired by Late Roman or early Byzantine metalwork.<sup>18</sup> Three-piece belt sets have also been found in the cemetery excavated during the interwar period in Unirea (Transylvania).<sup>19</sup> The interpretation of these burial assemblages must take into account the strong parallels with Merovingian burial assemblages for both belt sets and the associated weapons. Whether “Lombards” or “Gepids,” the men buried in Pannonia and Transylvania with three- or four-piece belts were given the same treatment in death as their Frankish, Alamannian, or Bavarian contemporaries.

The long, double-edged sword was a status symbol in the early Middle Ages. The way in which the sword was suspended at the waist changed in the course of time along with changing belt fashions. Most prominent in

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<sup>16</sup> Such belt sets are known from burials 18, 66, and 97 in Környe (Salamon and Erdélyi 1971, 80 with pl. 2.36–39 and 47; 87 with pl. 9.1–5; and 93 with pl. 15.25–27). They are also known from the cemetery A in Kölked-Feketekapu (grave 324A; Kiss 1996, 212–13 and 482 pl. 68.1–4), Budakalász (unpublished excavations by Adrien Pásztor and Tivadar Vida, 1987–1992), and Vác (grave 401; Tettamanti 2000, 150 with pl. 22.401.4–8), Band (graves 10, 71, 159, and 166; Kovács 1913, 286 fig. 15.1–3, 332 fig. 51.1–3, 356 fig. 78.6 and 10, and 357 fig. 79.5), Unirea (graves 10 and 13; Roska 1934, 126 fig. 3E.1–2.5 and 127 fig. 4/A.2–3 and 14), and Noşlac (grave 17; Rusu 1962, 272 fig. 2.39).

<sup>17</sup> Kiss 1996, 212–13; Martin 1990, 74.

<sup>18</sup> Tettamanti 2000, 150 with pl. 22.9. For the Martynivka culture, to which that style is attributed, see Bálint 1989, 88–92.

<sup>19</sup> Graves 12 and 13: Roska 1934, 123–30.

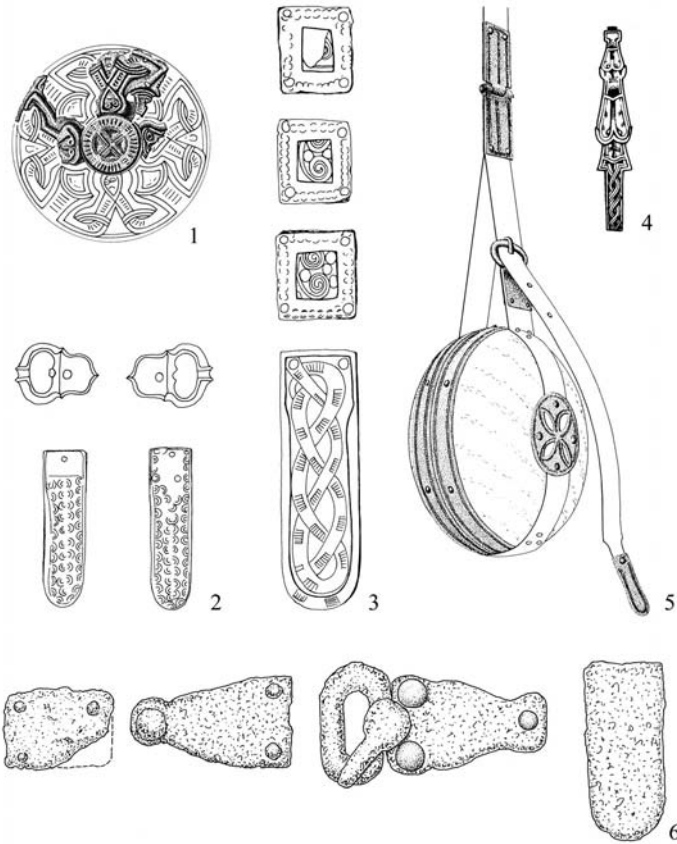


Figure 1. Artifacts illustrating the “Germanic” traditions of the Early Avar period: 1—round brooch with Animal Style II ornament (Csákberény, grave 283); 2—stocking suspender set (Budakalász-Dunapart, grave 1188); 3—female dress with mount-studded hanging strap (Budakalász-Dunapart, grave 1148); 4—female head-dress with pin (Kölked-Feketekapu B, grave 85); 5—amulet capsule (Budakalász-Dunapart, grave 458); 6—a three- and four-piece sword-belt set (Kölked-Feketekapu A, grave 324). After Vida 1995, 1996 and 2005; Kiss 1996 and 2001.

Pannonia during the Early Avar age were the so-called Weihmörting weapon belts, which appear Merovingian assemblages dated to the sixth century.<sup>20</sup> Graves 16 and 390 of the Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói cemetery produced rectangular belt mounts, which are similar to those decorating

<sup>20</sup> Such belts were given their name by Hans Zeiss, who was the first to study them (Zeiss 1934, 39). See now Ament 1974, 153–61; Menghin 1983, 145–49.

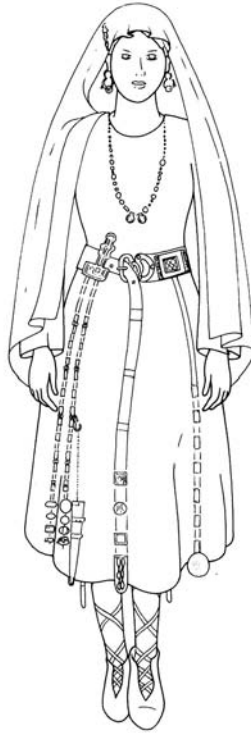


Figure 2. Reconstruction of the dress of a noble woman from grave 85 of the cemetery B in Kölked-Feketekapu B. Drawing by Sándor Ósi, after Kiss 2001.

sword-belts found in the western area of Merovingian Europe (Fig. 3.1).<sup>21</sup> Besides three belt mounts, the sword-belt set in grave 390 has a buckle with a shield-shaped plate decorated with dentil, interlaced ornamentation. An identical ornamentation appears on a large, hinged strap end found in the burial assemblage of grave 8 of the Unirea cemetery, in which it was found in association with a female skeleton.<sup>22</sup> That an identical ornament may be found on artifacts found in assemblages at the opposite ends of the Carpathian Basin speaks volumes about the circulation of Avar-age ornamental motifs. Belt-mounts of the Weihmörting type first appeared in West Merovingian assemblages at the beginning of the last third of the sixth century, but were still in use in the early

<sup>21</sup> Rosner 1999, 50 fig. 7; 54–55 and 194 pl. 28. The sword-belt set from grave 390 has been known to archaeologists for some time (see Bott 1987, 283).

<sup>22</sup> Roska 1934, 126 fig. A.8.

