



AKADÉMIAI KIADÓ

# Late antique Mediterranean rotary keys from Avaria

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## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER



### ABSTRACT

The present paper describes and discusses a group of iron and copper-alloy rotary keys characterised by a moveable joint connecting the shaft and the key-ring, appearing in the seventh-century material record of the Carpathian Basin whose origins can be sought in the Mediterranean. While the few published examples of the class were in previous studies mainly regarded as Roman-period artefacts secondarily re-used as amulets by the Avar-period population of the Carpathian Basin, the present study argues that these pieces in fact have a sixth-to seventh-century production date, being thereby contemporaneous with their deposition in seventh-century mortuary assemblages. Taking this observation as a springboard for further interpretation, an overview of the possible meanings and symbolic associations attached to keys in Roman, late antique, and early medieval times is offered. The main argument presented here is that besides serving amuletic purposes, some of the Avar-period keys could in all probability have conveyed more explicit messages about their owners, such as that of their femininity and of their economic role and authority in their respective households. The Appendix supplementing the present paper seeks to provide a theoretical reconstruction of a wooden casket buried with the woman interred in Grave 119 of the Kölked-Feketekapu B cemetery, one of the burials yielding a Mediterranean hinged rotary key.

### KEYWORDS

rotary key, late antique, Avar period, Carpathian Basin, Mediterranean

*For Éva Garam  
with respect and gratitude*

## INTRODUCTION

As in the case of several other Avar-period artefacts, it was Éva Garam who, a little more than two decades ago, first dedicated a separate study to Avar-period copper-alloy and iron key finds, whose overwhelming majority came to light from female burials of the earlier seventh century west of the River Danube.<sup>1</sup>

She divided the keys into two main groups on the basis of their copper-alloy and iron raw materials. She argued that the copper-alloy pieces, both rotary keys and ring keys, were of Roman date and had originally been used for locking and opening Roman-period caskets. They were thus suggested to have been secondarily re-used by the seventh-century population of the Carpathian Basin, while their Avar-period function and meaning was interpreted as having “resembled that of the other [i.e. iron] keys”,<sup>2</sup> namely serving as amulets. In contrast, the iron keys were described as being “of Avar date” (*awarenzeitlich*). Although she

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<sup>1</sup>Garam (2002) 165–174.

<sup>2</sup>Garam (2002) 169, 172.

did not cite any parallels to the iron pieces, and neither was any other argument invoked to support their Avar-period date of production, their iron raw material may have been the main rationale underlying the assumption that the time of their use and deposition could not have been all that far removed from their time of manufacture. Another argument in favour of their roughly co-eval manufacture and use in the seventh century was the assumption that their majority was expressly produced to serve symbolic, rather than practical purposes.<sup>3</sup> Of the iron key finds, only the pieces discovered in Grave 298 of the Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út cemetery, in Grave 225 of the Tatabánya-Alsógalla cemetery, and in Grave 59 of the Nagyharsány cemetery were suggested to have functioned as genuine keys, while the others were seen as being purely symbolic in nature.<sup>4</sup>

Taking her cue from a paper published by Heiko Steuer on Merovingian-period keys from Western and Central European burials, Garam also reviewed the wide variety of possible symbolic meanings of key finds discovered in burial contexts. While she cursorily mentioned the possible meanings associated with 1.) the concept of a wife's power to act in domestic affairs and represent her husband in matters concerning the household (*Schlüsselgewalt der Hausfrau*), 2.) the key as a symbol of marriage and childbirth, and 3.) keys as symbols of Germanic goddesses and gods, all discussed in some detail by Steuer,<sup>5</sup> she accepted the latter's conclusions, which, although leaving open the possibility of pagan symbolisms, opted for a Christian interpretation of the two purpose-made amuletic keys worn jointly.<sup>6</sup> After reviewing the symbolic meanings ascribed to keys in the Christian mind, including that of Saint Peter's keys, the key as a symbol of Christ, the key symbolising Christ's sovereignty over the underworld, and the key as a symbol of forgiveness of sins, Steuer concluded that in the Germanic contexts from which the purpose-made double keys are known, they may have originally been associated with the Germanic goddess Freya, and were later, under the influence of the Rome-centred western Church, transformed into a Christian symbol, mainly in association with Saint Peter's keys. At the same time, he also pointed out that the Christian and the pagan-Germanic layers of meaning did not necessarily conflict: instead, the transition between the meanings was smooth because keys were associated with protection, fertility, and the resurrection and salvation of the dead in both cultural realms.<sup>7</sup> Garam, who regarded the Avar-period custom of wearing keys as a reflection of cultural connections with the Italian Germanic world, linked the Avar keys to the layers of meaning proposed by Steuer, while leaving open the question of whether the pagan or Christian association dominated in the Avar milieu. She noted that most of the Avar-period female burials

containing keys in the Carpathian Basin were known from Transdanubia, where the custom of wearing costume accessories ornamented with Christian symbols is attested in several communities of the seventh century.<sup>8</sup>

Garam revisited these objects in her recent monograph on the Zamárdi cemetery. In her discussion of the archaeological contexts of the finds, she again made a case for her contention that the copper-alloy keys originally intended for locking caskets were not deposited in their original function, but as symbolic objects (*"Bedeutungs- oder Kraft- [z. B. Herrschafts-]symbol"*). She likewise ascribed a symbolic meaning to the long-stemmed iron keys, linking the custom of wearing them either singly or in pairs to the women of the communities of Germanic stock living in the Avar-period Carpathian Basin. Reviewing the exemplars from Zamárdi, she tentatively suggested that the chronologically earlier pieces had been vested with the power of "loosing and binding" (*die Gewalt des "Lösens und Bindens"*), while the meticulous assessment of the archaeological contexts of the later keys from the Zamárdi cemetery suggested that they had been worn as Christian symbols.<sup>9</sup>

While Garam's suggested Avar-period date is by and large acceptable in the case of the iron keys with long shaft, the chronological position of the copper-alloy pieces, alongside a few iron ones, and their interpretation calls for a fresh look. To be sure, dating everyday objects of functional purpose and fairly simple form is always a tricky business. For example, the forms of several iron agricultural implements display a remarkable continuity throughout the Roman, late antique, and early medieval centuries, which is quite understandable in view of their practical nature and the slow progress of certain agricultural techniques through the centuries. Simpler iron and copper-alloy keys are hardly an exception in this regard. While some more elaborate or unusual types may display time-specific features, other basic forms survived into our modern age, as illustrated, for instance, by the shape of the copper-alloy key discovered in Grave 176 of the Szébény cemetery.<sup>10</sup> Fortunately, a group of rotary keys among the pieces known from the Avar-period material record is characterised by a typological feature that can contribute to the more precise dating of these artefacts.

My attention was drawn to the rotary key type in question in the course of another research project. While re-evaluating a rich burial assemblage excavated in the 1930s at el-Jish (ancient Gischala/Gush Halav, modern Gush Halav in Israel) in Upper Galilee, I strove to offer a new chronological analysis of the surviving finds, which included an iron rotary key resembling the eight pieces known from Avar-age burials discussed below. Given that the el-Jish/Gush Halav tomb was used for burial between *ca.* the second/third and sixth/seventh centuries CE, and the key

<sup>3</sup>Garam (2002) 172.

<sup>4</sup>Garam (2002) 167 Fig. 8.5–6, 170, Fig. 10.2, 172.

<sup>5</sup>Steuer (1982) 203–206, 222.

<sup>6</sup>Garam (2002) 173.

<sup>7</sup>Steuer (1982) 211–221, 225

<sup>8</sup>Garam (2002) 173–174.

<sup>9</sup>Garam (2019) 180–186.

<sup>10</sup>Garam (2002) 167 Fig. 8.2.



type was not discussed in detail in the literature available to me, it was necessary to search for further parallel finds in order to narrow the date of the el-Jish/Gush Halav piece between the lower and upper chronological boundaries provided by the burial cave's use.<sup>11</sup> The result of this survey also indicated that the keys discovered in Avar-period burials cannot be dated solely on the strength of their copper-alloy and iron raw materials.

