# A SEAL RING FROM VÉGEGYHÁZA, HUNGARY

RÓZSA ZOLTÁN SZIGETI JUDIT

REZUMAT: UN INEL SIGILAR DE LA VÉGEGYHÁZA, UNGARIA.

Datorită cooperării civililor și a profesioniștilor din Muzeul Orosháza, Ungaria, numărul de inele sigilare găsite în diferite situri arheologice și trimise la muzeu în timpul activității de detectare a metalelor depășește 1000 de piese. În această lucrare, am dori să prezentăm un inel fragmentar care a fost găsit aproape de Végegyháza de astăzi (comitatul Békés), pe teritoriul Peregului medieval. Așezarea fusese stabilită în apropierea râului regiunii, numit Száraz-ér, de-a lungul drumului care duce la Mureș (acum Arad). Inelul aparține unui orizont al secolelor XII-XIII și poate fi datat în epoca anterioară invaziei tătarilor, la începutul secolului al XIII-lea. O parte semnificativă a inelelor găsite în apropiere de Orosháza sunt în legătură zonele din Balcani, în trecut cu Imperiul Bizantin, astfel încât istoria așezărilor locale și a culturii materiale ar trebui examinată în conformitate cu aceste regiuni.

#### ABSTRACT:

Due to the cooperation of civilians and professionals in the Orosháza Museum, Hungary, the number of seal rings found in various archaeological sites and sent to the museum during the metal-detecting activity exceeds 1000 pieces. In this paper, we would like to present a fragmentary ring which was found near to today's Végegyháza (Békés County), on the territory of the medieval Pereg. The settlement had been established near to the region's river, called Száraz-ér, along the road leading to the Maros (now Arad). The ring belongs to a horizon of the  $12^{th}$ – $13^{th}$  centuries, and it can be dated to the era before the Tartar invasion, to the beginning of the  $13^{th}$  century. The significant part of the rings found in the neighborhood of Orosháza is linked to the areas of the Balkans, once the Byzantine Empire, so the local settlements' and material culture's history should be examined in accordance with these regions.

CUVINTE CHEIE: inel sigilar, crin, Ungaria medievală, detectarea metalelor.

KEYWORDS: seal ring, lily, medieval, Hungary, metal-detecting.

## 1. Introduction

Among the forms of Community Archaeology, metal detecting has become more and more popular in Hungary. This activity has a 40–50 years of history, but the events of the last millennium are considered to have been illegal. In fact, the number of the civilians who use metal detectors legally under the museums' control can be considered significant only during the last 10 years. Hungarian law controls metal detecting, but the methods employed and the relation of participants vary from country to country. We live in an age of transition.

As a coin has two sides, metal detecting also has at least two sides. The number of archaeological metal finds has significantly risen, we are aware of hundreds of thousands of pieces. Hungarian archaeology cannot handle this amount yet: there is a huge number of unpublished, unrestored, unknown finds. Archaeologists see the potential in civil society, as we can see the signs of cooperation: both the civil and the professional side perform together on different stages of collecting, recording and processing finds.

Maybe the best example for this kind of cooperation is the activity led by Zoltán Rózsa in Orosháza: in the past five years, civilians with different backgrounds have worked together with colleagues from the museum. The friendly cooperation has had a numerical result as the nine metal detectorists collected 20.000 pieces of metal finds, which were placed in the museum's collection. In this selected material (from the territory of about 25 settlements with churches; Fig. 1/6, 1), there are more than 1000 seal rings, which are generally fragmentary, often hard to be interpreted due to corrosion, but they serve as a huge data set referring to this region.

In this paper, we would like to present a fragmentary ring which was found near to today's Végegyháza (Békés County), on the territory of the medieval Pereg (Fig. 1/1). The settlement had been established near to the region's river, called Száraz-ér, along the road leading to the Maros (now Arad). At the end of the Bronze Age, a hillfort stood in this area, which was created in a junction known for a thousand years¹. Due to its excellent geographical characteristics, the area remained a centre also in the successive periods. In the  $12^{th}$ – $13^{th}$  centuries, a river-sized canal was built here for the salt transportation, so the settlement became one of the most important stops of the artificial system of water connecting rivers Maros and Körös². Its last prosperity is connected to the recovering cattle trade during the  $15^{th}$ – $16^{th}$  centuries³.