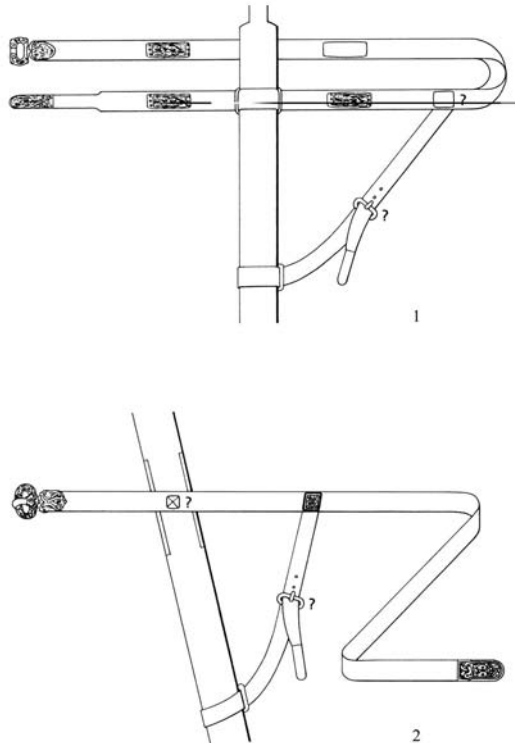


Figure 3. Sword belt-sets from grave 390 in Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói and the Jankovich collection. Drawings by Sándor Ősi, after Vida 2000.

600s.<sup>23</sup> In the Carpathian Basin, the earliest example with niello decoration is that from the sixth-century cemetery at Szentendre.<sup>24</sup> Typologically, technologically, and in terms of decorative patterns, all known Avar-age specimens must be dated to the late sixth or early seventh century. Such a chronology is not contradicted by what we know about the dating of similar specimens from assemblages in northern Italy attributed to the Lombards.<sup>25</sup> In conclusion, Weihmörting-type belt sets were in use by warriors in the Avar qaganate between 570 and 610, a chronology supported primarily by the toposeriation of the Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói cemetery, which shows that the two burials with

<sup>23</sup> Menghin 1983, 40–46, 53, 146; Koch 1990, 176; Reiß 1994, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Bóna 1976, figs. 62–63.

<sup>25</sup> Jørgensen 1991, 15 with fig. 10; Rupp 1997, 30 with fig. 6.

Weihmörting-type belt sets were part of a cluster of graves in the very middle of the cemetery, at a distance in both space and time from the surrounding graves.

Equally significant for this discussion of “Germanic” fashions is a number of gold artifacts with Animal Style II decoration, which have been found *ca.* 1820 in Hungary and have subsequently entered the Jankovich collection.<sup>26</sup> The function of these artifacts has long been disputed, partly because of the obviously fragmentary character of the assemblage.<sup>27</sup> That they all belonged to the same assemblage cannot be doubted, given the same alloy, technique, and exquisite decoration. In my opinion, the diamond-shaped mount strongly suggests that the artifacts in the Jankovich collection may have belonged to a Late Merovingian sword-belt (Fig. 3.2). Such diamond-shaped mounts appear in multi-piece sword-belt sets, which usually included both a waist belt and a side strap for the attachment of the scabbard.<sup>28</sup> The side strap had a strap end and a mount, while the diamond-shaped mount served for attaching the side strap to the belt at the waist. This configuration is reminiscent of the Civezzano-type belt sets dated to the first third of the seventh century, which replaced the Weihmörting type and remained in fashion until the late 600s.<sup>29</sup> The change from Weihmörting to Civezzano belt sets is most interesting in cemeteries of northern Italy attributed to the Lombards. In Nocera Umbra, both types were in use between 590 and 610, after which the multi-piece Civezzano belt set gradually became the only acceptable fashion.<sup>30</sup> Even though the exact circumstances in which the artifacts from the Jankovich collection have been found remain unknown, their stylistic analysis strongly suggest a date within the first third of the seventh century, precisely the time period during which Civezzano belt sets came into fashion.

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<sup>26</sup> For the circumstances of their finding, see Bóna 1982–1983, 82 and 85.

<sup>27</sup> Interpretations varied from Avar “princely belt set” (Bóna 1982–83, 82 and 85) to horse gear strap mounts (Janssen 1981, 166–67) and shoe strap mounts (Straub 1999, 96–99). Most such interpretations were based on the lack of any known Avar-age analogies for the artifacts in the Jankovich collection. However, in recent decades gilded silver objects of comparably exquisite execution and decoration have been found in Budakalász, Zamárdi and Kölked.

<sup>28</sup> Christlein 1971, 22–26 and fig. 7; Menghin 1973, 42–45 with fig. 32–33; Reiβ 1994, 56–58 with fig. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Menghin 1983, 48–52 and 60.

<sup>30</sup> Rupp 1997, 30 fig. 6.

Besides diamond-shaped mounts, multi-piece sword-belt sets are also betrayed by the presence of pyramid-shaped hollow knobs.<sup>31</sup> Such knobs were found in great numbers in cemeteries in northern Italy, the existence of which coincides in time with the Early Avar assemblages. A richly decorated pyramid-shaped knob may have also belonged to the Jankovich collection assemblage. If so, it may not have been very different from the specimen found in an Avar-age settlement in Keszthely-Pusztaszentegyházi dűlő.<sup>32</sup>

The transition from the three- to the multi-piece belt sets in the Carpathian Basin took place at the same time and at a similar pace as in the western areas of Merovingian Europe. We know of Gepid warriors in Avar armies from contemporary Byzantine sources.<sup>33</sup> It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to picture the conquered Gepids, supposedly forced into military service by their Avar masters, as equipped with the wonderfully decorated weapons and belts found in Pannonia, all of which point not only to a free, but also relatively prosperous population. The fact that some, at least, of these accoutrements (e.g., the dress accessories found in grave 85 in cemetery B at Kölked-Feketekapu or in grave 119 in Keszthely-Fenekpuszta) and sword-belt sets (the artifacts in the Jankovich collection) were made of gold also suggest that that population was also stratified, with a local aristocracy perhaps set in place or at least confirmed by the Avar rulers. Allowed to enjoy a certain degree of autonomy and to develop its own social hierarchy, the local population of Pannonia maintained relations with the Frankish and Lombard kingdoms. Whether these people were of truly Germanic origin or not, the fashions they adopted from such distant locations set them apart from other inhabitants of the Avar qaganate. From the second third of the seventh century, their distinctive fashions began to wane and by the late 600s completely disappeared. Most likely, the political autonomy of the local population disappeared at the same time as its penchant for distinctively “Germanic” fashions.

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<sup>31</sup> Such knobs are known from a number of Avar-age graves excavated in Band (grave 36), Unirea (grave 13), Noşlac (grave 6), Budakalász-Dunapart (grave 1140), and Kölked-Feketekapu A (graves 142 and 230). See Vida 2000, 169 with fig. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Müller 1999–2000, 348 with fig. 5.1.

<sup>33</sup> See the discussion of those sources in Kiss 1992, 20–43.