In fact, a few insights drawn from the Avar-period material record already pointed towards this conclusion. Firstly, Garam observed that some of the iron keys, like the one found in Grave 276 of the Kölked-Feketekapu cemetery, closely resemble – or “copy” in her words – copper-alloy pieces in terms of their forms.<sup>12</sup> While it is not entirely impossible that an accidentally found Roman-period copper-alloy key was copied in iron in the seventh-century Carpathian Basin, it seems more logical to assume that the form itself was continuously in production from the Roman period onward well into the early Middle Ages, and that both iron and copper-alloy pieces would have been manufactured in the same period. In view of the simple, practical form of the Kölked key, this is by no means too bold an assumption.

Secondly, while the small copper-alloy key described as a casket key from Grave 116 of the Jutas cemetery was identified as being Roman in date, a casket was also mentioned among the finds of this burial assemblage.<sup>13</sup> Without calling into question the casket's existence and its association with the key (for these problems, see below), this alone should have been a major caveat against ascribing a Roman date to all copper-alloy keys, since the re-use of a Roman-period casket acquired as a chance find in a seventh-century burial would hardly be a very likely scenario. Taken together, it seems prudent to take a closer look at the hinged rotary keys discovered in the Avar-age Carpathian Basin.

## COPPER-ALLOY AND IRON ROTARY KEYS WITH HINGED CONSTRUCTION: THE FINDS AND THEIR DATE

There are at least eight<sup>14</sup> rotary keys in the Avar-period material record, which share a distinctive feature unattested

on their Roman and late Roman counterparts. The attribute in question is the hinged construction whereby the key-ring and the shaft of the key are connected. The Avar-period pieces characterised by this feature are as follows:

### 1) *Budakalász-Dunapart, Grave 740 (Fig. 2.3)*

Key shaft of a copper-alloy rotary key: L 2.4 cm, W 0.95 cm, H 1.78 cm, bit 0.75–0.8 cm\*0.55 cm. Cast in one, both the shaft and the bit are hollow, broken.<sup>15</sup>

The key shaft was found among the scattered upper body bones of the young female in a severely looted burial.<sup>16</sup>

Ferenczy Museum Center, inv. no. 2010.01.740.

### 2) *Budakalász-Dunapart, Grave 1284 (Fig. 1.3)*

Iron rotary key: L 4 cm, diam. of key-ring 2.6–2.7 cm, diam. of iron wire 0.35 cm, L of shaft 2 cm, W of shaft 0.5 cm, H of shaft 1.7 cm, bit 0.8 cm\*0.8 cm\*0.5 cm. The key-ring and the shaft were forged in two separate pieces and joined by a hinged construction. The two parts are still moveable.

The key was discovered on the inner side of the right femur's proximal end in the partly looted grave of an adult male.

Ferenczy Museum Center, inv. no. 2010.01.1284.<sup>17</sup>

### 3) *Budakalász-Dunapart, Grave 1458 (Fig. 1.2)*

Iron rotary key: L 4 cm, diam. of key-ring 2.45 cm, diam. of iron wire 0.4 cm, L of shaft 2.1 cm, W of shaft 0.6 cm, H of shaft 1.5 cm, bit 0.75 cm\*0.75 cm\*0.75 cm. The key-ring and the shaft were forged in two separate pieces and joined by a hinged construction. The two parts were immovably secured to each other during conservation.

The key came to light from an animal burrow dug into the severely looted grave of an adult female.

Ferenczy Museum Center, inv. no. 2010.01.1458.<sup>18</sup>

### 4) *Jutas, Grave 116 (Fig. 2.4)*

Key shaft and bit of a copper-alloy rotary key cast in one. Lost, merely the photo published by Gyula Rhé and Nándor Fettesch is available.<sup>19</sup>

Female burial assemblage with a rich array of associated artefacts, including a follis minted for Phocas (r. 602–610) on a coin of Mauricius Tiberius. The key shaft lay under the

<sup>11</sup>Bollók, in preparation.

<sup>12</sup>Garam (2002) 169–170.

<sup>13</sup>Garam (2002) 166, 169.

<sup>14</sup>The present paper was already in print when the publication of another hinged rotary key of iron, the first of its kind found east of the River Tisza, became available, thereby raising the number of known Avar-period finds to nine. This piece was recovered from Grave 855 of the Szegvár-Oromdűlő cemetery, the burial of an adolescent boy: *Lőrinczy (2020)* 291, 730, Fig. 366.10. Its appearance in another male burial (besides Grave 1284 of the Budakalász cemetery) further strengthens the conclusions drawn below, that both males and females had safeguarded their valuables in lockable caskets, whose keys they kept with themselves, and that hinged rotary casket keys should be treated separately from purpose-made double amuletic keys typical for female burials.

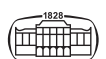
<sup>15</sup>Vida (2017) 16, Fig. 4.3. I am greatly indebted to Tivadar Vida for his kind permission to study and include this find in the present paper.

<sup>16</sup>Vida (2017) 14–16.

<sup>17</sup>Unpublished excavation by Adrienn Pásztor and Tivadar Vida. I am greatly indebted to them for their kind permission to include this find in the present paper.

<sup>18</sup>Unpublished excavation by Adrienn Pásztor and Tivadar Vida. I am greatly indebted to them for their kind permission to include this find in the present paper.

<sup>19</sup>Rhé and Fettesch (1931) Pl. III.10. I am deeply indebted to Ágota Perémi (Laczkó Dezső Museum, Veszprém) for sharing her knowledge on the fate of the Jutas finds and for double-checking the availability of any further information on the find in the Laczkó Dezső Museum's storerooms and archives.





**Fig. 1.** 1: Hinged iron rotary key, Kölked-Feketekapu, Cemetery B, Grave 119; 2-3: hinged iron rotary keys, Budakalász-Dunapart, Graves 1284 (3) and 1458 (2); 4: hinged iron rotary key rusted to a copper-alloy chain, Kölked-Feketekapu, Cemetery A, Grave 128 (photo: 1. ©Attila Ferencz, Hungarian National Museum; 2-4. Ádám Bollók, graphical design: Nóra Mészáros and Zsóka Varga, 1, 4. ©Hungarian National Museum)



**Fig. 2.** 1: Copper-alloy ring-key of a hinged rotary key and its copper-alloy chain, Kölked-Feketekapu, Cemetery A, Grave 15; 2: copper-alloy hinged rotary key, Várpalota-Gimnázium, Grave 192; 3: copper-alloy shaft of a hinged rotary key, Budakalász-Dunapart, Grave 740; 4: copper-alloy shaft of a hinged rotary key, Jutas, Grave 116; 5: copper-alloy ring key, Hegykő, Grave 54 (photo: 1. Attila Ferencz, graphic design: Zsóka Varga, 2. after Erdélyi and Németh, 1969, 188 Pl. XI.2, 3. photo: Ádám Bollók, graphic design: Nóra Mészáros, 4. drawing: Nóra Mészáros after Rhé and Fettich, 1931, Pl. III.10, 5. photo: Attila Mrenka, graphic design: Nóra Mészáros; 1. ©Hungarian National Museum, 5. ©Soproni Museum)

chin, while glass paste beads were discovered around the deceased's neck and further amulets in the middle of the chest.<sup>20</sup>

5) *Kölked-Feketekapu, Cemetery A, Grave 15 (Fig. 2.1)*

Copper-alloy key-ring of a rotary key attached to a copper-alloy chain: Diam. 2.5–2.7 cm, diam. of the copper-alloy wire 0.3 cm.

The key-ring was found attached to a copper-alloy chain: L of chain 6.7 cm, L of a single chain-link 1.5 cm, diam. of copper-alloy wire 0.2 cm.

The key-ring and the chain were discovered beside the left forearm of an adult female.<sup>21</sup> Close parallels to the key-ring, including the *Várpalota* key (Cat. no. 8 below) and further similar finds cited below, support its identification as the hoop of a key of hinged construction, whose lost key part may have been equally made of copper alloy or iron.

