

Cover:

The illustration of this Middle Neolithic Szakálhát Culture (5300-5200 BCE) face pot was excavated at the site of Rákóczifalva-Bagi földek, Hungary. The remaining height of the pot is 55 cm. It is currently housed at Damjanich J. Museum in Szolnok, Hungary. Excavators include Gábor Szabó, Gábor Váczi, Katalin Kovács and Katalin Sebők. The drawing of the ceramic find was done by Katalin Nagy. It is used here with the permission of Katalin Sebők.

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Short Report

New Research at the Early Bronze Age Cemetery at Mokrin, Serbia

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The day was hot, dry, and dusty when we first re-visited the site of Lalina humka, the exact toponym under which Mokrin necropolis is known locally in northeast Serbia (near the Romanian border). As we had done due diligence on our desk-based study before arriving, we had already formulated a mental image of the site which we knew had been inactive (in terms of research, at least) for decades. We were aware that a modern field road unceremoniously traversed both the Early Bronze Age site and its burials. We were prepared for the impromptu garbage dump that filled a lime pit at the very top of the cemetery (the same location of the partially damaged graves excavated in 1960). Upon arriving, we also noted subtle location markers for underground oil-transport pipelines. As we have gathered, these form part of the poorly-understood network of installations with which Kikinda Municipality is littered. On the surface, the tableau was rather unexceptional.

But, after all, why would this particular place instil a sense of awe if one looked no further than the surface? The site of the necropolis is part of an active landscape and is close to a modern settlement. It was difficult to imagine that people from modern Mokrin and its surroundings would overlook the fact that for a whole decade, archaeologists from many countries jointly worked and uncovered wide swathes of soil under which hundreds of burials rested. It is quite obvious that the site has not been forgotten by the archaeological community! So, if out of sight but not out of mind, our visit should have been a common event...

...But, of course, it was anything but! In spite of the superficial humdrum aura at Mokrin, it was nigh impossible for archaeologists not trace out the imagined lines of mid-20th century excavation trenches, and not to visualize the great work done as archaeological discoveries unfolded. Further temptations came in attempting to push the archaeological imagination farther back in time—to try and see the landscape as it was when Mokrin cemetery was active, i.e. before the construction of drainage systems and water management cooperatives changed the looks of Banat and the whole of Vojvodina.

The 2020 and 2021 campaigns

Our initial archaeologically-inspired awe was soon tempered with practical inquiry. Where was our own work to commence?

The exact location of the site is, of course, well known. The first systematic excavation of the cemetery with modern recovery techniques and documentation (Girić, 1971; O'Shea, 1996) was conducted in the decade between 1959-1969. These excavations comprised sizeable cooperative efforts by multiple institutions and researchers worldwide. They resulted in the most complete publication of Mokrin necropolis to date. Even without the detailed description of its position and surroundings by M. Girić (Girić, 1971), the most casual stroll in the area is enough to single out the elevated ridge extending 700 m northeast from the modern train station in Mokrin. From the top of this ridge, one can see the vast Banat flatlands to the east and south, dotted by an occasional burial mound. To the west, the present-day village of Mokrin blocks direct view of the paleochannels and meanders of the Tisza River Basin and Zlatica River, which extend over more than 300 km². To the north, bush and high vegetation

prevent direct line of sight to Kokanovića stream (channel), whose shores are only a short five-minute walk from the site. See Figure 13.

