

RUNIFORM SIGNS OR MEMENTOS OF CHRISTIANISATION?

Interpretations of rings from 11th- century villagers' graves in Hungarian archaeological research

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ABSTRACT: This paper reviews the research on a ring type appearing in Carpathian Basin cemeteries in the 11th century. In this paper, I present the early attempts to interpret the engraved signs on the rings and the related explanations. Following an overview of the historical developments, I make a brief suggestion that the signs on the rings were not always understandable; it cannot be ruled out that the makers of the rings may not have been able to write, while the customers could not read. This hypothesis would raise further considerations and possibilities when interpreting this group of artefacts.

KEYWORDS: strap ring, letter-like engraved signs, apotropaic inscription, research history, rings with 'runiform' signs

A story should be told from the beginning. Sometimes, however, storytellers start their stories at the end. And in some cases, the end and the beginning of a story may be linked together. What I have to say here is something like this. It is not complicated, of course, because I am not striving to write a postmodernist essay or develop a philosophical thesis; instead, I am merely briefly reviewing the phases of research and interpretation of a type of ring.

1. A treasure found in Germany¹

In February 1898, an unusual set of items was found by a local farmer in Paußnitz, a village in Saxony near the Elbe River. In this village, which was then part of Prussia, Emil Schreiber was digging up the roots of a tree when he found the treasure. In a pot decorated with sets of wavy lines, roughly 500 coins and one ring were discovered. The silver coins – most of which were soon lost back then – were good indicators of when the hoard had been hidden: among them were silver coins minted between 1127 and 1156 by Konrad the Great, margrave of Meissen, of the House of Wettin, and the money of Udo, son of Thuringian Count Ludwig II and bishop of Naumburg, and his successor, Wichman. Many coins had been made in the mint at the nearby town of Strehla. Based on all of this, it was clear as early at the time of discovery that the treasure had been hidden there sometime in the early 1150s.

As was common even at that time, news of the find reached a large group of interested antiquaries, and thus private collectors, art collectors and major state collection managers all sought to acquire as much of the treasure as possible. Of course, their main goal was to buy the coins. When the local museum expressed its interest – considering that the region was within the collection range of the Halle Museum (Landesmuseums für Vorgeschichte Halle) – the set was already being bargained away. In March of that year, barely anything of the find was left in the owner's possession. The farmer could only hand over to the Halle collection, "out of patriotic duty", some coins and fragments of the

1 For a detailed presentation of the data, see Muhl 2019.

pot that held the treasure (fragments of its bottom and side, because the top of the pot had been lost by then). The finder of the treasure, Emil Schreiber, intended to keep the ring as a memento, even though the interim director of the Halle museum, medieval art historian Rudolf Kautzsch was rather interested in it. Eventually, Kautzsch cajoled him into selling it to the museum for 15 Imperial marks and managed to acquire it before the other suitor of the rarity, the Münzkabinet of Dresden.² Despite the initial interest, the item was eventually forgotten, for several reasons. Where to place the artefact and the difficulties of deciphering the inscription may have caused this, just as the fact that in November the museum's expert who played the lead role in the acquisition, Kautzsch, moved on to become head of the museum collection of book publishing in Leipzig, at the institution that covered his area of interest at the time, medieval book art (Deutsche Buchgewerbemuseum, currently Deutsche Buch- und Schriftmuseum). After that, the item was no longer in the focus of attention and even those who did look for it could not find it, believing it was lost. Research of the site at the time was abandoned as well, and interest was revived only decades later during the Weimar period. In March 1927, in an attempt to identify the exact site, only other similar fragments of ceramics from the 11th or 12th century indicated the broader location of the discovery, but no new information could be gathered on what object, what strata, and what other findings the curious discovery could be linked to.

Following this, the ring fell completely into oblivion until the 120-year jubilee of the Halle museum. The museum management then planned a celebratory exhibition for the anniversary, designed to highlight lesser known artefacts. This is when, in connection with the 120 items selected, the museum's hidden treasure was rediscovered, including the ring with its inscription rendered illegible by corrosion, in an exhibition entitled "Schönheit, Macht und Tod". The mysterious marks on the item attracted wide attention. Today the village of Paußnitz, known to be the place of discovery, uses it almost as a brand, proud of the unique artefact

² Only a copy of the ring reached Dresden. For the dispute between the two museums and the background of how the item was acquired, see Muhl 2019, pp. 88-90.

uncovered from its earth,³ while thousands of replicas on sale at the Halle museum have been sold to this day. And that was only the beginning of the attention the ring drew. Other research started to study the symbolism behind the marks on the outer side of the object and its origin,⁴ a grandiose exhibition and conference were dedicated to this artefact,⁵ where the historical role, the symbols of the object and generally of rings and the nuances of their significance in early and medieval cultures were examined in a wider context.⁶ This research discovered that the closest relative of this piece of silver jewellery found in Paußnitz was from the Carpathian Basin, from Deszk in Csongrád County, Hungary. This find and its replicas had been the subject of attention of Hungarian archaeologists for a long time, who had published numerous valuable findings on this type of object. Indeed, the 11th–12th-century polygonal band rings with engraved groups of symbols were well-known artefacts in the Carpathian Basin.⁷

2. The ring of Deszk et al.

Research in the cemeteries of Deszk from the early Árpád Age started as early as the 1930s under Ferenc Móra.⁸ The excavation of a significant part of Cemetery D was performed under his supervision as well.⁹ Yet it was not he who published the ring found in Grave 87 of the site, but the later director of the museum of Szeged, Dezső Csallány, who pointed out that the discovery dated from the 11th

3 <https://www.facebook.com/Paußnitz-1599158893532246/> (downloaded on 10 January 2020).