Hungarian National Museum, inv. no. N.74.1.432.

6) *Kölked-Feketekapu, Cemetery A, Grave 128 (Fig. 1.4)*

Iron rotary key rusted to a copper-alloy chain: L of shaft 3.7 cm, H of shaft 2.55 cm, bit 1.4 cm\*0.75 cm, diam. of key-ring 3.3–3.4 cm, diam. of iron wire 0.5 cm.

The key is preserved rusted to a copper-alloy chain. L of chain *ca.* 26.3 cm, L of a single chain-link *ca.* 2 cm, diam. of copper-alloy wire 0.3 cm. The key is rusted to the chain, but it is not threaded onto any of the chain-links. Rusted to the key on one side is a small piece of twill-woven linen textile,<sup>22</sup> which may have been part of the one-time funerary attire.

Found in the grave of an adult female. The chain lay beside the left hand, with the key attached to its lower end lying towards the proximal end of the left femur.<sup>23</sup>

Hungarian National Museum, inv. no. N.74.1.432.

7) *Kölked-Feketekapu, Cemetery B, Grave 119 (Fig. 1.1)*

Iron rotary key: L of shaft 2.7 cm, H of shaft 0.8 cm, H of shaft with the bit 2 cm, diam. of key-ring 3 cm, diam. of iron wire 0.8 cm.

The key-ring and the shaft were forged in two separate pieces and joined by a hinged construction. The two parts would be still moveable if the accumulation of iron corrosion did not fill the loop formed on the shaft, created to allow the free movement of the joint. The shaft is rusted to the key-ring on the opposite side where it had moved on the ring, as indicated by waisted shape of the ring on the left side.

Very rich female burial assemblage, heavily plundered in early medieval times. The key was found near the left hand, whose area was also disturbed by the robbing.<sup>24</sup>

Hungarian National Museum, inv. no. N.79.1.30.

<sup>20</sup>Rhé and Fettich (1931) 25; Fettich (1964) 90; Somogyi (1997) 48–49, Cat. no. 33.

<sup>21</sup>Kiss (1996) 24, 434, Pl. 20.A.15.3.

<sup>22</sup>I am grateful to Zsuzsanna Hajnal (Hungarian National Museum, Budapest) for this information.

<sup>23</sup>Kiss (1996) 48, 453, Pl. 39.A128.7.

<sup>24</sup>Kiss (2001) I, 52, 54, II. Pl.35.24.

8) *Várpalota-Gimnázium, Grave 192 (Fig. 2.2)*

Copper-alloy rotary key: L of shaft 1.9 cm, diam. of key-ring 2.6 cm.<sup>25</sup>

Shaft and bit cast in one, and joined to the separately cast key-ring by a hinged construction. Stylised bird heads decorated the key-ring on either side of the key-ring's attachment point to the shaft. Lost, solely known from the brief description and the photo published in the original report.<sup>26</sup>

Female burial with a rich array of associated artefacts. Together with a copper-alloy disc identified as a Roman-period weight by the publishers, the key was discovered in the area of the left elbow.

Laczkó Dezső Museum, inv. no. 62.44.8.

Of the eight artefacts originating from four different sites (Fig. 3), four (Cat. nos 4, 6–8) were known to Garam at the time she wrote her pioneering study. The two copper-alloy pieces (Cat. nos 4 and 8) were dated to the Roman period, one of the iron pieces seems to have been tacitly identified as an Avar-period artefact (Cat. no. 7), while the second iron key was omitted from her study (Cat. no. 6).<sup>27</sup>

The main difficulty in assigning the two copper-alloy keys to the Roman period is that, as far as I am aware, keys with this type of hinged construction were not popular in Imperial Roman times.<sup>28</sup> The catalogue and classification of Roman caskets and keys found in Pannonia, the most likely region where the Avar-period population of the Carpathian Basin could have come across Roman-period keys, mentions but a single hinged rotary key. However, the piece in question originates neither from the province, nor from a known archaeological context.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the type is missing from the major collections of Roman keys published from Saalburg, Kaiseraugst, and Lauricaum,<sup>30</sup> as well as from smaller ones such as the first- to fourth-century finds kept in the Varna Archaeological Museum,<sup>31</sup> and, as noted in the above, from among the large series of Roman casket attachment, lock, and key finds from the territories north of the Danubian and Rhaetian *limes*.<sup>32</sup> Neither do late Roman burial

<sup>25</sup>Erdélyi and Németh (1969) 184.

<sup>26</sup>Erdélyi and Németh (1969) 184, 188, Pl. XL2. I am most grateful to Ágota Perémi (Laczkó Dezső Museum, Veszprém) for double-checking the availability of the find in the museum's storerooms.

<sup>27</sup>This find was described as an iron key in Garam's (2002, 157) list of copper-alloy chains, but it was not included in her list of keys, cf. Garam (2002) 166.

<sup>28</sup>The same conclusion was independently drawn—although without presenting the supporting evidence in detail due to the nature of their book by Bavant and Ivanišević (2019) 47. I was able to consult their volume during the last phase of writing the present paper.

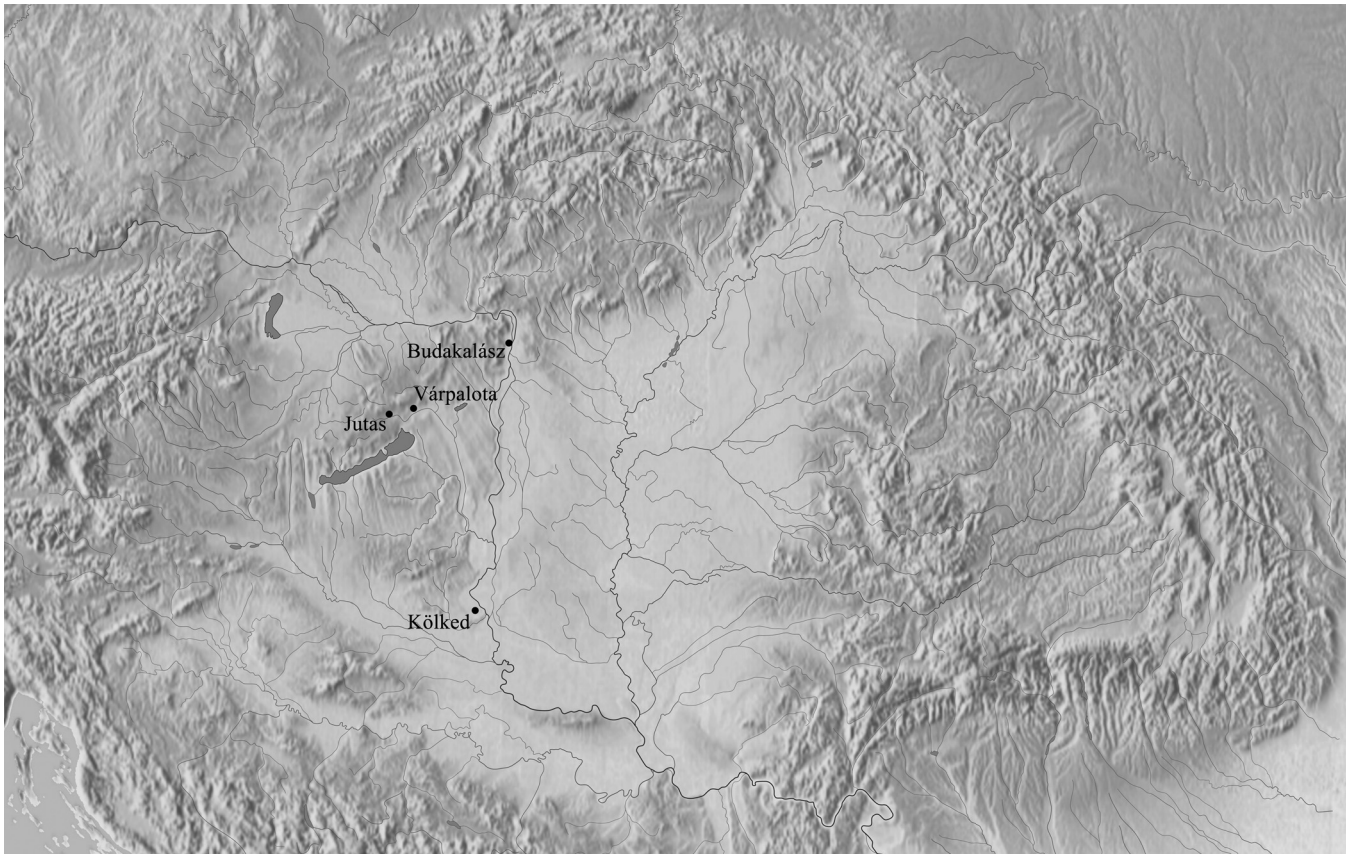
<sup>29</sup>See Gáspár's (1986, 51–52, Pl. XXVIII\*f) Class VIII.f keys, the class being established upon a single piece kept in a French museum collection, which acquired it without any precise data on its provenance in the nineteenth century: Comarmond (1885–1887) 367, No 607, Pl. 15.