*“Germanic” female fashions*

The presence of a local population within the Avar qaganate maintaining ties with the Merovingian world becomes even more evident when analyzing burial assemblages with female skeletons. In Pannonia, such assemblages produced belt sets consisting of mounts and a large strap end, which were typically found between the skeleton's legs. This has been interpreted as pointing to the fashion of a long strap hanging from the waist and adorned with pendants (Fig. 1.3). Rectangular mounts and long strap ends found in such position within burials with female skeletons are commonly decorated with a semicircular punched ornament. More often than not, mounts are made in the open-work technique, with the central part decorated with thin stamped plates. Analogies between this group of finds and Merovingian assemblages has already been recognized by Nándor Fettich, while more recently Attila Kiss demonstrated the links between artifacts with punched ornament and the sixth-century metalwork of the Carpathian Basin attributed to the Gepids.<sup>34</sup>

However, the specific fashion of a long strap adorned with mounts with punched ornament can be traced back to the metalwork of the sixth-century Pannonia, i.e., to Lombard traditions.<sup>35</sup> As a matter of fact, the stylistic analysis of the ornament displayed on mounts used for the decoration of the hanging strap may help establish a refined chronology for them. Late sixth-century mounts have a simple punched ornament, later ones display the interlaced pattern, while mounts with dentil ornamentation in the Animal Style II appear only after 600. Simple strap ends from burials in the Tiszafüred cemetery suggest that in the late 600s the mount-studded strap hanging from the waist was still in fashion, at least in some parts of the Avar qaganate.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, recent finds of cast mounts from Zamárdi strongly suggest that the fashion survived well into the Late Avar period, i.e., after 700.

The mount-studded strap hanging from the waist seem to have originated in those areas of Merovingian Europe inhabited by Franks and

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<sup>34</sup> Marosi and Fettich 1936, 63–99; Kiss 1996, 214–15.

<sup>35</sup> Bóna 1976, 42 fig. 7. For the reconstruction of Lombard female fashions of Pannonia, see Menghin 1985, 82 fig. 74; Martin 1991a, 652–61.

<sup>36</sup> Strap ends with interlaced ornament found in graves 22, 298, and 465 of the Tiszafüred cemetery may clearly be dated to the last third of the seventh century. See Garam 1995, 188 and 204–206.

Alamans. Indeed, some the earliest examples of the fashion are known from fifth-century burial assemblages in southwestern Germany.<sup>37</sup> However, it has also been suggested that the idea may have in fact originated in early Byzantine fashions and that the fifth-century noble Frankish or Alamannic women were in fact emulating the fashionable ladies of the high aristocracy in Constantinople.<sup>38</sup> Early Byzantine mosaics often depict women with textile ornamental ribbons hanging from the waist. This is the case of the images of the Holy Virgin and of Elizabeth in the Euphrasius Basilica of Poreč; of the portrait of the founder (Adanetus Iovia) in the Comodilla Catacomb in Rome (dated to 528); and of the courtladies surrounding Empress Sarah and Theodora in the basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna (Fig. 5.2.4).<sup>39</sup> Women depicted in all these images wear either single or double hanging straps. It comes as no surprise that Avar-age mount-studded straps also appear in burials of high-status females, who, much like their Frankish or Alamannic contemporaries, strove to imitate the fashions of the early Byzantine aristocracy.

The precise function of the hanging strap is not easy to determine. While the ornamental role seems obvious, attaching amulets or amulet-like objects to the strap may have given an additional role to the mount-studded strap. Moreover, the Avar-age custom of wearing amulets can itself be traced back to Merovingian and ultimately early Byzantine practices (see below). During the last part of the Early Avar period, the number of mounts increased together with the variety of their ornamental patterns, some of which were directly inspired from the early Byzantine art.<sup>40</sup>

It has also become clear recently that during the Early Avar period, noble women in Pannonia wore Merovingian-style shoes, the presence of which is signalled by finds of small buckles and strap ends between knees and ankles (Fig. 1.2). It is important to note the difference, in terms of both structure and decorative patterns, between such orna-

<sup>37</sup> Hinz 1966, 212; Dübner-Manthey 1987; Grünwald 1988, 108–26; Koch 1990, 156–63.

<sup>38</sup> Kiss 1964, 124–26 with fig. 14; Bóna 1971, 70–71; Schulze 1976, 155–61; Martin 1991b, 33–37 with fig. 3; Martin 1991a, 658–61, Fig. 34–35.

<sup>39</sup> Poreč: Prelog 1986, figs. 26 and 38. Rome: Ladner 1996, 44 with fig. 34. Ravenna: Deichmann 1958, figs. 326 and 361.

<sup>40</sup> This is best illustrated by the mount set found in grave 267 of the cemetery A in Kölked-Feketekapu, in which rectangular mounts decorated in Animal Style II were accompanied by a large, hinged strap end of the Kecskemét-Sallai type. See Kiss 1996, 475 with pl. 61.1–9 and 13.

ments and the boot mounts typical for the footwear of East European nomads, such as found, for example, in Szegvár-Oromdűlő grave 1.<sup>41</sup>

Small buckles and strap ends found in Early Avar burial assemblages of eastern Pannonia and Transylvania belong to Clauss's class I of stocking suspender sets.<sup>42</sup> This type of footwear was first recognized and carefully studied in Budakalász. Since then, the number of similar finds from other sites has multiplied rapidly. Small strap ends and buckles of stocking suspender sets typically have a punched ornament, which is similar to that of dress accessories from sixth-century assemblages attributed to the Gepids.<sup>43</sup> Much like contemporary mounts decorating the strap hanging from the waist, later footwear strap ends and buckles were decorated with interlaced or dentil ornament in Animal Style II.

Burials of Avar-age noble women from Pannonia also produced decorative pins similar to those from earlier, sixth-century assemblages attributed to the Gepids.<sup>44</sup> The pin found on the right side of the skeleton in grave 85 of the cemetery B in Kölked-Feketekapu is a unique specimen (fig. 1.4 and 2).<sup>45</sup> Only its upper end in the shape of an animal head survives. Its best analogy is the silver pin from grave 75 in Straubing, but the Kölked pin in the shape of an animal head reminds one of the similar ornaments of several dress accessories from Scandinavian assemblages of the Vendel I period.<sup>46</sup> Burial assemblages with female skeletons found in south-western Germany and in Bavaria show that in the late 500s, decorative pins were used to fasten a piece of cloth covering the head and the upper body, often on the right side, across the right shoulder, as indicated by the fact that such pins commonly appear on the right side of the skull.<sup>47</sup> This is directly comparable to the position of the Kölked pin pointing downwards on the right side of the skull: it must have fastened the veil or the kerchief falling on the shoulder or on the right side of the head. In south-western Germany and Bavaria, aristocratic women still wore the head-cloth on the right side of the body in the seventh

<sup>41</sup> Lőrinczy 1992, 88 fig. 6.1–6 and 89 fig. 7.2.

<sup>42</sup> Clauss 1976–77, 58–57.