4 Muhl 2003; Muhl 2019; Röhrer-Ertl, F.U. 2003; Röhrer-Ertl, F.U. 2019; Röhrer-Ertl, O. 2003; Röhrer-Ertl, O. 2019; Saller 2003.

5 Meller, Kimmig-Völkner & Reichenberger 2019b.

6 Meller, Kimmig-Völkner & Reichenberger 2019a, I-II.

7 Muhl 2019, p. 82; cf. Kürti 2000.

8 Bálint 1991, p. 218; Balogh & Bende 2007, pp. 17-18.

9 The first 206 graves of the cemetery were excavated by Ferenc Móra between 29 August and 8 October 1931, and the dig was later resumed in 1937 by his successor, Dezső Csallány, who discovered ten other graves. Graves from the Avar period and from the 10th and 11th century were discovered at the site. From many graves in the cemetery, bracelets with animal heads, bangles with S-shaped ends, braided silver rings with bradded ends, and coins from the Árpád period (István I, András I, Béla I, Salamon, László I) were recovered. Cf. Csallány 1955, p. 82; Bálint 1991, p. 218; Balogh & Bende 2007, p. 17.

century when he presented the grave. The signs on the artefact were not visible for a long time and were discovered on the outer side of the object only during restoration in 1953.¹⁰ We must mention this was not the first ring of this kind, as similar artefacts were discovered in the Carpathian Basin in the early 20th century. They were first analysed in the 1930s.

The earliest ring published and known to us was found in the early 20th century in Croatia, at the Svinjarevci site in Slavonia. The silver ring found in Grave 45 in the cemetery was easy to date based on the coin of King László I also found in the grave. Thus, this find, which was discovered in the early phases of research, was dated accurately to the 11th century.¹¹ However, neither the Croatian, nor the Hungarian researchers paid any attention to the ring type at that time. The artefact published by Josip Brunšmid was described in 1907 by another researcher, József Hampel, as a ring “*consisting of a closed-loop band with rectangular protrusions on its outer side*”.¹² The question arises whether this is the only artefact of this early age in the collection of the Zagreb Museum. The village cemetery of the former Gorbonok township of Kaproncza (today: Klostar Podravski, Croatia) was disturbed in the late 19th century. Of this site, only grave goods from the richer graves were kept together, while objects found in the other graves were thrown together. Among these stray artefacts there was one ring that might have fit this category. Unfortunately, no drawing was made of the ring and the description is not clear either,¹³ and thus it is questionable

10 Csallány 1955, p. 59. In the tomb, a ring with an S-shaped end was placed underneath the chin, and two denarii minted under King László had been placed near the deceased as well.

11 Brunšmid 1904, pp. 88-89.

12 Hampel 1907, p. 194.

13 Brunšmid 1904, pp. 78-79. According to the description: “*koja je izvna uresena kosim istockanim poteizma*”. It is unclear what the author meant by slanting lines. Unfortunately, the republication by József Hampel is also not helpful in understanding the decoration on the outer side of the ring: “*An open-loop band ring with overlapping ends; along the outer side, it is decorated by longitudinal straight lines intersected by dotted slanting lines*”. Cf. Hampel 1907, p. 170. Making interpretation of the object more difficult, Brunšmid speaks of a silver (*srebro ~ srebrni*) ring (Brunšmid 1904, p. 79), while Hampel refers to a copper-based alloy – “*made of yellow metal*”, (Hampel 1907, p. 170). For an independent interpretation of the ring, see Niederle 1913, pp. 673-674. In Niederle’s opinion, in this case, there is a row of trapezoidal patterns on the outer side of the band ring.

whether the item can even be considered. The ring type, similarly to other ring shapes, attracted no attention during that period of the research, and this is obvious from the brief summary by József Hampel in his volume of 1907.¹⁴

The next similar find was also from the southern region of the country, in the territory of what was then Bács County. It came into the possession of Kálmán Gubitza in 1908 when – together with Béla Posta – he noticed a disturbed medieval village cemetery between Újgombos and Újpalánka. From the site disturbed by railway construction, a triple-fold braided torque with a hook clasp and a ring came into the possession of the Bács-Bodrog County Company. Unfortunately, the signs on the ring cannot be compared with the piece disclosed by Josip Brunšmid or any pieces found later.¹⁵ Currently, the finding is in a collection at the Zombor Museum, but it also could not be clarified in its newer publication whether the signs engraved on the other side of the silver ring were different from those on other finds or of a similar design.¹⁶ Based on a republication by Nebojša Stanojev, it can be ascertained that the title of Kálmán Gubitza's work, which refers to a cemetery from the "Hungarian Conquest period" (i.e. started in the early 10th century), might be misleading on first reading. But the author explains the title, highlighting that the findings at that site "*are closely related to artefacts from the Bijelo-Brdo peak*", and therefore he believes they might point to "*the presence of some Slavic tribe*".¹⁷ The S-ended loop jewellery and rectangular cross-section bronze torques of the scattered artefacts also confirm what was clear from Gubitza's report: the remnants of a slightly later, late 10th-century or 11th-century village cemetery were discovered and the ring was probably part of them.¹⁸ Shortly afterwards, Arnold Marosi published a study on the Maroshegy cemetery in Székesfehérvár in the journal *Archaeológiai Értesítő* [Archaeology News].¹⁹

14 Hampel 1907, p. 67.

15 Gubitza 1910, pp. 169-170.

16 Станојев 1989, pp. 22-23, No. 103.