<sup>30</sup>Jacobi (1897) 462–480, Figs 74–76, Pls XXXIV–XXXV; Deringer (1960); Riha (1990) 39–41, Nos 170–203, Pls 9–11.

<sup>31</sup>Kuzov (2005).

<sup>32</sup>Gáspár (1986).





**Fig. 3.** Geographical distribution of hinged rotary keys in the Carpathian Basin

assemblages seem to contain this key type. In the few cases when representatives of the class are dated to the fourth to fifth centuries, like a copper-alloy piece from Building 2 excavated at Classe, the port city of Ravenna,<sup>33</sup> no compelling evidence is cited in support of this date.

In contrast, a survey of the sixth- and seventh-century Eastern Roman (Early Byzantine) material record as well as of the contemporaneous archaeological assemblages from the fringe regions of the Eastern Roman Empire offers a rich array of parallel finds. To start with sites close to the Avar-age Carpathian Basin in geographical terms, reference can be made to a copper-alloy piece from among the workshop finds discovered in Drobeta-Turnu Severin (Hung. Szörényvár) on the northern bank of the River Danube.<sup>34</sup> Still not very far from Avaria, an iron rotary key of hinged construction was found in a layer associated with a coin of Justin II (r. 565–578) in Tropaeum Traiani in the Lower Danube area.<sup>35</sup> To the west, a further two iron pieces came to light from sixth-century contexts in Tornovcov grad in Slovenia.<sup>36</sup> While their publisher forbore to assign a closer date to them, contending that similarly to many iron key

forms, this type was in use throughout Antiquity,<sup>37</sup> I would argue for placing their manufacture in the sixth century in the light of the present survey. Their sixth- to early seventh-century popularity is also strongly suggested by the eleven iron and copper-alloy pieces published from Iustiniana Prima/Caričin Grad,<sup>38</sup> the city founded by the Emperor Justinian I (r. 527–565) in the earlier sixth century. A similar date can be assigned to the iron key discovered at Gradina on the River Jelica,<sup>39</sup> another early Byzantine site in the Central Balkans.

Still in the westerly regions and the northern peripheries of the Eastern Roman Empire, mention must be made of the hinged copper-alloy and iron rotary keys brought to light during the Crypta Balbi excavation in Rome, where both variants were dated to the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>40</sup> It is thus hardly surprising that these objects could have made their way into Langobard-period grave assemblages in

<sup>33</sup>Guidoni Guidi (1983) 187–188, No. 16.18.

<sup>34</sup>Bejan (1976) 262–263, 269, Fig. 2f–h.

<sup>35</sup>Cătănicu and Barnea (1979) 191, Fig. 171.10.5.

<sup>36</sup>Milavec (2011) 480, Pl. 30.17–18.

<sup>37</sup>Milavec (2011) 59.

<sup>38</sup>Bavant and Ivanišević (2019) 47–48, Cat. nos. 465–475, Pl. VIII.465–466, 470, 473, 475. While the last two finds do not seem to represent the type of hinged construction based on their drawings, their descriptions would imply that they can nonetheless be assigned to the hinged type.

<sup>39</sup>Milinković (2010) 121, Fig. 125.

<sup>40</sup>Ricci (2001) 412–413, Figs II.4.903–911.

northern Italy, as it may be demonstrated by an iron exemplar from Grave 94 of the Castel Trosino cemetery.<sup>41</sup>

East of the Carpathian Basin, an iron key was recovered from Burial 2 of Horizon 1, the burial of a young female in Tomb 43 of the Crimean Luchistoe cemetery; found together with a Syracuse or D12 class buckle, dated to the late sixth and earlier seventh centuries.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Burial 6 of Tomb 478 of the Crimean Skalistoe cemetery contained the shaft of a copper-alloy key in a sixth-to seventh-century context.<sup>43</sup> The appearance of this late antique/early Byzantine key type in Crimean burials is hardly surprising since such keys also abound in the Anatolian part of the Eastern Roman Empire, with which the population of the Crimea maintained strong contacts. Sixth-to seventh-century examples include finds from Ephesos<sup>44</sup> and Sardis<sup>45</sup> in Western Asia Minor, as well as from Elaiussa Sabeste and Anemorium in more easterly regions. At the latter sites, besides the usual copper-alloy keys, the hinged varieties with copper-alloy shafts and iron key-rings as well as iron shafts and copper-alloy key-rings were also discovered.<sup>46</sup> Farther to the east and the south, at Antioch, the keys manufactured for locking chests or caskets comprised also hinged rotary keys.<sup>47</sup> Iron and copper-alloy rotary keys of this type were not infrequent in the Southern Levant, either. The iron piece from el-Jish/Gush Halav<sup>48</sup> has already been mentioned, to which similar iron parallels can be cited from Tombs 128 and 176 of the Gezer necropolis<sup>49</sup> and Yeh'iam,<sup>50</sup> while copper-alloy exemplars were discovered among the finds of tombs excavated in Shiqmona,<sup>51</sup> and Khirbet el-Shubeika,<sup>52</sup> as well as among the metal components of furniture and furnishings published from Caesarea Maritima.<sup>53</sup>

The type's popularity continued well into the early medieval and medieval periods. The two iron keys from Grave 160 of the Nin-Ždrijac cemetery attest to the type's survival into the later eighth to earlier ninth century,<sup>54</sup> thereby indirectly also proving its use in the Byzantine realm. The

same conclusion can be drawn based on several keys discovered at the Saraçhane site in Constantinople (modern Istanbul) from coin-dated layers of the ninth, tenth, and even later centuries.<sup>55</sup> Hinged copper-alloy and iron keys of middle Byzantine date have been published from Corinth,<sup>56</sup> Crimean Cherson<sup>57</sup> and the Anatolian Kadikalesi fortress,<sup>58</sup> as well as from late Byzantine Pergamon<sup>59</sup> and medieval Jerusalem,<sup>60</sup> to mention merely a few examples. It thus comes as no surprise that John Nesbitt and Gary Vikan describe these rotary keys as the most popular key type of the Byzantine period, "nearly all examples hav[ing] a moveable joint between barrel and hoops".<sup>61</sup>

In view of their sizes, the keys mentioned in the above brief survey were all manufactured to lock caskets and smaller chests.