<sup>43</sup> Vida 1996, 116 with fig. 8. The small strap ends from graves 1188 and 1400 in the Budakalász-Dunapart cemetery had a punched decoration, and so did the specimen from grave 85 of the cemetery A in Kölked-Feketekapu (Kiss 2001, 45 with pl. 31.4–5).

<sup>44</sup> E.g., the pin used for the head-dress of the noble woman buried in grave 84 of the Szentés-Nagyhegy cemetery, which is dated to the second third of the sixth century. See Bóna 1976, 43 with fig. 8.

<sup>45</sup> Kiss 2001, 43 and pl. 29.2.

<sup>46</sup> Fischer 1993, 38–40 and pl. 31.6–7; Stolpe and Arne 1912, pls. 6.5 and 29.5.

<sup>47</sup> E.g., grave 326 in Kirchheim am Ries. See Martin 1997, 354–55.

century, but at that time ornamental breast pins worn in pairs came into fashion in the western area of Merovingian Europe, across the Rhine. By contrast, Avar-age pairs of pins are commonly found on both sides of the skull, a sign that in the Carpathian Basin, they served for the fastening of the veil of early Byzantine inspiration.

The influence of the early Byzantine and Merovingian traditions upon Avar-age fashions and customs is also evident in the popularity that amulets enjoyed in the Carpathian Basin during the Early Avar period. Recent excavations have produced sufficient evidence to support the idea that Avar-age aristocratic women wore long mount-studded straps reaching down below their knees. The fashion harks back to Merovingian practices of attaching amulet pendants or fibulae to hanging straps, as was the case in the early and mid-sixth century with noble Lombard or Gepid women. It has become clear that the Avar conquest did not put an end to such fashion, but that under Avar rule the old fashion changed in that the hanging strap took on a purely decorative function, with no amulets attached to it. However, Early Avar-age burial assemblages produced a few amulets of “Germanic” character, such as axe-shaped pendants, tool amulets, and cowrie shells.<sup>48</sup> Over twenty amulet capsules are known so far from burial assemblages dated to the Early Avar period (Fig. 1.5). These are wooden spheres decorated with bronze and silver mounts. More than 100 such amulets are known from fifth- to seventh-century burials of aristocratic women on the fringes of the early Byzantine Empire: northern Caucasus, Crimea, the Balkans, Italy, central Spain, central and northwestern Europe.<sup>49</sup> Early medieval amulet capsules were sometimes used for the storage of plants with healing properties, much like the *bullae* of the Roman age. Much more often, capsules were however used to store plant amulets, a pre-Christian practice that continued well into Late Antiquity. A hint of syncretism is given by the examination of surviving amulet capsules, especially on their decoration which often includes explicitly Christian symbols, such as the fish, birds, or the cross. There can be no doubt that both manufacturers and users knew the symbolism of such ornaments. Sometimes a capsule initially used to store plant amulets may be reused for the storage of relics. The religious ambiguity so evident in the use of amulet capsules speaks volumes about the syncretism of the late antique

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<sup>48</sup> Vida 2002.

<sup>49</sup> Vida 1995.

culture. Their adoption by members of the local population in the Carpathian Basin implies that that syncretism reached very far outside the borders of the early Byzantine Empire.<sup>50</sup>

*Social structure: rich burials of local aristocrats under the Avar rule*

There is ample evidence for advanced social stratification within the Avar qaganate. Lavishly furnished “princely” burials stand out among poorer graves of common warriors, and the structure of many cemeteries with several hundred burials strongly suggests social differentiation. What remains unclear is the relationship between the ruling Avar aristocracy and the local population.<sup>51</sup> There are several mentions in Byzantine sources of Gepids fighting in the Avar army. No indication exists in the archaeological record that these were slaves of the Avar, nor can burial assemblages with weapons found in Pannonia be interpreted as an indication of anything less than free men. Instead, sword-belts decorated with gold or gilded such as those from the Jankovich collection or from the Szekszárd cemetery point to a rather well-to-do local aristocracy. This is substantiated by finds of lavishly furnished female burials, such as graves 85 (Fig. 3) and 119 of the cemetery B in Kölked-Feketekapu.<sup>52</sup> A small cemetery with only ten graves was excavated in 1974 less than a mile to the north from the Late Roman fortress at Keszthely-Fenekpuszta.<sup>53</sup> The richest assemblages were found in wooden burial chambers (graves 2, 4 and 5). In such cases, the burial pit floor was covered with planks supported by posts, with stones piled on the roof. Despite extensive robbing, the wealth of the assemblage found in grave 2 was considerable: two golden pendants with polychrome glass

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<sup>50</sup> The capsule found in grave 136 of the cemetery excavated in El Carpio de Tajo (Castile), was decorated with a cross, a fish, a Star of David and floral ornaments. Floral ornaments, together with a “tree of life” appear on the capsule from Deza. By contrast, the capsule found in grave 90 of the Vendeuil-Caply cemetery in Picardy was decorated with a cross nailed to it from both sides. The richly decorated silver capsule from Cologne has a palm-leaf cross depicted on it. Among capsules found in the Carpathian Basin, the cross appears on the specimens from Szárazd and grave 397 in Budakalász-Dunapart. The other specimens from Budakalász and Csákberény have simple leaf crosses. Often the decoration of amulet capsules (such as those from Wonsheim and Arlon) combines such apparently contradictory elements as palm-leaf crosses and motifs of the Animal Style II (Vida 1995).

<sup>51</sup> Bálint 2006.

<sup>52</sup> Kiss 2001, 29–37 and 46–61.

<sup>53</sup> Sági 1991.

inlay, eleven Roman coins plated in gold, a golden ring, a twelve-sided jar made of bone.<sup>54</sup> Rectangular golden mounts with punched ornament were attached to a textile ribbon hanging from the waist of the deceased (probably a woman), the sign of an elegant and richly decorated dress. Finds from other graves, such as a small strap end of the Martynivka type or a three-piece belt set with interlaced ornament, suggest a date within the Early Avar age. On the basis of the small pendants with almandine inlays, scholars have initially dated the cemetery to the pre-Avar period and attributed it to a mid-sixth-century Lombard community. However, the both the Animal Style II decoration and the cloisonné decoration of the pendants both with good analogies in the Wittislingen cemetery leave no doubt as to a date within the third quarter of the sixth century.<sup>55</sup> The small cemetery found in 1974 must have been used by a high-ranking family for burying its members who had died in the aftermath of the Avar conquest of Pannonia and the Lombard migration to Italy.