17 Gubitza 1910, p. 172.

18 Gubitza 1910; Станојев 1989, pp. 22-23. Gubitza's description of the position and large number of the graves and scattered bricks seems to confirm that this was a village cemetery, as does the existence of graves of different depths. A curiosity of the cemetery is the fact that two crosses made of "silver plates" were found there, as well.

19 Marosi 1914.

In describing the graves of the disturbed cemetery that could be documented, Marosi mentions that a ring was found in Grave 6, “consisting of a silver band, the surface of which was decorated by notches reminiscent of runiform script”.²⁰ Thus, he was the first to associate the object type with runiform script. However, he published no drawing or photo of the find in his first study, and so his contemporaries disregarded the comment hidden among his lines. Along with the ring, a string of beads, another ring, an S-ended loop jewellery, and a denarius coined by King András I were found in the tomb, and these together are good indicators of the age of this artefact.²¹

This early news was not followed up by any analyses covering the ring type and the signs on it. Although research into runiform script had started in the second half of the 19th century, a significant shift in emphasis occurred only from the 1910s when several prestigious experts started to pay attention to this topic.²² However, until the 1930s, nobody noticed these rings and it was only then that Gyula Mészáros, a researcher of runiform script, looked into the issue. Contemporaneous archaeologists had also not studied the older discoveries in more detail. To complicate the situation, with the exception of the piece in Székesfehérvár, all of them were stranded abroad after the state borders were redrawn in the wake of WWI. Following József Hampel, there was no expert to offer any comprehensive interpretation of the 10th-century artefacts. This hiatus was filled in the 1930s by Nándor Fettich, although he was more interested in the early artefacts and less in the material found in the less well-furnished graves.²³ The group of items was also not covered in papers debating the Slavic ethnicity of the Hungarian Principality in the 10th–11th century,²⁴ while researchers’

20 Idem, p. 61. Cf. Csallány 1968, p. 294; Kornél Bakay only disclosed a profile photo of the ring in parallel with Csallány’s publication, and his description (“Gegossener Bronzering mit Buckelverzierung”) is unclear on whether there was any decoration on the object. Cf. Bakay 1968, p. 58. Unlike Csallány and Marosi, Bakay described the ring as a bronze ring.

21 Marosi 1914, p. 61; Bakay 1968, p. 58.

22 For the timeline of research, see Sándor 2014, pp. 299–306.

23 For the relevant issues of the history of research, see Langó 2017, pp. 43–45.

24 Richthofen 1926; Niederle 1926. Niederle knew and even later published similar polygonal rings with inscriptions from the Byzantine discoveries in Bulgaria. Cf. Niederle 1930, pp. 122–123.

interest was not roused either when Arnold Marosi published, this time with a drawing, the rings from Maroshegy, presenting a total of two artefacts: “*on one of them, notches reminiscent of runiform script, and on the other, which is thicker than the first, an intricate punched decoration*”.²⁵

The first recognition and interpretation of the object type in Hungary occurred when Kálmán Szabó found rings with similar inscriptions²⁶ in 1932 in the cemeteries studied at the Kerekegyháza (Fülöpszállás) – Kunpuszta site (the medieval Hercegegyháza?),²⁷ and then in 1933 at Ladánybene-Templom-dűlő

25 Marosi 1922, p. 34, cf. p. 26. Table I photos 3–4. The signs on the ring among of the second scattered finds were noticed by Kornél Bakay as well, and according to his description: “Einfacher Ring mit Kopf aus einem 0,35 cm breiten Silberblech (Inv. Nr. ?), dessen Enden zusammengelötet sind. In den von Perlenreihen eingefassten Vierecken sind verschiedene”. Bakay 1968, p. 59. Based on the same description, the stray ring published by Marosi was identified by Miklós Béla Szőke as well. Cf. Szőke & Vándor 1987, p. 71. However, Kornél Bakay only provided a top view of the ring in the table he published: Bakay 1968, Taf. XII.1. The picture of the ring from Grave 6 has an important and interesting detail: based on the drawing published by Marosi, it seems the signs were not framed on the ring from Grave 6, which is why Miklós Béla Szőke assumed, precisely based on the drawing published by Arnold Marosi, that “the signs were lined up one after another with no frame”. See Szőke–Vándor 1987, p. 71. However, on the ring the signs were framed, as could be seen easily in the photo by Dezső Csallány (and not in the drawing that also did not show any frames). Cf. Csallány 1968, p. 294. All of this shows that earlier drawings are not always decisive in a matter, since in many cases they express an interpretation, as can be seen in Csallány’s drawing, from which another scholar might draw the wrong conclusions. It is not easy to decide whether the stray find had any frames on it, as assumed by Miklós Béla Szőke from Bakay’s description above. But there is a possibility to resolve the contradictions. At the time Bakay registered the discovery and documented it with photos, both rings were available, but Bakay incorrectly listed Figure 3 of Photo 1 in Marosi 1922 (cf. Bakay 1968, p. 58, n. 18.) under Grave 6 of Maroshegy, and in fact it was probably Figure 4 of Photo 1 in Marosi 1922 that pertained to Grave 6. But all of this is mere speculation. The opinion could be supported and Bakay’s mistake could be indicated by the fact that the top-view photo of the ring from Grave 6 is identical to the similar view of the ring listed among the findings of the current Grave 6 (I had the opportunity to examine the ring personally in 2015). But we cannot be certain because unfortunately I could not find the other stray ring in the Székesfehérvár collection. Even if we accept the above assumption, the question remains whether we should attach more importance to Bakay’s description above or the drawing published in Marosi’s study, when it comes to whether the stray ring had any frames on it.