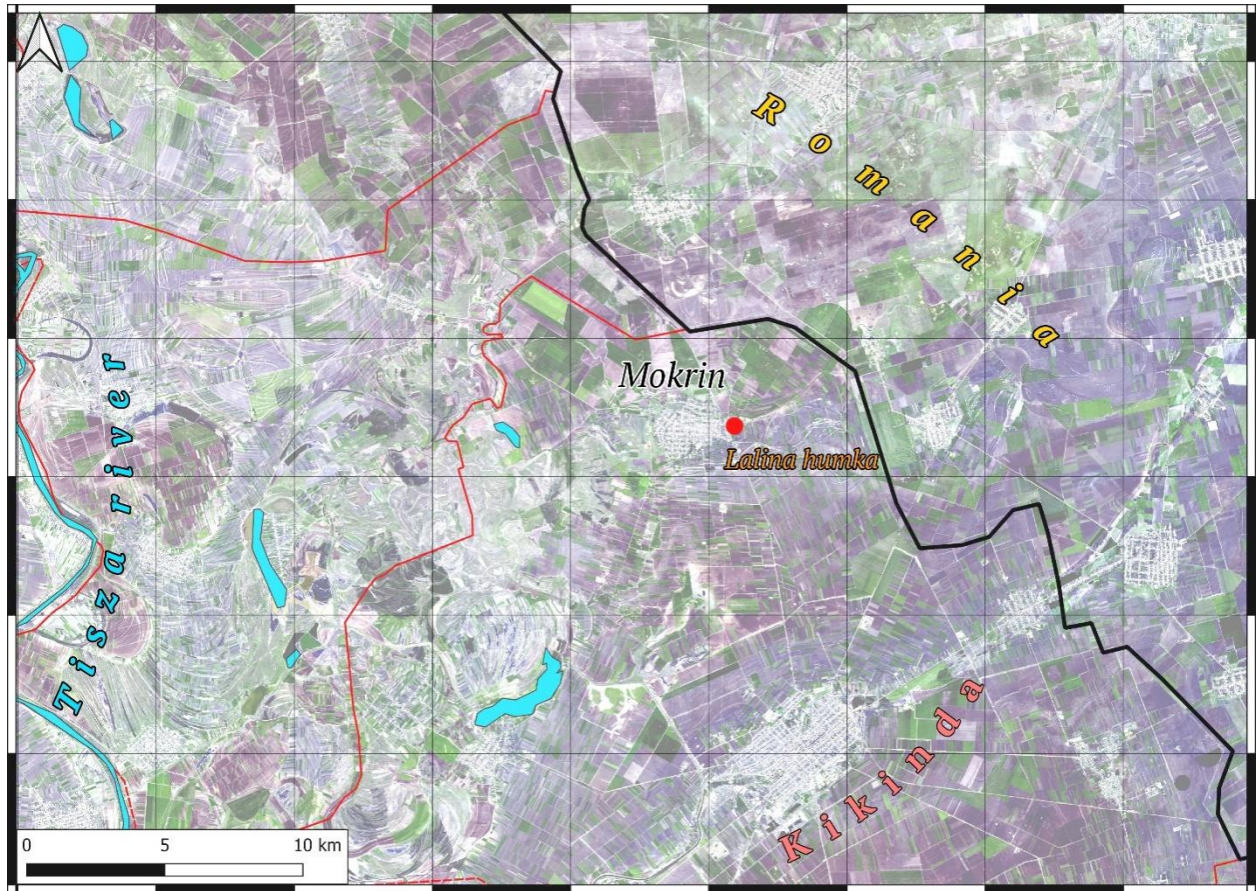


Figure 13: General map of the wider region around the necropolis.

What was not so well known were the exact positions of the earlier excavation trenches. The spatial plans that were published contained detailed accounts of the sequence of the excavation areas, the positions of the burials, and other points of importance found in the vicinity. However, they contained little in the way of coordinates to tie the plan to an actual space. A search through archived material (dispersed across several locations, including the Provincial Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments in Petrovaradin at National Museum of Kikinda) yielded no results in the search for spatially aware plans. In 2020, we used the locations of some of the points of interest (the field road mentioned previously and the now buried lime pit) to reconstruct provisional trench positions. One potentially disastrous scenario would have been to have placed the old trenches too far to the north or south, thereby opening ground in essentially empty (or previously-excavated) space.

Unfortunately, during the longer part of our first campaign (2020), just such a scenario played out. We began work on two excavation trenches – one close to the top of the Lalina humka, running east, and one on the lower, southern slope of the ridge, running southwards. Over the span of seven of our 15 planned working days, the list of discoveries made contained no indications of the EBA necropolis. Instead, all contexts could be traced back to the use of the landscape in the second half of the 20th century. We soon surmised that a long, 1.5-meter-wide ditch had been placed in a north-south direction across the necropolis, as we could follow its extent in both excavation trenches. On the fourth day of the campaign, we unfortunately found that at least one prehistoric burial had been destroyed by the ditch placement. This ditch contained modern debris (bags, unidentifiable plastic pieces, and parts of mechanized field equipment). In the eastern side of this V-sectioned structure lay

the remains of an inhumed individual, mixed with animal bones, who was likely re-deposited immediately after discovery during the ditch construction work.

In the eastern portion of our 2020 working zone, a few other intrusions appeared. These included large, irregular pits (>2m diameter) which the trench bisected. In addition, a sardonic twist of fate showed the traces of deep ploughing in the trench base that had at first glance seemed remarkably similar to what one would expect for the surface outline of a Maros burial. And so, similarly strange discoveries of modern site perturbation continued... until the 28th of October, when a day-long windstorm heralded a rainy afternoon and evening. In our introduction to this report, we described our “hot, dry, and dusty” first arrival in Mokrin. Hot, dry and dusty had come to define our days up until this point. However, when faced with the well-known Banat winds, even our dusty team had to retreat from the field. We comforted ourselves in the knowledge that the rainwater would drain quickly, and that we could start our – now hastened – attempts to cover more area in the search to define the extent of the necropolis. However, as the saying goes, “the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry...”