Another burial chamber was found in 1998 on the neighboring site at Keszthely-Fenekpuszta-Pusztaszentegyházi dűlő.<sup>56</sup> Unlike the graves of the cemetery excavated in 1974, this burial chamber had not been completely robbed. Its western half was left intact, with a number of valuable artifacts found there: a gold strap end with embossed decoration, a buckle with Greek inscription, golden shield-shaped belt mounts, a gilded pyramid-shaped mount with glass inlay, a golden ring with encased gem, a wooden beaker with silver mount decorated with interlaced ornament in Animal Style II, and a carved bone comb decorated with bird heads. Judging by the size of the buckle and of the strap end, as well as of the pyramid-shaped mount with glass inlay, this must have been a sword-belt set of the Civezzano type similar to that from the Jankovich collection, which was no doubt in the possession of a high-ranking member of the local aristocracy.<sup>57</sup> The burial chamber was found less than 900 yards from the walls of the Keszthely-Fenekpuszta fortress. During the Early Avar age, the fortress was occupied by a relatively numerous community, which buried its leaders within and around the basilica built within the fort, beside the old *horreum*.

<sup>54</sup> Sági 1991, 116 with fig. 6–7.

<sup>55</sup> Heinrich Tamáska 2002, 36–39.

<sup>56</sup> This was an unusually large chamber (3.20 m in length, 1.70 m in width and 1.11 in height). The excavators recorded the posts at both ends of the grave no doubt supporting a timber roof. See Müller 1999–2000.

<sup>57</sup> An artifact similar to the pyramid-shaped mount with glass inlays may have originally belonged to the Jankovich belt set. See Vida 2000, 167 with fig. 6.

It is therefore possible to see the Keszthely burials of the local elite as evidence of the survival of a pre-Avar social hierarchy, even if, as suggested by written sources, the local population may have been forced to perform military service for the Avar rulers. High-ranking members of the local elite were buried within the basilica, the graves of perhaps less influential aristocrats were in the cemetery by the *horreum*, and commoners were laid to rest beside the southern wall of the fort. The survival under Avar rule of this clearly delineated social hierarchy suggests a certain degree of political autonomy, which the community in Keszthely enjoyed. The names of such non-Avar community leaders have not survived, perhaps because Byzantine sources were not interested in the role and importance of this group within Avar society. In any case, on the testimony of the archaeological record, the autonomy and prosperity of the Keszthely community came to an end in the 630s, when following the defeat of the Avars under the walls of Constantinople and the ensuing civil war within the qaganate, all local autonomies and cultural distinctions completely disappeared, making room for the much more standardized culture of the Late Avar period.

#### *Romans and Byzantines in Pannonia*

A relatively large number of assemblages in southern Pannonia, mainly in the region of Keszthely and Pécs point to such a considerable Roman or early Byzantine cultural influence during the Early Avar period that the assemblages in question are collectively referred to as the “Keszthely culture”.<sup>58</sup> Much ink has been spilled on the interpretation of that influence, but no agreement has so far been reached. Some believe that responsible for that influence must be groups of population from the Balkan provinces of the Empire, which the Avars had forcefully resettled within the borders of the qaganate.<sup>59</sup> To be sure, Theophylact Simocatta twice mentions prisoners of war being taken to the qaganate after the sack of Sirmium and Singidunum in 582 and 584, respectively.<sup>60</sup> Byzantine prisoners of war moved to the Avar qaganate are also mentioned in

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<sup>58</sup> Müller 1992, 251–307; Bálint 1993, 222–33; Garam 2001, 178–99.

<sup>59</sup> In Hungary, the most important advocate of this interpretation ultimately relying on the testimony of the written sources was Bóna 1970, 257–58 with n. 122. Bóna’s arguments have been adopted by Bálint 1993, 226 with n. 125, who dates the Keszthely culture to the seventh century (Bálint 1993, 226–28).

<sup>60</sup> Theophylactus Simocatta, *Historia* 7.10, in Boor and Wirth 1972, 262.

the *Miracles of St. Demetrius*, in connection with military events dated between 610 and 618.<sup>61</sup> Finally, according to Paul the Deacon, Lombard captives were moved to the qaganate after the Avar raid into Friuli in 610 or 611.<sup>62</sup>

In my opinion the theory of the transplanted POWs does not work with the existing archaeological evidence. The wealth of the cemetery by the *horreum* of the Late Roman fort in Keszthely-Fenékpuszta, which is outstanding even by early Byzantine standards, cannot be easily reconciled with the idea of an enslaved population of prisoners.<sup>63</sup> It is also very unlikely that the captives brought from the Balkans would have been moved to such a strategically important location, undoubtedly a hub of trade and cultural routes. Much more persuading is Walter Pohl's interpretation of the Keszthely culture as an "island culture" formed in a foreign milieu and playing the role of a cultural bridge between the nomadic traditions of East European origin and the local traditions of Central and Southeast European character.<sup>64</sup> I can only add that such an interpretation is substantiated by the absence of any traces of Lombard presence inside the fort in Keszthely-Fenékpuszta for the whole duration of the Pannonian phase of Lombard history, perhaps because the site had already been occupied at that time by the local population. But when exactly did that occupation begin and where did the "local population" come from?

Many archaeologists have embraced the idea of direct continuity from the Roman province of Pannonia, without much effort to prove the point.<sup>65</sup> So far, no arguments have been brought forward to support a cultural continuity from the fourth to the sixth century. The question of the local, presumably Romance-speaking population cannot be reduced to the Carpathian Basin alone. The issue begs a much broader approach at the scale of the entire Mediterranean region, taking into consideration especially those areas that were included into the successor, "barbarian" states of the early Middle Ages. In all those territories, a process of acculturation must have been at work from a relatively early date,

<sup>61</sup> *Miracles of St. Demetrius* 2.5, in Lemerle 1979, 285.

<sup>62</sup> Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 4.37, in Bethmann and Waitz 1878, 164.

<sup>63</sup> Bálint 1993, 226; Daim 2003, 473–76.

<sup>64</sup> Pohl 1988, 232–33.

<sup>65</sup> To be sure, Paul the Deacon mentions Pannonians (*Pannonni*) along with *Norici* under the rule of King Alboin (*Historia Langobardorum* 2.26, in Bethmann and Waitz 1878, 103). For the archaeological literature on Roman continuity, see Bierbrauer 2004.

and the study of that process has much to offer to the interpretation of the archaeological record of the Carpathian Basin. In what follows, I therefore deal not just with assemblages associated with the so-called Keszthely culture, but also with Avar-age *Reihengräberkreis* assemblages in Pannonia as a whole. The key issue is of course the identification of the relations those communities maintained with the neighboring Alpine region or with the Mediterranean *Romanitas*. Because of the meagre written record, archaeological sources will constitute the basis of my arguments.<sup>66</sup> Despite the widely spread stereotype according to which after ca. 500 the Romanized population of Pannonia cannot be traced archaeologically anymore, the few archaeological and written sources pertaining to this problem were never studied systematically.