26 Szabó 1938, p. 32.

27 For issues relating to the identification of the site, see Siklósi 1999; Rosta 2014, pp. 55, 88–89.

(the medieval *Benezzállás*).²⁸ The significance of the rings was recognised by Turkologist Gyula Mészáros who had recently moved home and was the first to publish it, following a lecture on the topic held at the itinerant conference of the Szeged Commission for Research of the Great Plain in Kecskemét.²⁹ Mészáros defined the inscriptions as specimens of Cuman runiform script,³⁰ although he probably confused the two rings.³¹ In Mészáros' interpretation, the discovery turned out to be a "sensation", because these would have been the first specimens of Cuman runiform script.³² The results of Gyula Mészáros were accepted by Kálmán Szabó as well, but no other relevant contemporaneous opinions were expressed regarding the signs on the ring. As suggested by the review on Szabó's work by Alajos Bálint, the archaeologists of the period kept their distance from this topic.³³ Although similar finds were discovered as early as that period (more precisely, before the excavation by Szabó) by Ferenc Móra, in their primary presentation the archaeologist did not mention this curiosity (probably because the inscription was not legible before restoration).³⁴ A more detailed processing of the cemetery and the ring was hindered by Móra's long illness and death in 1934. Afterwards, Dezső Csallány was appointed as director of the Szeged Museum and he resumed the exploration of the Deszk cemetery in 1937.³⁵ The restoration of earlier findings was probably conducted in parallel with this.³⁶ However, another

28 Rosta 2014, pp. 201–203.

29 Anonymous 1936.

30 Mészáros 1936.

31 On the matter of confusion, see Kürti 2006, n. 19. However, it is not clear who made the mistake: Mészáros, who published the ring inscription as early as 1936 (Mészáros 1936, pp. 172–173), or Szabó, who published his book two years later, in 1938 (Szabó 1938, p. 33, photo 90–91). The identification by Mészáros was later followed by Dezső Csallány as well.

32 The current position on the research is that to this day we have no runiform scrip that can be associated with the Cumans. Here, I wish to thank my Turkologist friends, Balázs Sudár and Dávid Kara Somfai for sharing their knowledge in this matter.

33 Bálint 1938, p. 211.

34 Móra 1932.

35 Csallány 1943.

36 Csallány had no plans on excavating any graves later than the Avar Age; plans were that it would have been done by "the intern of the archaeological institute of the University of Szeged". Although Dezső Csallány mentions no names, he must have meant Márta Széll who had started a systematic processing of the digs conducted by Móra. Cf. Széll 1940; 1942; 1943.

global conflagration thwarted the processing of the Deszk cemetery. Following WWII, the scholar who published work on the early Árpád-period cemeteries discovered by Ferenc Móra, Márta Széll, moved to the USA; Csallány's career was disrupted, and he was only able to resume his work as an archaeologist in 1954 in Nyíregyháza, far away from his previous station.³⁷ During this time, Csallány began his activity with renewed zeal and picking up previously started work, his publications came out one after another, on artefacts of the migration period and the Árpád period, and on runiform inscriptions. His interest in the specific ring type was obviously aroused in a previous dig. As early as October 1939, Csallány was excavating in Klárafalva, in the garden of tavern-keeper György Faragó, where he exposed 11 (12?) graves from an Árpád-period cemetery.³⁸ In Grave 6 opened in the SE part of the cemetery fragment, a silver band ring was found, with signs engraved on the outer side that were noticed by Csallány even at the time of the discovery.

Eventually, reports on the Csongrád County finds were published in 1955. This is when he published what he knew of the ring type in question. The processing of the parallels was not only a development of earlier conclusions by Mészáros, but the beginning of his project that became an important part of his work:³⁹ an interpretation of early medieval and Árpád-period sign groups

37 A detailed report on the early Árpád-Age finds of cemetery D of Deszk has not been published to this day. More recent research found that a similar ring was in another grave (Grave 56) of the cemetery, but not even Csallány recognised it. Cf. Kovács 2015, n. 779.

38 Csallány 1955, pp. 83-84; Csallány 1968, pp. 293-294. In connection with the site, Csanád Bálint mentions only twelve graves. Cf. Bálint 1991, p. 236.