Among the reviewed finds, the iron keys from Gush Halav and Tarnovcov grad are close parallels to the finds from two of the Budakalász burials (Graves 1284 and 1458) as well as to the ones from the Kölked A-128 and B-119 burials. The broken Budakalász and Jutas shaft parts closely resemble the Skalistoe shaft, while the Várpalota-Gimnázium key and the Kölked A-15 key-ring have good sixth-to seventh-century parallels from Antioch, Caesarea Maritima, and *Iustiniana Prima*/Caričin Grad, to mention but a few sites. In fact, the object class's appearance in the Carpathian Basin seems to coincide with the Avar period; the Roman-style keys known from pre-Avar-age early medieval burials appear to represent other forms (see, e.g., the copper-alloy ring-key from Grave 54 of the Langobard-period burial ground at Hegykő, Fig. 2.5).<sup>62</sup>

## FUNCTION, ORIGINS, AND MEANING OF ROTARY KEYS IN THE AVAR-PERIOD CARPATHIAN BASIN

### Function and origins

In her important surveys, Éva Garam argued for a uniform, symbolic function of all Avar-period key finds, although her later overview drew a distinction between the symbolism inherent in Roman-period casket keys and the Avar-period iron keys with long shaft, as well as between the symbolic meanings of the early and late long-stemmed iron keys used by the Zamárdi community. However, the sixth- and seventh-century date suggested for the copper-alloy and iron rotary keys on the strength of the above survey opens up

<sup>41</sup>Paroli and Ricci (2007) 71, Tav. 75.94.2. Unfortunately, it is not entirely certain from the available drawing whether the key belongs to the class characterised by a hinged construction.

<sup>42</sup>Ajbabin and Hajredinova (2014) 47, 155, Pl. 7.3–3a.

<sup>43</sup>Vejmarn and Ajbabin (1993) 117, 120, Fig. 81.13.

<sup>44</sup>Pülz et al. (2020) 164, 202–203, Pl. 29.S201–S203, Pl. 89.A118–A119, A.122, Colour Pls 27.S201–203, 101.A118–A119, 102.A122.

<sup>45</sup>Waldbaum (1983) 75–76, Nos. 403–407, Pl. 25.403–407.

<sup>46</sup>Russel (1982) 136, Fig. 2.18–19; Ferrazzoli (2012) 292, Pl. 4.33–34.

<sup>47</sup>Russel (2000) 82–83 (with their descriptions) and Fig. 4 (bottom right).

<sup>48</sup>Bollók, in preparation.

<sup>49</sup>Macalister (1912) 347, Pls XCIX.6–12, CXIII.23 (Tomb 128), 370–372, Pl CXIV.4 (Tomb 176).

<sup>50</sup>Unpublished excavation, publication in progress by Ádám Bollók and Ayelet Dayan (Israel Antiquities Authority).

<sup>51</sup>Elgavish (1994) 127–128, Fig. 102.

<sup>52</sup>Tatcher et al. (2002) 271, 285 Pl. 10.3

<sup>53</sup>Gendelman and Gersht (2019) 138–139, Fig. 8.2.

<sup>54</sup>Belošević (1980) 117, Tab. LXXVI.4–5; Petrinec (2009) 28, Taf. 49.5–6, 211.

<sup>55</sup>Gill (1986), 248, Cat. nos 332–336, Figs 329–333,

<sup>56</sup>Davidson (1952) 137, Pl. 70.979–997.

<sup>57</sup>Denisova and Yashaeva (2011) 547–548, Cat. nos 245–247.

<sup>58</sup>Mercangöz (2012) 227, Fig. 2.

<sup>59</sup>Gaitzsch (2005) 207, Pl. 40.S3.21.

<sup>60</sup>Zitronblat and Geva (2003) 357, Cat. no. M31, Pl. 14.2.M31.

<sup>61</sup>Nesbitt and Vikan (1980) 4.

<sup>62</sup>Bóna and Horváth (2009) 46, 247, Pl. 12.54.3.





new avenues of interpretation as regards the use and function of these artefacts in the seventh-century Carpathian Basin.

The copper-alloy and iron rotary keys discussed above were manufactured for locking caskets or smaller chests. All the pieces currently known from the Carpathian Basin were found singly in their respective burials, not in pairs, as was more common for the type specifically made for amuletic purposes in the Merovingian world and in the Carpathian Basin.<sup>63</sup> What is more, at least in one specific case, a burial yielding a rotary key, namely Grave 119 of the Kölked-Feketekapu B cemetery, was also furnished with a casket, as shown by its iron fittings discovered at the feet of the deceased (for the casket, see the [Appendix](#)).<sup>64</sup>

In other instances, the association between the keys and the other artefacts in the burial assemblages is not as straightforward. As mentioned in the Introduction, Garam's study speaks of a "casket with bronze key" (*Kästchen mit Bronzeschlüssel*) found under the deceased's mandible in Grave 116 of the Jutas cemetery.<sup>65</sup> The original report has "the bronze key of a Roman jewellery casket" (*der bronzenne Schlüssel eines römischen Schmuckkastens*), which lay "beside the right maxilla", while two bronze rings "slipped over a cylindrical casing [*Hülse*] bent out of sheet bronze" were found under the chin.<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, the wording of the German text is vague and no photos of the artefacts lying under the chin were included in the publication. In a later paper on the same cemetery, Nándor Fettich describes the latter find as an "amulet of sheet bronze" found in the middle of the thorax,<sup>67</sup> while he speaks of "a wooden casket placed on the chest of the deceased female, whose key was laid under the chin".<sup>68</sup> Although no metal components of the casket were discovered in the grave, Fettich assumed its presence from the cluster of heavily worn artefacts (copper-alloy and iron buckles, an incomplete strap-end, a copper-alloy brooch, a broken iron horse bit, a secondarily re-used belt ornament, and a Roman and Byzantine copper coin) in the abdominal area, and associated the key with it.<sup>69</sup> In any case, in the absence of a metal lock or padlock, and in view of the lack of the key's key-ring, the association between the key and the assumed casket, which supposedly contained the objects found on the chest, cannot be taken for granted.

<sup>63</sup>Cf. Steuer (1982); Garam (2002); Garam (2019) 184, Table 2.

<sup>64</sup>Kiss (2001) I, 47, Fig. 13, 55–56, Fig. 16, II, 50, Pl. 36.2–6.

<sup>65</sup>Garam (2002) 166.

<sup>66</sup>Rhé and Fettich (1931) 25.

<sup>67</sup>Fettich (1964) 90. For the Avar-period cylindrical amulet cases he might have meant by this description, see Pásztor (1986) 129–133. Ágota Perémi kindly checked both the storerooms and the archives of the Laczkó Dezső Museum (Veszprém) to see whether the object itself or any drawings of it are available. Unfortunately, neither is the case. She also pointed out that the copper-alloy tube in question could also be a brush ferrule. I am particularly grateful to her for her efforts to identify the find and for her suggestion on its possible function.

<sup>68</sup>Fettich (1964) 90.

<sup>69</sup>Fettich (1964) 90–92, 94, Fig. 20.

A fairly similar situation can be observed in Grave 192 of the Várpalota-Gimnázium cemetery. The publishers of the site, István Erdélyi and Péter Németh suggested, albeit only tentatively, that the two copper-alloy chains found "above the left elbow" and the *ca.* one dozen silver sheet fragments discovered beside the left elbow were perhaps the remains of a casket. In their view, the latter may have been cut out of a larger silver sheet and secondarily attached to the wooden casket.<sup>70</sup> In fact, the copper-alloy key also lay by the left elbow and thus its association with the other finds uncovered in the same area cannot be rejected out of hand. However, the lack of any other metal elements of a lock mechanism from the burial belies the one-time existence of a wooden casket locked by the key. It seems more likely that one of the copper-alloy chains was indeed associated with the key (as in Graves 15 and 128 of the Kölked A cemetery), while the second one was employed to suspend the wooden artefacts to which the silver gilt sheets had been attached.

As the above three examples indicate, the presence of keys does not necessarily entail the presence of the caskets they were meant to lock, although the two were deposited jointly in the Kölked B-119 burial. To be sure, neither does the lack of a metal lock and fittings exclude the possibility that a wooden casket was in fact placed next to the deceased, since wooden caskets without other additional components made of non-perishable materials are also known in the early medieval archaeological record.<sup>71</sup> The identification of these artefacts is extremely difficult without discovering at least their wooden fragments, and even in these cases, their association with rotary keys would pose a problem due to the lack of any identifiable lock mechanism.