When talking about the Romanized population of the Avar age, most Hungarian archaeologists have primarily in mind the Keszthely culture, the rich assemblages of which have multiple analogies in the Mediterranean region. Éva Garam has recently studied the west Balkan and Italian analogies for the disc fibulae with Christian ornament found in burial assemblages of the Keszthely culture (Fig. 4.4).<sup>67</sup> Meanwhile, a number of very similar brooches have been found on sites in Calabria, such as Cannaró and Caracones.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, recently the argument has been put forward that such hollow brooches served as containers of relics, wax, soil, or plants from pilgrimage sites. Animal- or swastika-shaped brooches, as well specimens decorated with stone inlays or pearls, point to Mediterranean practices and fashions.<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, the origin of the earrings with basket-shaped pendant, which are so typical for the Keszthely culture, has been traced to Late Roman burial assemblages of the late fourth or early fifth century. Such earrings are known from a relatively large number of burial assemblages in Italy and the Balkans dated to the fifth and especially to the sixth century.<sup>70</sup> Many specimens have been found on sixth-century forts in Macedonia.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, some, at least, of the earrings with basket-shaped pendant found in assemblages of the Keszthely culture may be dated to the early or mid-sixth century, in any case before the arrival

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<sup>66</sup> See Rettner 2004 and Curta 2005.

<sup>67</sup> Garam 1993a; Garam 2001, 51–56.

<sup>68</sup> Spadea 1991, 569 with fig. 6 and 571 with fig. 8; Cuteri 1994, 339–59 with fig. 6.

<sup>69</sup> Daim 2002.

<sup>70</sup> Possenti 1994, 46; Riemer 2000, 45–64.

<sup>71</sup> Mikulčić 2002, 379 with fig. 280; 477 with fig. 396; and 485 with fig. 405.

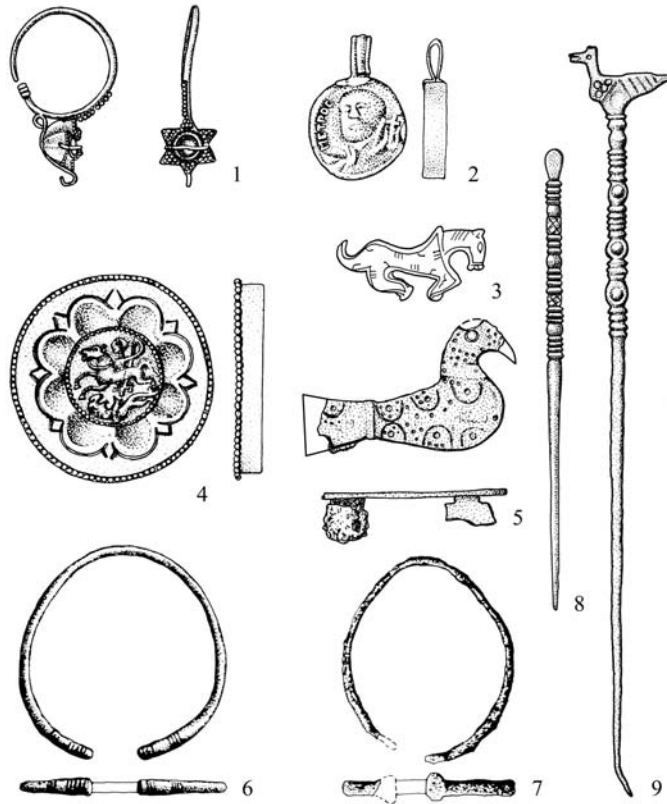


Figure 4. Artifacts illustrating the “Roman” traditions of the Early Avar period: 1—earrings with basket-shaped pendant (Keszthely-Fenékpuszta, *horreum* cemetery, grave 8); 2—round *bullae* (Balatonfűzfő-Szalmássy, grave K); 3—horse-shaped brooch (Keszthely-Fenékpuszta, *horreum* cemetery, grave 17); 4—disc brooch with Christian motifs (Keszthely-Fenékpuszta, stray find); 5—bird-shaped brooch (Várpalota-Gimnázium, grave 201); 6—bronze bracelet (Keszthely-Fenékpuszta, cemetery by the southern rampart, grave 96); 7—iron bracelet (Keszthely-Fenékpuszta, cemetery by the southern rampart, grave 70); 8—*stylus*-shaped pin (Budakalász-Dunapart, grave 348); 9—pin with bird-shaped ornament (Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói, grave 79). Drawing by Ildikó Pisch (8), all others after Barkóczi 1968, Erdélyi and Németh 1969, Müller 1999, Rosner 1999, and Garam 2001.

of the Avars (Fig. 4.1). Slovenian,<sup>72</sup> northern Italian, and Macedonian<sup>73</sup> analogies for the earrings from Hévíz-Alsópáhok<sup>74</sup> and the cemetery by the southern wall of the Keszthely-Fenekpuszta fort<sup>75</sup> may all be dated to the mid-sixth century.

However, it has also been suggested that the Romanized population of the formerly Roman provinces may also be “hiding” behind fifth- to seventh-century burial assemblages without any grave goods. It is somewhat odd that Hungarian archaeologists have until now failed to look for the Romanized population within cemeteries opened during the Avar age on sites previously occupied during the Roman age. Three recently excavated Early Avar cemeteries in Pannonia—Csákberény, Szekszárd, and Budakalász—offer us a unique opportunity to take a more sophisticated look at the evidence pertaining to the continuity of Roman traditions. Grave goods from those cemeteries, which are clearly associated with Mediterranean practices and fashions (crosses, disc brooches, bird- and horse-shaped brooches, pins decorated with birds) bear testimony to vibrant Roman traditions, if not also to the presence of a population of Roman origin. Such phenomena are not restricted to the Keszthely culture, but also appear in both the northern and the southern parts of Pannonia. Several disc brooches with late antique decorative patterns are known from Szekszárd and Kölked. The still unpublished cemetery of Csákberény produced bird- and horse-shaped brooches (Fig. 4.3 and 5).<sup>76</sup> Some specimens are clearly recycled material of Roman origin, but most others cannot be dated earlier than the Avar age. Several Italian analogies are known for the plate brooch from Várpalota.<sup>77</sup> The Christian symbolism of bird-shaped brooches is documented by a specimen from Keszthely-Fenekpuszta-Pusztaszentegyházi dűlő, on which the owner seem to have engraved a cross.<sup>78</sup>

Several burial assemblages of the cemetery by the southern wall of the Keszthely-Fenekpuszta fort produced pins with bird-shaped ornament.<sup>79</sup> A similar pin was found in a grave of the Szekszárd cemetery

<sup>72</sup> Ibler 1991, 45.

<sup>73</sup> Vinčić and Ivanovski 1978, 85–89 with pl. 53.

<sup>74</sup> Alföldi 1926, 40–42 with pl. 5.3–4.

<sup>75</sup> Müller 1992, 286 pl. 2.71/42.1–2; 288 pl. 4.71/87.1–2; Müller 1999, 173 fig. 4.26.1,4 and 4.29.1–2.

<sup>76</sup> László (forthcoming).

<sup>77</sup> Erdélyi and Németh 1969, 190 pl. 15.2.

<sup>78</sup> Straub 2002, 103–11 with fig. 1.

<sup>79</sup> Müller 1999, 174 with fig. 5.34.1; 177 and fig. 98.3.