## 2. The ring

There are few publications in Hungary dealing with medieval rings. The first significant summary was published in 1938 by Mária Hlatky<sup>4</sup>. Unfortunately, her work has not been followed by any newer or more important publication. 40 years after, Zsuzsa Lovag published a paper about the rings from the Árpádian Era, but this work has also remained unfinished, however the author was intended to continue the process<sup>5</sup>. Another 30 years later, Zoltán Litauszki started the examination of rings from the Southern Great Plain (Bács-Kiskun, Békés and Csongrád Counties, Fig. 1/6, 2) in his university thesis<sup>6</sup>. Although his work has not yet been published, it is really important to us because it discussed the same region. He does not exceed Zsuzsa Lovag, his opponent's work, but he presents the finds from the storages of the museums systematically. His thesis was completed just before the metal detecting "boom", in 2012. After all, only few things can be said about the medieval Hungarian rings, here we would like to draw the attention to a close piece found in Szentes, mainly because its publisher wrote an independent paper about the cast bronze ring depicting a lily, which we consider as a good parallel to the one presented below<sup>7</sup>.

The ring found in Végegyháza is a seal ring cast in bronze, on whose widening head, a lily in a frame of dots can be seen. Its shoulders are undecorated, the hoop is flat (Fig. 1/1)<sup>8</sup>.

#### 2.1. Material and technique

In his study dealing with the ring found in Szentes, (Fig. 1/2) which was published in 2001, Attila Türk wrote: the formal antecedents of the medieval seal rings are the widening-headed, bronze-cast rings depicting mainly a bird or a pentacle, which are generally unearthed in common cemeteries dated to the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries (...)<sup>9</sup>. Later, Hungarian researchers have also worked with these rings, but however it is emphasized that they can be found in huge numbers on the Eastern part of the Balkan (mainly on Bulgarian sites), ethnical problems have not been already solved<sup>10</sup>. It can be seen upon the above-mentioned quotation that the connection between the widening-headed rings and medieval (14<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries), bronze-cast seal rings has already been noticed by Hungarian research, but there are no firm opinions about where and when did this process take place. We can talk about the result of an internal development, or about a Balkan-process, which was a continuous "emissive" during the Middle Ages towards the Carpathian Basin. We see the second option more likely. In our opinion, a basic ethnocultural element is that in the material culture of the conquering Hungarians, rings occur only infrequently, as its wearing was not a widely spread habit.

In the burials of the post-conquest period, the above-mentioned cast bronze rings of Balkan origin occurred, but by the end of the 11th century, they disappeared from the grave goods.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Milo et al. 2009; Sava 2018.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Rózsa 2013; Rózsa and Sümegi 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Bálint 1938; Rózsa 2013; Litauszki 2018.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Hlatky 1938.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Lovag 1980.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Litauszki 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Türk 2001.

Nagy Gyula Területi Múzeum, Orosháza, No. 2015.248.13. The sporadic ring was found by Mr and Mrs Péter Zsikai on the territory of the once settlement.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Türk 2001, 382.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Keszi 1999, 142; Langó 2016; Grigorov 2007, 209. These rings occur in the largest number around Szentes (Keszi 1999, 148, Fig. 2), where Csongrád-hillfort was supposed to be stand. The name of Csongrád (meaning 'black castle') is not a unique place name here, because on the left bank of the river Tisza, south from Szentes we have more such data which preserved the traces of Bulgarian Slavs. The name 'Landor/Nándor' meant 'Bulgarian Slav' in the antique Hungarian language (Belgrad is called Nándorfehérvár/Bolgárfehérvár in Hungarian).

From the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, bronze cast head or seal rings can be traced in the material culture, and they become dominant between the 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The main problem in this case is the intermediate period, so the 12<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

#### 2.2. Pattern

In addition to the material and manufacturing technique of the ring, the pattern on it is also remarkable. On the edge of the oval head a dotted frame can be seen, which girdles an anthropomorphic-natured lily. In the archaeological material in Hungary, the lily appeared at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, but its higher presence is detectable from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It is presented continuously by the coat-of-arms of the Angevin kings, in fact it is detectable in later periods as well – to be honest, in the form of a destructed one<sup>11</sup>.