At the same time, the sixth-to seventh-century manufacturing date of the hinged copper-alloy and iron rotary keys discovered in seventh-century mortuary assemblages of the Carpathian Basin quite evidently implies that the keys listed in the above were not "antiquities" collected by chance, which, on the testimony of the Kölked B-119 exemplar, may well have included pieces associated with caskets used by the Avar-period population, even if 1.) the one-time presence of caskets can rarely be conclusively demonstrated, 2.) in part because the caskets were not necessarily deposited together with the keys, and 3.) in part because it cannot be wholly excluded that some of these keys had been commodities possibly acquired in foreign lands that were then worn as amulets. The key shaft worn around the neck by the deceased in the Jutas burial perhaps shows that a previously functional key was transformed into an amulet after it became damaged and lost its key-ring. Likewise, the key-ring and chain in the Kölked A-15 burial would suggest that after the shaft broke off, the chain and key-ring were used as a hanger. However, most cases do not fall into this category: the keys from the Kölked A-128 and B-119 burials, as well as the one from the Várpalota interment were found in the region of the deceased's left hand, an

<sup>70</sup>Erdélyi and Németh (1969) 184, 187, Pl. X.5–7.

<sup>71</sup>Steuer (2007) 421.



indication that they had been suspended from the belt or kept in a pouch, strongly suggesting their function as genuine keys. In the Kölked A-128 burial, the key was found together with the chain from which it was suspended, as was perhaps the key in the Várpalota grave, while the key-ring suspended from a chain survived in the Kölked A-15 burial, which its owner wore as was customary for keys even after the loss of the shaft.

The origins of the keys and the caskets they had presumably locked can be surmised from the distribution of their parallels. As we have seen, the best analogies to hinged rotary keys have a concentration in Italy and the Eastern Roman Empire; and the padlock found at Kölked likewise represents a Roman type. However, rotary keys with hinged construction are not attested among the Roman-type copper-alloy keys from the Merovingian lands,<sup>72</sup> and the functional keys associated with the caskets found in Merovingian burials represent an entirely different type, the so-called L-shaped lift keys or *Hakenschlüssel*.<sup>73</sup> The widespread use of the latter in the Merovingian world is amply reflected by that the overwhelming majority of purpose-made amuletic keys worn in pairs copied this form.<sup>74</sup> The archaeological record would thus suggest that the rotary keys of the Avar period reached the Carpathian Basin from the Mediterranean, specifically from Italy or the Balkans in the case of the Transdanubian sites. The cultural connections of the assemblage from Grave 119 of the Kölked B cemetery would strongly point towards an Italian origin for the rotary key and the casket, too, although given the site's dynamic Balkanic connections,<sup>75</sup> this issue cannot be conclusively resolved.

The custom of depositing the casket and its key beside females was a widespread practice in several provinces of the Roman Empire in imperial times<sup>76</sup> and it is also attested in the Merovingian lands during the early Middle Ages.<sup>77</sup> Grave 119 of the Kölked B cemetery is rooted in this tradition. Although better known from Roman-period finds, the caskets generally contained costume accessories, jewellery items, and toiletry sets (including textile pieces),<sup>78</sup> explaining their greater frequency in female burials. Neither is it mere chance that rotary keys unassociated with caskets are generally recovered from the female burials of the Avar period in the Carpathian Basin: the women's caskets, to which these keys originally belonged, probably contained the same sorts of articles as their Roman counterparts. This

leads us to the question of why these rotary keys had been deposited in the burials.

## Meaning

As we have seen in the above, Garam proposed a symbolic interpretation of the key finds in the overwhelming majority of the known cases. Only in a few instances did she concede that a functional purpose could be ascribed to larger and sturdier iron keys. Their length of 10–13 cm and the relatively massive size of iron lift keys, tentatively regarded as functional pieces,<sup>79</sup> make it likely that these keys had indeed been used for locking and opening larger chests or even wooden doors in the Avar-period Carpathian Basin. While this issue is not pursued here, it should nevertheless be pointed out that given the houses of the more prosperous families of the Kölked settlement in the seventh century,<sup>80</sup> there would be nothing surprising about the use of wooden doors with metal/wooden locks and keys or of lockable larger chests in the seventh-century Carpathian Basin. The sizes and forms of the sixth-century iron keys brought to light at *Iustiniana Prima/Caričin Grad*<sup>81</sup> and of the Avar-period iron keys indicate that the exemplars from Tatabánya and Szekszárd similarly followed models also used in the Roman world.

Even though the association between the casket/chest keys and other finds alluding to the presence of caskets in the respective graves cannot be always confirmed with the necessary degree of certainty, the finds of the Kölked B-119 grave clearly prove that at least some of the hinged rotary keys had in fact been employed to lock wooden caskets in earlier seventh-century Avaria. The same holds true for the rotary key from Grave 1284, a male burial, of the Budakalász cemetery that seems to suggest the deposition of a functional key rather than of a key vested with amuletic properties more typical for female and child burials. This makes a strong case not only for a date in the Avar period, but together with the above-mentioned functional keys, their functional nature also provides fertile ground for the emergence of a wide variety of symbolic meanings associated with Avar-period keys, perhaps well beyond what was assumed for the purpose-made amuletic pieces worn in pairs.

The most obvious layer of possible associations, suggested by the joint presence of key and casket, of which the latter known from other graves generally contained jewellery pieces, is the Roman concept of *ornamenta muliebra* ("women's jewellery") and *mundus muliebris* ("women's toilet equipment"), i.e. the articles used by women to beautify themselves.<sup>82</sup> Ulpian, the earlier third-century Roman jurist, defines these articles as

"earrings, bracelets, small bangles, rings, with the exception of signet rings, and everything acquired for no other purpose than adornment. And the following, too, belong to this

<sup>72</sup>Arends (1978) 1180–1182, Pls 17–19.

<sup>73</sup>Steuer (2007) 423; Koch (2001) 205–251, Fig. 105, Pl. 60.19

<sup>74</sup>Cf. Steuer (1982) 234–246, Figs 21–33.

<sup>75</sup>Cf., e.g., Hajnal (2005).

<sup>76</sup>Cf., e.g., Radnóti (1958); Martin-Kilcher (1976) 58–63, 87.

<sup>77</sup>Koch (2001) 241–244, Fig. 99.

<sup>78</sup>Martin-Kilcher (1976) 88; Dinkler-von Schubert (1980). See the latter also for other possible casket contents, including writing implements and vessels bespeaking food and drink offerings, although the former are not particularly likely in Avar-period contexts in the Carpathian Basin.

<sup>79</sup>For these keys, see the literature quoted in note 4 above.

<sup>80</sup>Hajnal (2009).

<sup>81</sup>Cf. Bavant and Ivanišević (2019) 41–47.

<sup>82</sup>Berg (2002) 17.



category: gold, gems, [precious] stones, because in themselves they have no other use” (*ornamenta muliebra*),

as well as

“mirrors, jars, perfumes, perfume bottles, and anything that may be of like nature such as equipments for the bath [or] a chest” (*mundus muliebris*).<sup>83</sup>

Although the actual usage of these terms, and some of the articles concerned, was more varied than would be suggested by these legal definitions,<sup>84</sup> jewellery and toiletry articles were strongly associated with expressions of femininity and female identity, and it is therefore hardly surprising that some of these objects were buried with women as items strictly belonging to them.<sup>85</sup> Jewellery or toiletry caskets, together with their keys, were thus both the personal properties of women and powerful symbols of their femininity and female identity. This interpretation is not at variance with the fact that in Avar-period burials, the rotary keys to the caskets had been suspended from a girdle hanger or kept in a pouch, as in the case of the female burial from Kölked, which also contained the casket, or had been suspended from a chain, as at Várpalota and Kölked (Graves A-15 and A-128). In contrast, casket keys often took the form of finger-rings in the Roman world, as well as during the late antique and Byzantine centuries.<sup>86</sup> Yet, a hinged copper-alloy key suspended from a well-preserved ornate strap in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology<sup>87</sup> clearly demonstrates that the custom of wearing these keys attached to the person’s attire was also known in the late antique Roman sphere.