(Fig. 4.9).<sup>80</sup> According to Ellen Riemer, such pins rarely, if ever, appear in the late antique assemblages of Italy.<sup>81</sup> However, they are relatively common in the Balkan provinces of the Empire.<sup>82</sup>

In many Avar-age burial assemblages, Roman fibulae were found on the chest, an indication of a remarkable continuity of Roman fashions and practices.<sup>83</sup> In other cases, there is clear evidence of “quotations” from contemporary cultural practices of the Balkan provinces of the Empire. As we have seen, round or cylindrical *bullae* could be traced to late antique or early Byzantine traditions (Fig. 4.2) and may have served as containers for either amulets or relics (*phylakteria*).<sup>84</sup>

Late Antique traditions are also visible in the production of sixth- to seventh-century pottery. Wares from the Csákberény area are clearly modelled technologically, morphologically, and in terms of ornamental patterns on the local pottery of Roman age.<sup>85</sup> It is hard to imagine the transmission of such models without the physical survival of a Romanized population from the fourth to the sixth century.<sup>86</sup> In any case, there is now ample evidence to show that the archaeological evidence pertaining to the continuity of the Roman population is not restricted to a small area around Keszthely and Pécs. Traces of the Early Avar-age culture of Roman tradition may be found all over central and eastern Pannonia. It is perhaps no accident that the largest cemeteries that have produced evidence for such a culture are located next to Late Roman forts, some of which were still occupied during the Early Avar age, albeit in a non-military fashion.<sup>87</sup> This suggests that a strong connection between the

<sup>80</sup> Rosner 1999, 172 with pl. 6.79.1.

<sup>81</sup> Riemer 2000.

<sup>82</sup> Caričin Grad: Kondić and Popović 1977, pl. 16 with no. 59. Krivina (Iatrus): Gomolka-Fuchs 1982, 178 with pl. 64.286. Corinth: Davidson 1952, pls. 49.512; 89.1500; and 116.2290.

<sup>83</sup> Garam 2003, 106.

<sup>84</sup> Vida 2002, 204 with pls. 9 and 12.1–3.

<sup>85</sup> Csákberény may have been a workshop supplying the entire surrounding region with “Romanized” wares. See Vida 1999, 74–82. For a re-assessment of the late antique influence on the Early Avar pottery, see Hajnal 2005.

<sup>86</sup> Recent salvage excavations on the southern shore of Lake Balaton produced new evidence of mid-sixth-century settlements in Balatonlelle and Zamárdi. Both settlements included sunken-featured buildings with post constructions. The ceramic material collected from all of them testifies to the continuity of late antique models. See Skriba and Sófalvi 2004.

<sup>87</sup> The Zamárdi cemetery was located near the Late Roman fort at Ságvár, the Környe cemetery by the abandoned and demolished fort on that same site. Finally, several cemeteries found in Keszthely cluster around the Late Roman fort at Keszthely-Fenekpuszta, the site of which was still occupied during the late sixth and early seventh century. The

late antique and the Early Avar settlement patterns in Pannonia. According to Paul the Deacon, the last remnants of a Christian population of Roman origin left Pannonia shortly after the Avar conquest. But no Early Avar assemblages have been found to the west of the Savaria-Sopianae line (a line linking present-day Szombathely to Keszthely and Pécs), which could be attributed to the steppe nomads. Apparently the Avars had some good reason to avoid settling in Pannonia.<sup>88</sup>

The evidence presented so far thus points to the likely possibility that the local Romanized population played a considerably greater role than previously believed in the forging of the Early Avar qaganate. Conversely, the alternative seems unlikely, namely that a wealthy Christian group immigrated to Pannonia from an unknown area exactly at the same time as the Lombards under Alboin were moving out of that region. There is so far no other better explanation for the rich and sophisticated “Keszthely culture” of the Early Avar age than to assume the continuity of the local Roman population.<sup>89</sup>

Earlier scholars interested in the Keszthely culture worked under the assumption that it must have come into being only after 568, the year of the Avar conquest and of the Lombard migration to Italy. This culture-historical bias prevented them from seriously considering the chronology of the earrings with basket-shaped pendant, the disc-, animal-, and S-shaped brooches, the pins, as well as the bronze and iron bracelets (Fig. 4.1–9), all of which could well be dated before 568. During the Early Avar period, no communities with traditions linked to the East European steppe lands existed within the territory of the so-called

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Budakalász cemetery was found on the northern outskirts of present-day Budapest, not far from the ruins of the Roman fort at Aquincum.

<sup>88</sup> It is also important to remember that the Late Roman fort at Keszthely-Fenékpuszta did not produce any archaeological evidence that could be attributed to the presence of a Lombard garrison in the pre-Avar years. That this may have been a deliberate choice results from the fact that a Lombard-age settlement existed on the opposite, southwestern shore of Lake Balaton, at Vörs. On the other hand, during the first third of the sixth century, the southern parts of Pannonia were at times under the direct control of the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy, which may otherwise explain the absence of Lombard garrisons in the region. In any case, the local, Romanized population took advantage of the situation thus created to strengthen its position. Little evidence exists for its massive emigration from Pannonia in the late 560s. On the contrary, as we have seen, the late sixth and early seventh century witnessed the strengthening of the ties that population maintained with regions of Europe farther to the south and southwest.

<sup>89</sup> This is not at all contradicted by the results of forensic anthropological studies on skeletons from cemeteries in Csákrberény and the Keszthely area, all of which point to the physical continuity of the local Roman population. See Éry 2001.

Keszthely culture. For over half-a-century of Avar-Byzantine wars between 568 and 626, that territory was on the southern frontier of the Avar qaganate with the Balkan lands under Roman military control. The first traces of “Avars” moving into the region from other parts of the qaganate farther to the east cannot be dated before the second half of the seventh century. It may not be an accident of research strategies that the earliest remains that can be attributed to Avar garrisons within the territory of the Keszthely culture have been found in its most central parts, not on the periphery.<sup>90</sup>

Such remarks beg the question of what happened to the Romanized population of the Keszthely culture. Assemblages found in Keszthely and its environs testify to the continuous existence of Christian communities with strong ties to both the Roman Empire and the Merovingian world until some point within the second third of the seventh century. There are no such assemblages after that date in cemeteries in and around Keszthely-Fenekpuszta. New burial grounds were opened in the area at different sites, and they all produced evidence of Avar culture. At the westernmost end of Lake Balaton, cemeteries of the Keszthely culture continued well into the early ninth century.<sup>91</sup> Within such cemeteries, earrings with basket-shaped pendants, decorative pins, and bracelets continued to adorn both the dead in burial and, most likely, the body in lifetime. However, judging from the existing evidence, by 700 that group of population had been cut off from all ties with Christian communities either in Byzantium region or in (late) Merovingian Francia.