However, this lily is not seen in its destructed but in its emerging state. Since the paper of Zsuzsa Lovag was published in 1980, researchers agree on the fact that lilies derive from human depicting<sup>12</sup>. The process of transformation can be studied excellently on the rings<sup>13</sup>. Among the rings of late Roman times, we see human figures made up of triangles, the limbs of which are simple sticks. The petals of the later lilies were formed from the rounded limbs of these sticks. The ring published below belongs to an intermediate condition when the human head is well noticeable, but the form already patterns a lily. The fact that this transformation - preserving certain conditions - was made several times is considered unimaginable, but for once between the 12th-13th centuries it took place demonstrably. We have very good examples of it such as the Hungarian Tatar coin treasures, which were hidden during 1241–1242. Beyond the coins, large number of jewels of the same era is also to be found in these treasures. From the schematic human figure to the lily, we can find good examples<sup>14</sup>. Since these treasures – also based on the coins – are presumably accumulated over several generations, the stations of these rings can also mean several generations. However, this process could not have been longer than 50-100 years, as neither numismatic, nor historical data prove it. In conclusion, all stations of transformation were present on the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary between the 12th and 13th centuries. These rings were mainly made of silver and can be classified as strap rings whose rounded head was made from their circle by hammering. Fully formed lilies also appear on bronze cast rings, but these pieces from Hungary are difficult to date according to our current knowledge. These pieces are dated to the 13th-16th centuries, however, bronze cast rings with a head tend to be dated exclusively to the 15th-16th centuries, presumably because more authentic data are available from this period<sup>15</sup>. We ourselves can fully agree with the 'dumping' of rings of the 15th-16th centuries, and the question of patterns in the 13th-14th centuries is also a mystery. To solve this, we need to examine first the coin circulation of both the site and the region.

### 3. Datation

#### 3.1. Coin circulation

Coins can be one of the most important finds for dating. On the archaeological site, almost 1000 pieces of coins were found during metal detecting (from reviewed material). The coins made in the 11<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries however are represented in the collected material in very different proportions. Not just here, in this site, but also on the others, it is true, that from the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, we do not have coins. From the whole material found with metal detectors, only 2 can be dated to this period. From the middle of the century to the beginning of the next one, we know of a dozen from this region. The time of the reign of king Bela II (1131–1141) can be considered as the "big boom" just as in other places<sup>16</sup>. This does not mean that the region was deserted, simply we cannot talk about trade, of which base could have been the cattle trade also in this period. At the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries, king Coloman "Könyves" (1095–1116) allowed the oxen to be taken abroad. From the middle third of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the number of coins shows a further increase. Among the coins, we rarely find Hungarian ones; they become replaced by better quality foreign coins, mostly from Friesach.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Litauszki 2012, 157–158, Pl. 3/4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Lovag 1980, 222; more recently: Szigeti and Rózsa 2021, 16–20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Bikić 2010, 120–123; Ota 2015; Manojlović-Nikolić 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Parádi 1975, Fig. 2/9, Fig. 8/1–4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Türk 2001; Litauszki 2012.

By the end of 2019, no coins of the 11th century were found. There is a missing of coins of King Coloman (1095–1116) and his son Stephen II (1116–1131). From the short reign of Bela II (1131–1141) 10 pieces arrived to the museum. The reign of King Geza II (1141–1162) and Stephen III (1162–1172) is represented by 3 Hungarian coins, while from the reign of Bela III (1172–1196), we are aware of 29 copper alloy coins. This is a little misleading, as the coins of King Bela III made upon an example of the Byzantine Empire, were not so popular among the inhabitants, they simply threw them away, in most cases invalidated them with punching.

The site was destroyed by the Tartar armies during the invasion, which meant the destruction not only of Pereg but also of the whole region. We do not find coins from the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the first third of the 15<sup>th</sup> century neither here nor in the whole region, except for 2–3 dozen<sup>17</sup>. The situation was completely changed by the end of the reign of Sigismund of Luxembourg (1387–1437), because there are sites where – with a little exaggeration – the land is sown with his quartings. The increase of the coin circulation is due to cattle trade. From the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the climate had become rainier, and the region struggling with the lack of water sources was more appreciated. The area of the previously uninhabited villages become the subject of sales more often. Participants of the cattle trade drove the cattle raised here through Vienna towards Nuremberg. In the 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries, mainly in the last decades, a never seen richness came to Pereg and the region, which can be seen not only in coin material, but in other objects. Cloth seals, book clasps, thimbles, knife accessories prove this theory.

Unfortunately, the examination of coin circulation does not take us further to the dating of the ring, as we see a drastic decline at the same time that interests us most from the point of view of the ring. We do not know whether the area was deserted at this time or only the commercial activity ceased almost completely.

# 3.2. Complex questions of chronology

We have only one-way information about the extent of the enrichment of the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries. It seems clear that the population of the region before the Tartar invasion had already begun to keep and drive cattle, but the use of the property received in return was much more than accumulation. In the treasures from the era of the Tartar invasion, there are almost exclusively just silver coins and objects made of silver (e.g. variants of hammered lily rings), without bronze objects. However, it does not mean that they were not in use.

The results of the Hungarian metal detecting activity are known only partially, so we can draw conclusions only in the light of the data known from Orosháza. On the sites of the Árpádian age region (11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries), metal detecting surveys were conducted only a few times, probably because of their "poverty", against the area of the settlements reaching the 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although cast bronze rings in 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> century sites have not been found so far, in this case we cannot state that they were not in use during this period either.