39 One commentator on the history of science attributed this interest of his to the speculation that "provincial solitude drove the old man to studying runiform script". Emphasising that I am not familiar with the habits of Dezső Csallány or with how bitter he might have grown during the stormy years between 1947 and 1954, I would only like to point out that perhaps this is not the only possible interpretation of this detail of his life work. His works published after his study of 1955, presented above, do not seem to support this explanation. Csallány published the first register of Avar discoveries in 1956. In parallel with his work on runiform script (or specimens to be believed to be such), he published a series of summaries, used and cited to this day, regarding the 10th century (Csallány 1957; 1959; 1970), the Avar Age (Csallány 1956; 1958a; 1962; 1968c), research on the Gepids (Csallány 1961), Byzantine archaeology (Csallány 1957; 1962a; 1965) and the history of research (Csallány 1958; 1968b). (The references are not exhaustive, a large number could be added to them,

believed to be runiform script.⁴⁰ The paper was clearly a thorough work. Obviously, Csallány had studied and collected the related artefacts for a long time. Initially, he accepted the opinion of Mészáros and took the late horizon of the inscriptions to be Cuman runiform script; he believed the 11th-century artefacts to be traces of “*Christianised Pechenegs*”.⁴¹ He reported a total of six rings in his study, but also mentions a seventh (one piece in Székesfehérvár). Of the six rings, the artefacts presented above can be regarded as being from the 11th or 12th century. The ring from Battonya, included in the paper, is certainly an artefact that does not pertain to this category (he himself later partially solved the issue of its dating⁴² when he discovered in the collection at the Esztergom museum and published the closest parallel of the Békés County artefact known only from a photo).⁴³ Even more questionable than the Battonya

as preferred.) In my opinion, these papers prove that Csallány had his Hungarian and foreign connections even during this late phase of his work, he was familiar with and used contemporaneous literature, and he does not seem at all to have been forgotten by scholars, locking himself up in his solitary provincial study to pursue eccentric interests. Cf. Bóna 1971; Németh 1977. His work on runiform script was born as a result of long-term scientific efforts, regardless of whether or not some of his findings were mistaken or erroneous. In my opinion, this type of work Dezső Csallány conducted could be compared best to the papers written by Gábor Vékony or János Harmatta on similar topics. In the case of the latter, their interest in the various scripts they thought they discovered on archaeological findings was not caused by any “provincial solitude”, or any other negative “socio-psychological background”. I cannot assume any lack of linguistic knowledge of sufficient depth (as expected by contemporaneous research) in Csallány’s case, as no such complaint was raised in the case of the other scholars mentioned. I see no reason why we should judge him for daring to investigate the topic as an archaeologist. There are many contemporaneous examples of interest expressed by archaeologists in this field. Such was the significant debate on the interpretation of the inscriptions of Nagyszentmiklós, where archaeologists and linguists expressed conflicting opinions.

40 Csallány’s last paper was also in this field. Cf. Csallány 1976.

41 Csallány 1955, p. 84.

42 This paper does not cover the rings of Battonya or Esztergom, because they cannot be seen as early Árpád-Age pieces, which is why I do not present them in detail nor wish to state how the groups of signs on the ring heads could be interpreted. I only want to point out that formal parallels of this ring type point to the 14th and 15th century in both cases, when (betrothal) rings with Cyrillic inscriptions and elements that seem to be similar groups of signs were generally known in the Balkans. Cf. Радојковић 1969, p. 195; Милошевић 1987, No. 209–213.; Бајаловић–Хаџи–Пешић 1984, Cat. 428, pp. 394, 568.; Ђуровић 2012, Cat. 70.

43 Csallány 1968, pp. 281–284.

ring head is how we should interpret the discovery of Pomáz. Not even a photo of the Pomáz ring survived,⁴⁴ and it was presented only based on a drawing known to him from a copy made by István Erdélyi and Sándor Sashegyi.⁴⁵

In his later work, Csallány frequently returned to this issue and wrote larger summaries on the topics on several occasions, also covering the finds in Nagyszentmiklós.⁴⁶ He did not stop collecting finds and added another ring to the category of artefacts that might be included in the study. He was the first to present the artefact from Hódmezővásárhely and mentioned another find from Mezőberény, but it is very likely that – similarly to the Battonya ring – it does not fall within the scope of my study.⁴⁷

Thus, thanks to Csallány's contribution, the topic attracted much attention and at the end of his activity, as many as six authentic artefacts were the focus of research (Deszk cemetery D, Grave 87; Ladánybene, Klárafalva – György Faragós garden, Grave 6; Fülöpszállás-Kerekegyháza; Székesfehérvár-Maroshegy Grave 6; and Hódmezővásárhely-Kenyereéri-dűlő/Káposztásföld).⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the research of the scholar in Nyíregyháza into early medieval groups of signs and runiform script was mostly met with silence. His contemporaries, such as Gyula László, often helped him with data,⁴⁹ but they did not reflect on the merits of his findings. This reluctance speaks volumes, also because during that period some of the artefacts covered by Csallány (such as the treasure found in Nagyszentmiklós) were discussed in many papers.⁵⁰ The reason could be the fact that the contemporaries disagreed with Csallány on the dating and interpretation of the runiform script. The topic was not addressed by Béla Szőke in his overview

44 To my knowledge, the ring of Battonya was also not included in a museum.

45 On Sashegyi's work, see Kanyó 2012, while a relevant example of his knowledge of materials of Transylvania is: Erdélyi 2016.

46 Csallány 1968; Csallány 1968a.

47 Unfortunately, Csallány did not publish a photo of the find, and all we know is that it was in the possession of ethnographer Hajnalka Tábori of Debrecen. Cf. Csallány 1968, p. 299.

48 At that time, the finds that were added to collections in the territory of the then Yugoslavian state were not noticed by Csallány either.