The appearance of keys among female costume accessories cannot solely be interpreted within the above framework—they can equally well represent other aspects of female identity in the Roman world. Through their role among the symbolic gestures in the contraction and the dissolution of marriages, keys alluded to women’s marital status as well as to the role they performed and the power they wielded in the household (*Schlüsselgewalt*). While we have a fairly good idea of the latter from the written sources, we can merely make conjectures in the case of the former. To start with the better known aspect, the law of the Twelve Tables stipulates that a husband deciding to divorce his wife had to take back from her the keys;<sup>88</sup> in a similar vein, a wife wishing to divorce her husband handed back the keys and moved out of his house.<sup>89</sup> Tertullian, too, alludes to the symbolism of keys associated with the household duties of

Roman wives, mentioning the duty of “chests and keys to be guarded” among the needs which urged a man to remarry.<sup>90</sup> At the same time, according to one of Plutarch’s controversial passages, the ancient Roman law laid down by Romulus permitted divorce if the wife made copies of the keys without her husband’s knowledge, which was interpreted as meaning that a woman making keys was secretly conducting an adulterous affair or it signalled her inclination to consume alcohol—strictly forbidden by Romulus’s laws—which would ultimately lead to adultery.<sup>91</sup> In the light of the intimate connection between keys and marital bonds and the wife’s role in the household, it is hardly surprising that scholars have avidly searched for a key symbolism among the rich array of Roman marriage rituals. However, the textual foundation on which the widespread assumption rests, namely that a newly-wed wife received the keys of the house after entering the house of her new husband,<sup>92</sup> is strongly contested.<sup>93</sup> The key text claimed to support this rite, a laconic remark about the custom of donating keys to women to ensure safe childbirth by Festus, the later second-century CE Roman grammarian,<sup>94</sup> could be interpreted as part of the notions associating keys with female fertility (see below). However, in order to conceptualise the act of investiture into the status of economic authority in the household (*Schlüsselgewalt*) by handing over the keys, we shall hypothesise, as has repeatedly been the case since the first printed editions of his text in the Renaissance, that Festus had simply misunderstood the symbolism of the rite he described.<sup>95</sup> In any case, the close association between keys and marriage is well illustrated by Ambrose of Milan, who in one of his letters refers to getting married as “get[ting] possession of the key of marriage”.<sup>96</sup> In view of the rich symbolism inherent in the “key of marriage”, to use Ambrose’s phrase, it would be hardly surprising if widows were indeed expected to place their key on their deceased husbands’ graves, thereby symbolically expressing the end of their duties in his household.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>90</sup>Tertullianus, *De exhortatione castitatis* XII.1, transl. Thelwall (1926) 56.

<sup>91</sup>Plutarchus, *Vitae parallelae seu comparatae, Romulus* XXII.3, ed. and transl. Perrin (1914) 160–163. See also the editor’s note on the different restorations and translations of the text: Perrin (1914) 162, note 1. For translations and interpretations of Plutarch’s phrasing as referring to copying-forging (a) key(s) without her husband’s knowledge, see, e.g., Waechter (1822) 20–24; Rein (1836) 205.

<sup>92</sup>Cf., e.g., Bierkan et al. (1907) 313; Pankofer (1974) 12; Steuer (1982) 204.

<sup>93</sup>Cf., Becker and Metcalfe (1849) 162; Roßbach (1853) 352, note 89.

<sup>94</sup>*Clavim consuetudo erat mulieribus donare ob significandam partus facilitatem*: Festus, *De verborum significatione* III, s.v. *clavim*, ed. Ponori Thewrewk (1889) 39.

<sup>95</sup>As suggested, among others, by Ahrens (1864) 1.

<sup>96</sup>Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *Epistola* 74 (31), transl. Beyenka (1954) 424.

<sup>97</sup>This custom is mentioned by Pankofer (1974), 13, and, with reference to the former, by Steuer (1982) 204. However, it is unclear from Pankofer’s phrasing whether he speaks of a custom harking back to Roman times or of a later phenomenon. In any event, I was unable to trace any written account of Roman date describing this rite.

<sup>83</sup>*Digesta* XXXIV.2.25.10, transl. Watson (1998) 153.

<sup>84</sup>See the survey provided by Berg (2002).

<sup>85</sup>Berg (2002) 23–24.

<sup>86</sup>Nesbitt and Vikan (1980) 4.

<sup>87</sup>Swift et al. (2022) 99, Fig. 3.17.

<sup>88</sup>...*ex duodecim tabulis clavis ademit*... Cicero, *In Marcum Antonium oratio philippica secundum* XXVIII (69), ed. and transl. Ker (1957) 132–133.

<sup>89</sup>... *quo mulier offensa, claves remisit, domum revertit*. Aurelius Ambrosius, *Epistola* 33.3 (6.3), transl. Beyenka (1954) 164.



Nevertheless, wearing keys did not exclusively signal a woman's married status, since as John Chrysostom clearly notes in the late fourth century, little girls had their own "little chests" and kept its key,<sup>98</sup> apparently in order to prepare them for their future married role. Keys, as well as their depiction, were also vested with amuletic properties and were employed in uterine magic. As Festus's above-quoted passage emphasises, Roman women were presented with keys, symbolising the wish for easy future childbirths.<sup>99</sup> Images of keys also appear on carved gems interpreted as devices for either uterine or erotic magic. In the first case, the key can be understood as an instrument to "open the womb to allow conception and delivery, and to lock it to avoid efflux of semen, menorrhagia, menstruation, miscarriage, and wandering of the womb",<sup>100</sup> while in the second, as a device meant to "opening' the female (including the uterus as well), so as to facilitate sexual intercourse with them".<sup>101</sup>

While the casket and its key, partly as a functional unit,<sup>102</sup> symbolised the femininity of its owner, and the casket and its contents conveyed the symbolism, the latter layer of meaning was expressed by the key itself through its genuine and symbolic power of locking and unlocking, and thereby binding and unbinding. While in the case of married women and their power over the household was based on the genuine function of locking and unlocking, the role of keys in magic was based on a more abstract association.

The same associations may have all been in play in a non-Roman context, partly because these connotations were not restricted to Roman culture, and partly because of the possible impact of Roman culture on the peoples living under the Empire's sovereignty and on her fringes. For example, it is very telling that the notion of expressing the economic authority of free-born women in the household through key symbolism is also attested in seventh-century CE Anglo-Saxon law.<sup>103</sup>

The most plausible explanation for the keys found in the burials of small girls suspended from a girdle hanger,<sup>104</sup> the secondarily re-used old Roman keys, and the key-shaped articles that were not actually used as keys<sup>105</sup> in the Merovingian world and in the Avar-period Carpathian Basin is that they functioned as amulets.<sup>106</sup> Obviously, it cannot be rejected out of hand that in some cases, when worn by adults, keys signalled marital status and the associated social role. As functional pieces, Avar-period rotary keys with hinged construction could more strongly allude to marital

status and social status derived from the former, as well as to other aspects of female roles through their association with caskets. Similarly to amulets, their position in the burial can in all likelihood be explained by the fact that the amuletic pieces were worn at the waist just like functional keys.

Yet another question that needs to be addressed is whether the appearance of these keys in mortuary assemblages bears any additional meaning beyond the ones discussed in the above. The casket and key in the Kőlked B-119 burial can be principally seen as the deposition of the woman's personal articles and, similarly to the keys found in the waist region, the symbol of female power over the household, which, through the presence of a *casket key* simultaneously alluded to the deceased's femininity, and through the presence of a *key* to her *marital status* and her *social role within the household*. The placement of these attributes on the deceased would in itself explain why these articles were deposited in the grave. However, they could have easily acquired additional layers of meanings in their new, mortuary contexts. In Palmyrene funerary sculpture, for example, several female deceased are depicted with a brooch to which a key is attached, while others, males among them, are portrayed as holding keys in their hands.<sup>107</sup> On three of the female portraits, alongside others displaying males, the keys bear inscriptions which "appear to relate to the funerary buildings and to aspects of death and the afterlife."<sup>108</sup> Without these inscriptions, the keys held by the female deceased or attached to their brooch could have been seen as symbols of the depicted woman's power and her role in the household,<sup>109</sup> which is hardly an implausible meaning of the keys worn by these women in their lives. However, when entering the mortuary realm, keys could have been easily transformed into devices which open the gates of heaven or any other place related to the given people's concept of the afterlife.<sup>110</sup> An interpretation along these lines would have been acceptable for pagans and Christians alike. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus promised to give "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (*claves regni coelorum*) to the Apostle Saint Peter.<sup>111</sup> While the expression "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" could have easily been understood in the stricter sense of Saint Peter's power over providing or denying entrance to Heaven, as our modern Western understanding would imply, the wider context of Jesus's saying belies this restricted interpretation, since Jesus adds that "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be

<sup>98</sup>Iohannes Chrysostomus, *De virginitate* LXXIII.1, transl. Shore (1983) 109.