During continued trench excavations the next morning, the shape of an oval pit began to peek out from beneath a layer of wind-blown dust. See Figure 14. The pit lay immediately adjacent to one of the modern intrusions (which had missed it by mere centimeters). The wind and rain of the previous day’s intense weather had worn down the sediment, making visible not only the shape of the feature, but also a few square centimeters of human cranium. The discovery of the first undisturbed grave from Mokrin necropolis in 60 years was met with much excitement! The grave contained a juvenile individual (oriented in south-north). The face was turned towards the east. The grave contained a pottery vessel, a collection of perforated animal teeth and shell that were likely strung together and grasped with the hands, and a single wound copper-wire bracelet, still in place on the wrist of the deceased individual. See Figure 15.



Figure 14: First view of a Mokrin burial in five decades. Photo by Đurđija Nikolić, courtesy of J. Pendić.



Figure 15: process of excavation of the first grave discovered during the 2020 campaign. Photo by Đurđija Nikolić, courtesy of J. Pendić.

Not a day later, we uncovered a second burial in the southern profile cut of the same trench (which we promptly extended). Finally, we used some extra time from the first campaign – amazingly there was some time left after all that had occurred – to complete a direct verification of a GPR profile showing a concentration of high amplitude reflections. Lo and behold, as a result of this, we uncovered our fourth burial of the year!

The second campaign (in 2021) continued work on previous excavation zones to locate a row of burials extending across the area where we had commenced our work. Going farther east, we could confirm that the boundaries of the cemetery extended beyond previous researchers' estimates. During both campaigns, we used considerable amounts of time to auger and to take soil samples both directly on site as well as within its wider surroundings. On one of these occasions, the drill team managed to locate a burial by unknowingly sampling directly on top of it. We took it as a good sign for future work (although we would naturally have also accepted a less invasive means of locating further burials!)

Physical anthropology research

The main goal of the first campaign (and the standard for those that followed) was to research burial units and the spaces between burials in accordance with up-to-date methodology and bioarcheological protocols for the treatment of interred human remains. We expended maximum effort to enforce strict protocols in order to leave as many doors open as possible for eventual analyses of the organic remains. We worked with sterilized instruments and safety garments (which, as it turned out also coincided with the peak COVID-19 safety rules) in order to leave as few modern traces as possible on the bone and pottery material, grave infill, and any potential sediment content of the vessels. We additionally undertook frequent sediment sampling for wet sieving. We took soil samples at various depths for each grave as well as around crucial parts of the skeleton (feet, waist/stomach, chest and cranium). One of the major problems with the skeletal material uncovered during previous campaigns was that it was severely compromised by taphonomic processes. As a result, the new protocols aimed at preserving as much of the damaged skeletal remains from the 'new' graves as

possible. As major parts of the brittle bones were crumbling before our eyes, we lifted a lot of material in blocks, which we excavated later in the lab (especially the cranial and pelvic bones).

In a manner of speaking, the recent campaigns drew a line that M. Girić could not have crossed (not for lack of desire, but more because proper workflows, instruments, analyses, and technologies were not possible or even conceived of at the time in which he excavated). See Figure 16. Having the opportunity to discuss methods and findings with colleagues specialized in zooarchaeology, palaeobotany, aDNA, and absolute chronology as well as their willingness to provide their time and expertise to help us to devise the Mokrin protocols was a great privilege and help.



Figure 16: Excavation of the second burial discovered in 2020. Photo by Đurđija Nikolić, courtesy of J. Pendić.

The work continues

Since we began our work in 2020, we have undertaken a total of two campaigns. The last focused on charting the extent of the cemetery and estimating the number and distribution of the graves in the southeastern and eastern portion of the cemetery. We made attempts to map the wider extent of the site with fluxgate magnetometry and ground-penetrating radar, though each of these operations was only a partial success. On the first attempt (in 2020), GPR results were ambiguous. The profiles documented occasional high amplitudes that could possibly have corresponded with offerings located within the burial pits. Unfortunately, as the grave fills are very similar to surrounding sediment, we could not accurately document the grave cuts. Magnetometry conducted in 2021 over a more spacious area (5 ha vs 0.15 ha for GPR) documented targets that could be interpreted as burials. However, only a modest number of them were identifiable, and those were scattered across a much wider area than expected. What the magnetometry did show was evidence of site encroachment by the local oil industry. See Figure 17. Huge subterranean pipes cut the proposed eastern boundary of the site.