49 Csallány 1968, p. 295.

50 For a summary of the history of research on the topic, see Bálint 2004, pp. 78–87.

that remains a field manual to this day,⁵¹ nor was any interpretation of the rings provided by Kornél Bakay in his studies systemising the findings of the Székesfehérvár cemeteries.⁵² The latter published both relevant findings in the case of the Maroshegy cemetery, but did not ascribe any importance to the groups of signs on the outer side of the rings, only mentioning the framed design in the case of the stray piece.⁵³

In parallel with Csallány's aforementioned papers, pieces from Baranya County were published that represented progress in the research on this group of artefacts.⁵⁴ After the death of János Dombay, the excavation notes of the researcher and founder of the collection were published, which discussed the earliest artefacts of the early Árpád Age in Baranya County that were professionally excavated and processed. But the artefacts of the Ellend-Szilfai-dűlő site published as part of this work were not utilised by Csallány or any other researcher, and thus the analysis of the rings he published only started later.⁵⁵ Among the parallels published by Dombay were some on which the excavator identified clearly Latin-script inscription fragments,⁵⁶ while in other cases, he could only identify "*traces of script*".⁵⁷

51 For a presentation of the rings of the early Árpád Age, see Szőke 1962, pp. 96-99.

52 Bakay 1965; Bakay 1968.

53 On the ring from Grave 6, the rectangular design of the object can be seen well even from the top-view picture: Cf. Bakay 1968, Taf. IX.8. The expression used in the text (Buckelverzierung) may also refer to the formal appearance of the ring: Idem, p. 58. Regarding the framed design: Idem, p. 59. But in this case, the band of the ring was not rectangular: Cf. Idem, Taf. XII.1. Obviously Bakay's description misled Miklós Béla Szőke, too, who later declared that the ring from Grave 6 of Maroshegy was lost. Cf. Szőke & Vándor 1987, p. 71. In 2015, I held the ring from Grave 6 in my hands and it certainly existed at that time, so probably (identifying the top-view picture of the ring based on Kornél Bakay's paper), the object was not lost earlier, either (without doubt the photo taken by Dezső Csallány was made in the 1960s as well; cf. Csallány 1968, p. 294.), what happened was simply that they attached no importance to the signs.

54 Dombay 1960; Dombay 1961.

55 Dombay 1960, pp. 152, 154. A ring such as this was found in both Grave 70 and 128 of the cemetery. Dombay's descriptions reveal a reserved interpretation, because he emphasises, in the case of both objects, that the signs that could be seen on them were: "engraved signs reminiscent of letters". Cf. Ibid.

56 Ellend-Szilfádűlő Grave 145: "On its outer side, there was an inscription in Latin script, with three consecutive letters that can still be recognised: OVN." Idem, p. 155.

57 Dombay 1961, p. 83.

Progress was made by Attila Kiss,⁵⁸ a younger colleague of Csallány and contemporary of Kornél Bakay. Kiss, who worked in the Janus Pannonius Museum at that time, conducted studies on the 10th century relating to the two aforementioned rings of the Ellend cemetery which had been discovered and published by János Dombay. Independently of Csallány (as suggested by his references), Kiss started to look into the ring of Hódmezővásárhely as well.⁵⁹ Kiss extended his research to the artefact from Grave 45 of the Svinjarevci cemetery, and mentioned the pieces found in the excavation conducted by Béla Horváth in Tiszaörvény.⁶⁰ The then-young researcher proposed a new solution to interpreting the object type. To interpret the signs on the ring in Grave 128 of Ellend, he asked for the help of the leading experts of the time, Orientalist professor Károly Czeglédy, Turkologist Gyula Németh, and Hebraist Sándor Scheiber. The renowned scholars believed the ring might have had Hebrew, perhaps Greek, and characters of an unidentified set of letters as well, but Attila Kiss thought he identified Hebrew and Latin letters in the case of the 70 badly preserved graves and the artefact from Hódmezővásárhely. According to him, the runiform marks were explained by the uninterrupted survival of the Hungarian culture of runiform script, while the Greek and Latin letters were explained by Christian evangelists who came from these places. He attributed the Hebrew characters to the Judaisation of the Khazars and the presence of such Khazars converted to Judaism in the Hungarian settlement in the Carpathian Basin.⁶¹ He then proposed an ethnic interpretation of the rings, including toponymic data and assuming that these artefacts, e.g. in the case of

58 On the consultations between Attila Kiss and Csallány regarding the findings, see Kiss 1970, p. 345. no. 12.

59 In his paper, Kiss makes no references to Csallány's paper of 1968, and this is probably due to the fact that Kiss was not familiar with this article by Csallány and by the time it was published, he probably had already submitted his own manuscript to the editors of *Acta Archaeologica*, with no possibility to address the other one's conclusions. It must be noted that Kiss did mention how he consulted with Csallány in the case of the Hódmezővásárhely find, but even regarding this consultation there is no reference that he might have been familiar with Csallány's text from 1968 or the manuscript of the study.

60 According to a note by Kiss, two such rings were found at the Tiszaörvény-Templomdomb site in Grave 164 and 167. Cf. Kiss 1970, p. 344.