The material, the formal nature and the dotted frame of the ring can also be seen on the one found near in Csorvás (Fig. 1/3)<sup>18</sup>. The coins of the 13<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries are also missing from this site. In this case, the central part of the ring is not the developing lily, but the reversible-headed four-legged animal, with slapped up tail, which appeared suddenly and without antecedent in the 2<sup>nd</sup> part of the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the Carpathian Basin both on rings and on pendants and seals as well.

We have previously pointed out on the inhesion of the reversible-headed four-legged animal and the anthropomorph depictions, and their role as defenders<sup>19</sup>. Both with rings as well as with pendants/seals it is possible to see the dotted frame around the motif, or its imitation made by punching, which in our opinion is an age-determining element, because in the case of the rings deriving from the 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries, this element does not appear.

Since the lily shows a strong anthropomorph nature on the ring discussed above, and it has a dotted frame, we think that it can be dated before the Tartar invasion and it possibly has Balkan origins.

#### **Summary**

Due to the cooperation of civilians and professionals in the Orosháza Museum, the number of seal rings found in various archaeological sites and sent to the museum during the metal-detecting activity exceeds 1000 pieces. A smaller part of it can be dated between the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, while most of them to the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Rings from earlier periods were made of silver; their rounded head was made from the circle itself by hammering, while the rings of later periods were cast mostly in bronze. The situation is certainly not this simple, because we are aware of pieces also cast in bronze from earlier periods, as well as of silver ones from later centuries. However, we can find good examples from the Balkans from both periods, on the territory of the once Byzantine Empire with millennial traditions.

The change in use between rings hammered of silver and cast in bronze in Hungary could have started sometime in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, before the Tartar invasion, as the ring presented above is set as a good example because of the pattern. We should be very careful, as written sources have not survived even after the invasion, and the coin exchange is also paused in the region until the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It is also a big problem as well as the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Altogether five coins were unearthed on the site from the reign of King Charles I (1308–1342) and Louis I (1342–1382).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Szigeti and Rózsa 2021.

fact that settlements from the same period have not been excavated yet and we barely find rings among the grave good of burials, which can prove our thoughts, or they are dated schematic.

The ring from Végegyháza presented in this paper belongs to a horizon of the 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries, and it can be dated to the era before the Tartar invasion, to the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, we can see that there is a strong emotional nature in the chronology. Despite all these and the fact that we speak of a very small part of the whole material, we would like to present this study, mainly because of the problems in question<sup>20</sup>. In this paper, we drew attention to the wide-ranging cooperation discussed above. The significant part of the rings found in the neighborhood of Orosháza is linked to the areas of the Balkans, once the Byzantine Empire, so the local settlements' and material culture's history should be examined in accordance with these regions<sup>21</sup>. Demanding catalogues of rings from Croatia serve as good examples for it, whose material carries so many questions in itself (for example Fig. 1/4–5)<sup>22</sup>.

# Figure(s)

Fig. 1. 1: Végegyháza; 2: Szentes; 3: Csorvás; 4–5: Rings from Eastern Slavonia; 6/1: Collection area of the museum of Orosháza; 6/2: The area presented by Zoltán Litauszki (2012).

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We intentionally refer to the neighborhood of Orosháza, instead of Hungary, because we are not aware of the finds of other regions.

Adžaga 2020, 142, Catalogue 89; Gaunt 2020, 29, Katalog 50. We would like to thank editor-in-chief Silviu Oţa for the possibility and for his advices. The drawing of the ring was made by Anna Tarbay, and the map was made by László Pokorni. Translated by Viktória P. Horváth.

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#### **ABBREVIATIONS**

Dolg. (Szeged) Dolgozatok a M. Kir. Ferencz József Tudományegyetem Archaeologiai

Intézetéből

FolArch (Budapest) Folia Archaeologica

MFMÉ – StudArch (Szeged) Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve – Studia Archaeologica

Mozaikok (Orosháza) Mozaikok Orosháza és vidéke múltjából

RÓZSA ZOLTÁN

Castle Headquaters Integrated Regional Development Centre Ltd. rozo30@hotmail.com

SZIGETI JUDIT

Castle Headquaters Integrated Regional Development Centre Ltd. judszig@gmail.com



Fig. 1. 1: Végegyháza; 2: Szentes; 3: Csorvás; 4–5: Rings from Eastern Slavonia; 6/1: Collection area of the museum of Orosháza; 6/2: The area presented by Zoltán Litauszki (2012).