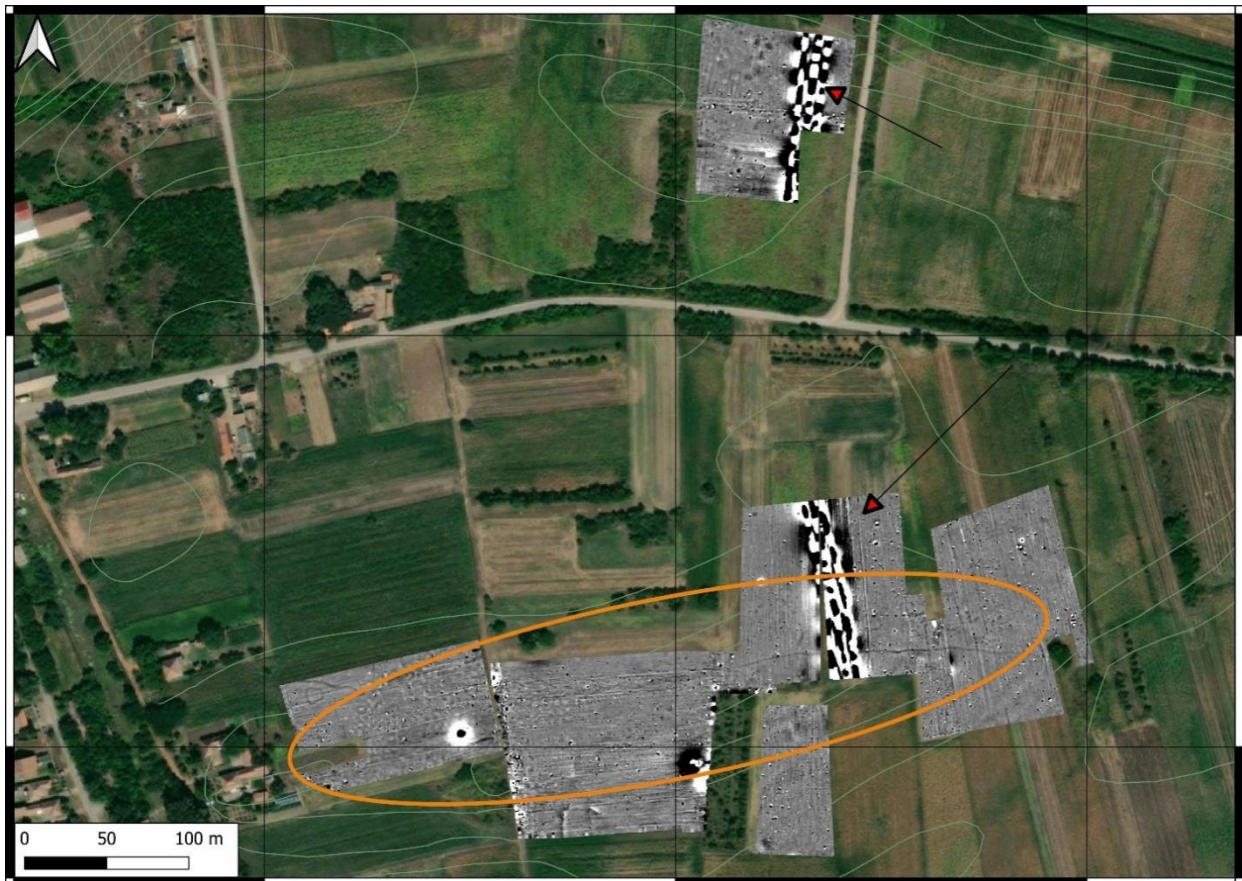


Figure 17: The orange ellipse marks the boundary of the cemetery according to recent magnetometry survey. The two red arrows point to the oil installation intrusions done at the site.

One of our goals in advancing our new work at Mokrin is to provide a well-supported argument for the placement of a number of land lots under cultural heritage protection. However, this can be a protracted process. At the time of writing (mid-July of 2022), there are roughly two more months before the third work season is scheduled to commence at Lalina humka. We are now on the lookout for the outer limits of the site and are making connections with the industrialized area near the railroad station and the eastern part of the modern village of Mokrin. Our current task is to establish if it is possible to detect traces of the Early Bronze Age settlement in the only elevated position in the

area: that of urban Mokrin itself! Our foremost hope is to conclude the excavation campaign with clear direction and knowledge of how best to build a safe environment for the remaining parts of the necropolis, and to work together with the people of modern Mokrin to raise awareness of the amazing and important archaeology they have in their own backyard. Ultimately, we break ground not for the sake of curiosity, but to trace and preserve what lies beneath for generations to come.

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