61 Kiss 1970.

Ellend, might have been brought by women from nearby Khazaria, as a sign of their religious and national affiliations. His ideas and proposals, however, did not trigger any debates and were left unanswered. Even if contemporaneous research had no appreciation for his conclusions, they were integrated into Hungarian research over time.⁶²

After Kiss's work, no other scholars conducted any comprehensive research on the topic. The only comment Ágnes Cs. Sós made on a similarly designed piece found in Grave 76 in Csátalja was that it had "*engraved decorative lines*" on it,⁶³ while Gyöngyi Csukás continued to reference the finding of Sárosd as a piece with runiform script,⁶⁴ and Edith Bárdos only noted on the ring from Kaposvár that it was "*polygonal*", and published the inscription on a drawing with no comments and explanations.⁶⁵

A new interpretation was provided only much later, in the 1980s, when Miklós Béla Szőke and László Vándor published on the cemetery from Pusztaszentlászló. In the analytical part of the monograph, a separate chapter discussed the ring type, of which six pieces were found in this 11th-century village cemetery.⁶⁶ Their analysis has been the basis of scientific analysis of the topic ever since, not only thanks to its sensible statements, but also because in this part Miklós Béla Szőke offered the most comprehensive collection of the object type to this day. They too asked Károly Czeglédy for help in this work, who reviewed the set of artefacts and – obviously in the light of the new sources found in such a large number – expressed a much more comprehensive opinion than previously on the Ellend ring. Based on these, in his opinion the set of signs on the object type is neither Inner-Asian, nor Khazar runiform script. The

62 Cf. Szőke & Vándor 1987, p. 70; Kovács 2015, p. 207. I can add personal experience to these references. In his series of university lectures on archaeological artefacts of the 10th–11th century (1996), professor István Bóna also sympathised with the solution that interpreted the ring inscriptions as Hebrew letters and, making reference to the proposal of Miklós Béla Szőke; he was inclined to take them as parallels of the magic rings with Hebrew inscriptions widespread in Western Europe at that time.

63 Cs. Sós & Parádi 1971, p. 114.

64 Csukás 1975, p. 368.

65 Bárdos 1978, p. 196.; Cf. XV.t. 14.

66 Szőke & Vándor 1987, pp. 68–73.

signs on the rings are not related to Szekler runiform script either. Nor can the signs be identified as letters of the Hebrew and Greek alphabet.⁶⁷

In addition to the above-mentioned pieces, the authors collected many other artefacts and presented parallels of the object type from outside the Carpathian Basin as well. They collected and assessed 34 rings from a total of 24 sites. The wide-scale data collection also proved that this was not a phenomenon of the Carpathian Basin, but a specific object type that was widely present in Central Europe in the 11th to 13th centuries. The renowned scholar compiled a basic classification of the object type, distinguishing two types. In the case of type 1, the ring band was polygonal, as the signs were framed in a rectangle. In the case of type 2, the band was oval or circular, as the signs on the side of the ring were added one after another, with no frame. The finding type appeared in the Carpathian Basin probably in the mid-11th century (the earliest was Grave 6 of Székesfehérvár-Maroshegy, which can be dated using the András I coin), and can be dated to the middle third of the 12th century, based on graves that had coins in them (Grave 119 of Pusztaszentlászló, dated using a coin minted by Béla II). Szőke associated the signs on the rings partially with runiform script, and based on formal similarities he drew attention to the often polygonal Thebal rings meant to protect against trouble.⁶⁸ He also pointed out that in the case of the latter pieces, the eponymous word of the inscription, Thebal, originated in the Cabbalist Hebrew expression.⁶⁹ Following this wide-ranging study and analysis, Miklós Béla Szőke proposed an interpretation according to which we must assume a sort of a protective function of these rings, similarly to the Thebal rings, and the magical power of the inscriptions protected the owners of the rings from evil spirits which were bound by the meaning of the inscription. In this respect, it was beneficial that not all signs made sense, and this might have been the reason why the makers “*borrowed letters from various scripts and even invented new letterlike signs*”.⁷⁰ He believed the rings were popularised by

67 Idem, p. 70.

68 Regarding the ring type, see Grohne 1956; Michelly 1987; Lorenzen 1997; Hermann 2009, pp. 226-227.

69 Szőke & Vándor 1987, pp. 72-73.

70 Idem, p. 73.

the missionary priests who “often sold these rings to the believers who buried their dead near the church”.⁷¹

The findings of Miklós Béla Szőke were accepted by general scientific opinion. In his review of the book, the only addition László Kovács made was to present the Hungarian Thebal ring found in 1905, providing arguments for its authenticity.⁷² He made no relevant comments to the ring type analysed above. In his later paper discussing the cemetery at the Tiszaluc-Sarkad site, he also accepted the position of Miklós Béla Szőke and in his opinion, on the ring he found that “no meaningful text can be recognised in the mixed Latin, Greek, Hebrew, or unknown signs, it is very likely that the inscription-like decoration was believed to have magical powers”.⁷³ But László Kovács’ paper also shows that the number of the known pieces of the finding type continued to increase recently, as new artefacts were added to the existing database. He also drew attention to the fact that the ring was present not only in the 11th century, but also in the 12th century, and in addition to village cemeteries that had no church, it was found in cemeteries around churches as well.⁷⁴

Pieces found and published since then were added to the new list of sites by László Kovács, increasing it to 35. There are more than 50 artefacts which I have collected. All of this is indicative of the fact that this object type was widespread. More recently, the German researchers mentioned early in the paper also discovered this object type. When the artefact found in Paußnitz was published and analysed, not only were the magical rings brought to attention again (including an interpretation of the Thebal inscription,⁷⁵ and a study of other rings, e.g. with an Agla inscription and some decorated with the Tetragrammaton, etc.),⁷⁶ but the research also extended to the pieces

71 Ibid.

72 Kovács 1990, pp. 326-330.

73 Kovács 2015, p. 207.

74 Ibid.

75 On this, following an interpretation of the inscription, see a critique of Michelly (1987) for an interpretation of Grohne, and the proposal by Olav Röhrer-Ertl (2003, pp. 124-126, n. 100). Cf. also Grabowski 2002.