### *Conclusion*

The archaeological record of Pannonia during the Early Avar age points to strong connections between the local population and early Byzantine communities in the Balkans and in Italy. The strategically located communities of southern Pannonia were in the best position to maintain long-distance contacts with the Empire, but also with the Merovingian world and, to a lesser degree, with the communities of immigrant nomads from the East European steppe lands. Such contacts are primarily evident in dress accessories such as decorative hanging straps, brooches, and amulet capsules found in burial assemblages of the region, as well

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<sup>90</sup> Müller 1989, 141–64.

<sup>91</sup> As in Lesencetomaj, for which see Perémi 2000.

as in ornamental patterns of either “Germanic” (Animal Style II) or Byzantine (interlaced ornament) origin. The cultural exchange revealed by such features bespeaks the presence, as well as the social and political prominence of the local population. In Early Avar Pannonia, four types of burial assemblages may be distinguished on the basis of the cultural relations to which they point. No large cemeteries exist with assemblages pointing to the traditions of the East European steppe lands. What we have so far is simply the evidence of small cemeteries, perhaps of “governors” recruited from the upper echelons of Avar society, and of their families.<sup>92</sup> Some Late Roman forts in the Keszthely-Fenekpuszta region continued to be occupied by a population that maintained ties with the Empire and with the lands in Central, Southern, and Western Europe. That population buried its dead in cemeteries around the fort, none of which produced any evidence of the steppe traditions that could be dated before *ca.* 630. Elsewhere in Pannonia, such traditions do appear in fact on burial sites where the “Germanic” component is also evident (e.g., Környe and Kölked). Finally, on other sites, along with “Avar” and “Germanic” elements a third component is attested, which can be attributed to the local population of Roman origin (Budakalász, Csákberény, Szekszárd, and Zamárdi). Perhaps the best example of a community in which the “Avar”, the “Germanic”, and the “Roman” traditions are blended in an inextricable way is that of the Szekszárd cemetery.<sup>93</sup> The “Germanic” traditions are linked to the earliest burials on that site, which have a typically west-east grave orientation and could be dated to the last quarter of the sixth century. At some distance away from them, two small clusters of “Avar” burials of different orientation (north-south, as opposed to west-east) appeared by 600. They are marked by such peculiar features as the presence of animal bones and of grave goods harking back to the traditions of the East European steppe lands. During the first half of the seventh century, burials within this part of the cemetery adopted the west-east orientation of the earliest graves with “Germanic” traditions, and the burial ground in Szekszárd came to look more like a “standard” row grave cemetery. By the late seventh century, the acculturation was so advanced that no cultural

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<sup>92</sup> Such is the case of the Szentendre cemetery, for which see Bóna 1982–1983, 98–104.

<sup>93</sup> Rosner 1999.

difference can be observed any more, a phenomenon marking the onset of the Late Avar age.

There is one particular category of artifacts illustrating the multiculturalism of the Early Avar society better than any other archaeologically observable features: amulets. Identifiable analogies point to eastern, early Byzantine, as well as western (“Germanic”) types of amulets simultaneously in use during the Early Avar period. Many burial assemblages dated to that period produced pendants made of small animal bones, often no more than a couple of inches in length, which were either worn on necklaces along with beads or other pendants or kept in small pouches at the waist.<sup>94</sup> Similar finds are known from several burial assemblages in Eastern Europe, but are not so far attested anywhere in the Mediterranean region or in Central and Western Europe. *Bullae*, crosses, pendants in the form of miniature tools or implements, as well as early Byzantine protective amulets form another distinct group. Some of those amulets have analogies in burial assemblages associated with the acculturation of barbarians during the early Roman (imperial) age. The blending of eastern and western traditions, as well as, possibly, beliefs is best illustrated by the assemblage in grave 74 of the Kiskőrös-Vágóhid cemetery, which included small animal bone pendants, as well as pendants in the shape of miniature tools and implements.<sup>95</sup>

It has not been my intention in this chapter to offer a comprehensive discussion of the archaeology of Early Avar society. Instead, my goal was to point to a number of still unsolved problems of interpretation and to advance new arguments for the refinement of the Early Avar chronology. The ethnic melting-pot of the early Avar history is well documented in written sources. For no more than a couple of generations, the Avar qaganate was in fact a more or less odd mosaic of groups with different traditions and political aspirations. The “Germanic” and “Roman” components of that mosaic seem to have been much more prominent than previously assumed. By means of a refined chronology, it is possible to monitor the process and to see how from initially clearly distinguished cultural groups, a new culture emerged after *ca.* 600 by means of contact, integration, and acculturation, integration. The first traces of cultural syncretism cannot be dated earlier than the first three decades

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<sup>94</sup> Good examples of such amulets are known from the Alattyán cemetery. See Kovrig 1963, 21 and pls. 13.23 and 65.3.

<sup>95</sup> László 1955, 37 fig. 17 and pl. 21.

of the seventh century, but the process of cultural unification and “standardization” did not start in earnest before the second third of the that century. By 670, most “Germanic” and “Roman” traditions have completely disappeared, making room for the Middle Avar culture of a distinctly East European appearance.

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### Illustrations

#### Figures

1. Artifacts illustrating the "Germanic" traditions of the Early Avar period: 1—round brooch with Animal Style II ornament (Csákberény, grave 283); 2—stocking suspender set (Budakalász-Dunapart, grave 1188); 3—female dress with mount-studded hanging strap (Budakalász-Dunapart, grave 1148); 4—female head-dress with pin (Kölked-Feketekapu B, grave 85); 5—amulet capsule (Budakalász-Dunapart, grave 458); 6—a three- and four-piece sword-belt set. (Kölked-Feketekapu A, grave 324) After Vida 1995, 1996 and 2005; Kiss 1996 and 2001.

2. Reconstruction of the dress of a noble woman from grave 85 of the cemetery B in Kölked-Feketekapu B. Drawing by Sándor Ósi, after Vida, 2004.
3. Sword belt-sets from grave 390 in Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói and the Jankovich collection. Drawings by Sándor Ósi, after Vida 2000.
4. Artifacts illustrating the “Roman” traditions of the Early Avar period: 1—earrings with basket-shaped pendant (Keszthely-Fenekpuszta, *horreum* cemetery, grave 8); 2—round *bulla* (Balatonfűzfő-Szalmássy, grave K); 3—horse-shaped brooch (Keszthely-Fenekpuszta, *horreum* cemetery, grave 17); 4—disc brooch with Christian motifs (Keszthely-Fenekpuszta, stray find); 5—bird-shaped brooch (Várpalota-Gimnázium, grave 201); 6—bronze bracelet (Keszthely-Fenekpuszta, cemetery by the southern rampart, grave 96); 7—iron bracelet (Keszthely-Fenekpuszta, cemetery by the southern rampart, grave 70); 8—*stylus*-shaped pin (Budakalász-Dunapart, grave 348); 9—pin with bird-shaped ornament (Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói, grave 79). Drawing by Ildikó Pisch (8), all others after Barkóczi 1968, Erdélyi and Németh 1969, Müller 1999, Rosner 1999, and Garam 2001.