

Bronze Age cemetery reveals history of a high-status woman and her twins

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Ancient urn graves contain a wealth of information about a high-ranking woman and her Bronze Age Vatya community, according to a study published July 28, 2021 in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* by

Claudio Cavazzuti from the University of Bologna, Italy, and Durham University, UK, and colleagues.

People of the Vátya culture that flourished during the Hungarian Early and Middle Bronze Ages (approximately 2200-1450 BCE) customarily cremated the deceased—making the [human remains](#) difficult to analyze from a bioarchaeological perspective. In this study, the authors used new osteological sampling strategies to learn more about the people buried in the urnfield cemetery at Szigetszentmiklós-Úrgehegy, one of the largest Middle Bronze Age urn cemeteries in Central Hungary.

Cavazzuti and colleagues analyzed human tissues from 29 graves (three whole burials, or inhumations, and 26 urn cremations) and applied strontium isotope comparison techniques to test if sampled individuals were local to the geographic area. For the majority of sampled graves, each contained the remains of a single individual and simple grave goods made of ceramic or bronze; however, gravesite 241 was of special interest: this grave contained an urn with the cremated remains of an adult woman and two fetuses, buried alongside prestigious grave goods including a golden hair-ring, a bronze neck-ring, and two bone hairpin ornaments.

Though the three inhumed individuals were poorly preserved, the authors were able to confirm these had been adults, though they couldn't determine the sex. Of the 26 cremated individuals, seven appeared to be [adult males](#), 11 [adult females](#), and two appeared to be adults whose sex couldn't be determined. They also identified children's remains: two individuals likely 5-10 years of age, and four individuals ranging from 2-5 years of age—the youngest present aside from the twin fetuses buried with the adult woman in grave 241, which were approximately 28-32 gestational weeks of age. The authors believe the woman in grave 241 may have died due to complications bearing or birthing these twins. Her remains indicate she was 25 to 35 years old at her time of death and

the remains were especially carefully collected post-cremation, as her grave exhibited a bone weight 50 percent higher than the average sampled grave. The strontium analysis also revealed she was likely born elsewhere and moved to Szigetszentmiklós in early adolescence, between the ages of 8-13. One other adult woman also appeared non-local to Szigetszentmiklós, with the adult women in general featuring a more varied strontium isotope composition than the adult men, whose isotopes were concentrated in an especially small range—even narrower than those of the children analyzed in the study.

The authors note their findings at the Szigetszentmiklós urnfield reinforce evidence that women, especially of high rank, commonly married outside their immediate group in Bronze Age Central Europe—and confirm the informative potential of strontium isotope analyses even for cremated remains.

The authors add: "Thanks to a wide spectrum of new bioarchaeological methods, techniques and sampling strategies, it is now possible to reconstruct the life-histories of cremated people of the Bronze Age. In this case, the authors investigate the movements and the tragic events of a high-status woman's life, settled along the Danube 4000 years ago, in the territory of modern-day Hungary."

More information: Cavazzuti C, Hajdu T, Lugli F, Sperduti A, Vicze M, Horváth A, et al. (2021) Human mobility in a Bronze Age Vatia 'urnfield' and the life history of a high-status woman. *PLoS ONE* 16(7): e0254360. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0254360

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