76 Lorenzen 1997; Hermann 2009.

from the Carpathian Basin.⁷⁷ Analysing these pieces, later studies mentioned another possible explanation in addition to the abstract magical substance: it is not impossible that the often meaningless set of signs on these rings was due to the fact that the ring makers were in fact illiterate, and so they decorated their goods with script-like symbols, to sell them to those who were illiterate themselves – letting the buyers to read whatever they wanted in the unintelligible inscriptions, or whatever the seller could make them believe was there. Craftsmen who used meaningless signs and incorrectly written letters were not rare and were known to exist and work in Antiquity as well.⁷⁸ This possibility is supported by several arguments. On the one side, many artefacts were found in places where runiform script was not used. Such was the case with the Kašić–Maklinovo brdo site,⁷⁹ Poznan, considered to be the birthplace of Poland, more specifically the early cemetery from Ostrów Tumski,⁸⁰ a grave with a ring in the 11th–12th-century cemetery of Masłowice,⁸¹ or the discovery site of a 13th-century ring found in Norfolk, England.⁸² The rings found in Poland also did not have any letters on them and only featured ornamental decoration or unintelligible signs, but the design and form of the rings was the same as the artefacts discussed above. Researchers believe the Poznan find was made clearly under Western influence, and they see no link between the “ornamental decoration” on the rings and runes or any other script.⁸³ Runiform script or runic script was also not assumed in the case of the artefact from England.⁸⁴

77 Muhl 2003.

78 Among others, Mayor, Colarusso & Saunders 2014.

79 Belošević 1982, Y 271/2/2. photo 4. Cf. Petrinec 2009, p. 21.

80 Hensel & Žak 1964, p. 272.

81 Abramek 1980.

82 Hinds 2004, Cat. pp. 90–91.

83 Among the pieces found in the Carpathian Basin, the ring of Csátalja is more likely to have ornamental decoration on its side than an intelligible set of signs. Cf. Cs. Sós & Parádi 1971.

84 But it must be noted that runic script was used on magical rings. However, in this case we must emphasise that the use and spread of runic script was entirely different in medieval Scandinavian territories than that of the runiform script in the Carpathian Basin. Runes did not disappear at all, they were widely used up to the modern age and often even to record Christian texts. Cf. Lorenzen 1997.

We must point out that the rings associated with renowned personalities such as Lothar III⁸⁵ or the Hungarian house of rulers⁸⁶ generally contain intelligible abbreviations or inscriptions (using Hebrew, Greek or Latin letters). The Thebal rings or other mentioned magical rings can be interpreted similarly as well.⁸⁷ Thus, in the case of most finds discovered in Western Europe, the text consisted of intelligible letters (or at least contained legible characters).⁸⁸ A similar observation was made in the case of Byzantine rings with magical inscriptions: although some expressions were probably related to magical practices, the signs themselves were legible and intelligible.⁸⁹ So it seems that in territories with a more advanced culture of writing, it was rare, if at all, for signs to be used on the outer sides of rings that only resembled letters, while in fact they were not. Contrary to this, in territories where writing and reading were less universal, such findings were discovered more frequently. The phenomenon was not limited to the Carpathian Basin. Inscriptions that looked like script were discovered in many other places, but in most cases, the phenomena were not believed to be magical practices. It is important to emphasise that the sets of signs on the rings from the Carpathian Basin are not uniform at all. Renowned scholars have not reached a consensus on whether any sets of signs can be distinguished that can be explained clearly using one script or another (as opposed to the above-mentioned examples from abroad).⁹⁰ These arguments could be helpful in rethinking the matter and also in considering other and different possibilities of interpretation for the set of signs on the rings, as suggested above.

Of course, this does not dismiss the explanation suggested by Miklós Béla Szőke (namely that the objects were worn due to the magical powers attributed

85 A.B. 1995.

86 Kiss 2010.

87 Hermann 2009.

88 Muhl 2003.

89 Van den Hoek, Feissel & Herrmann 1994; Eger 2001, pp. 366-367. The same can be said about the Byzantine magical amulets. Cf. Spier 1993; Foskolou 2014; Bosselmann-Ruickbie 2017.

90 Lorenzen 1997; Hermann 2009; Röhrer-Ertl, F.U. 2003; Röhrer-Ertl, F.U. 2019; Röhrer-Ertl, O. 2003; Röhrer-Ertl, O. 2019.

to them), or that the objects were hoped to provide supernatural protection. A review of the possible new interpretations (such as, among others: inclusion of the recent analysis of research on the Thebal rings in the analysis of findings discovered in the Carpathian Basin; a study of whether the sets of engraved signs on the Carpathian Basin rings indeed contained only protective inscriptions, or the notch marks might have been used for other reasons as well; a comparison of the set of signs on the Hungarian rings and of rings from abroad that contained similar sets of signs, etc.) could widen the gate opened by the late researcher, Olav Röhrer-Ertl, regarding the old-new specimen found in Paußnitz.⁹¹

91 Regarding his person, see Meller & Reichenberger 2019.

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