<sup>99</sup>See note 94 above.

<sup>100</sup>Aubert (1989) 446; Ament (1992) 21.

<sup>101</sup>Tsatsou (2019) 281.

<sup>102</sup>Cf. Ament (1992) 20.

<sup>103</sup>Fell (1984).

<sup>104</sup>Ament (1992) 20.

<sup>105</sup>Steuer (1982); Garam (2002); Garam (2019); Felder (2015).

<sup>106</sup>Ament (1992) 21–22.

<sup>107</sup>Krug (2018) 105.

<sup>108</sup>Krug (2018) 105–106.

<sup>109</sup>For previous research suggesting this interpretation, see Drijvers (1982) 712; Krug (2018) 105.

<sup>110</sup>For this interpretation of the Palmyrene representations, see Drijvers (1982) 720.

<sup>111</sup>*Evangelium secundum Matthaeum* 16:19. Translations from the New Testament throughout this paper are according to the New Revised Standard Version.



loosed in heaven”,<sup>112</sup> implying that in this case, the keys are intimately related to their above-referred power of binding and loosing. Disregarding the exact path leading to Heaven through the deeds and events of earthly life, the symbolic role of the key to bind and loose as well as to open and lock evidently points beyond the earthly realm, too. In a similar manner, the *Book of Revelations* makes mention of both “the keys of Death and of Hades”<sup>113</sup> (*claves mortis et inferni*) and a “key to the barrel of the bottomless pit”, from which, after it was opened, “rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the barrel.”<sup>114</sup> In view of these passages, it is by no means surprising that from Early Christian times on, there emerged a rich array of associations of the key symbolisms established by the above-quoted passages, including the keys standing for Christ himself, His powers transferred to St. Peter and the Church, and thereby the very establishment of the Church, and His powers over Hades and the forgiveness of sins.<sup>115</sup>

We are rarely in such a fortunate position as to be informed about the direct meaning of the keys deposited in burials from the texts of a given culture. A Hebrew text of controversial date,<sup>116</sup> the *Šēmaḥoṭ*, or *Tractate on Mourning*, addresses the permissibility of the custom of suspending the deceased man’s key from his coffin, adding the explanation that the custom was meant “to heighten anguish”.<sup>117</sup> According to the text, the question was posed in the late first century CE by Samuel the Little, of whom it is also said in the text that when he died, his key was suspended from his coffin “because he had no son”.<sup>118</sup> Disregarding the tractate’s actual date of composition, the custom’s association with Samuel suggests that it dates from an early time. On the other hand, the two different explanations provided by the text for suspending a key from a coffin, namely “to heighten anguish” and the lack of a male heir, spurred modern scholars to explore the origins and meaning of this custom. In the 1940s, Shmuel Yeivin argued that the Jewish communities in Palestine adopted the custom of depositing a key in the burial from the Parthians, transmitted by Babylonian Jews who took their deceased back to Palestine for burial.<sup>119</sup> Citing the medieval Jewish tradition, he suggested that since the gates of heaven could only be opened for the father languishing in hell by the prayer publicly recited by his son,

the key placed on the coffin probably served the same purpose of opening the gates of heaven.<sup>120</sup> However, Gedalyahu Allon rightly challenged the notion that a prayer known to have been recited publicly from the thirteenth century onward would provide sufficient grounds for explaining a much earlier tradition, particularly since it offers no feasible explanation for the writing tablet that was also suspended from the coffin, as mentioned in the same context by the cited tractate.<sup>121</sup> It seems more likely that keys were accorded to men who had died without fathering sons and could not leave their wealth to their sons—the suspension of a key and a writing tablet from the coffin symbolised this state of affairs.<sup>122</sup> In contrast, after considering the broader context of the cited passages, embedded among customs regarded as seemingly heathen and often related to the handling of objects, which, being personal belongings, were intimately connected to the deceased, Dov Zlotnick explained their deposition in the grave by their being the deceased’s personal property.<sup>123</sup> Seconding Zlotnick’s arguments, neither did Amos Kloner and Boaz Zissu attach any specific meaning to this custom. Instead, they classified the few keys discovered in Late Second Temple Period Jewish tombs from Jerusalem as personal items of “sentimental value to their owners, perhaps their most personal possessions”.<sup>124</sup> Yet, the above explanations are not mutually exclusive: in specific instances, the key and writing tablet suspended from the coffin of men who passed away without a son could symbolise the lack of a male heir, while in a more general sense, attaching these two objects that were intimately related to the deceased person to his coffin could “heighten anguish” in those who attended his funeral by evoking his memory as well as by referring to his social *persona*.

## CONCLUSION

The bottom line of the above survey is that the functions and symbolisms of the key finds discovered in Avar-period burial assemblages are more diverse than it has been assumed in previous scholarship. In addition to the purpose-made amuletic keys generally worn in pairs and the secondarily re-used Roman-period keys, whose amuletic function is obvious, there was at least one other category, namely hinged rotary keys that can be regarded as genuine keys with a practical function. Although some of these were damaged by the time they were deposited in the grave (Budakalász, Grave 740, Jutas, Kölked A-15) and had perhaps been worn as amulets (Jutas), these sixth- and

<sup>112</sup>*Evangelium secundum Matthaum* 16:19.

<sup>113</sup>*Apocalypsis Johannis* 1:18.

<sup>114</sup>*Apocalypsis Joannis* 9:1–2.

<sup>115</sup>An overview is provided by Steuer (1982) 206–221, Sassi (2019) 917–921.

<sup>116</sup>For the arguments against a late, eight-century CE date, and in favour of a Roman-period date of composition, see the arguments put forward by Zlotnick (1966) 4–9, cf. also Meyers (1971) 100–101, note 15.

<sup>117</sup>*Šēmaḥoṭ* 8:7, transl. Zlotnick (1966) 59.

<sup>118</sup>*Šēmaḥoṭ* 8:7, transl. Zlotnick (1966) 59.

<sup>119</sup>Yeivin (1940) 22–25.

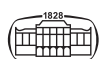
<sup>120</sup>Yeivin (1940) 26–27. I am most grateful to Ayelet Dayan (Israel Antiquities Authority) for recapitulating the arguments put forward by Yeivin and Allon in their Hebrew papers.

<sup>121</sup>*Šēmaḥoṭ* 8:7, transl. Zlotnick (1966) 59.

<sup>122</sup>Allon (1941).

<sup>123</sup>Zlotnick (1966) 15–17.

<sup>124</sup>Kloner and Zissu (2007) 134.



seventh-century pieces had nevertheless probably been genuine keys before becoming damaged. Their use as functional keys seems even more likely in the case of the other exemplars, particularly in view of the casket in the Kölked B-119 burial. Likewise, the handful of larger, sturdier iron keys were probably also functional pieces for locking and opening larger chests or wooden doors. Although the latter are not covered here, their presence definitely warrants further study because they again highlight the point that the role of keys in the Avar-period Carpathian Basin was much more complex and diverse than the amuletic pieces would have us believe.

The reason for the deposition of various keys and key-shaped artefacts can most clearly be determined in the case of the pieces worn as amulets, among which the most obviously non-functional pieces are the key-shaped articles worn in pairs in the Merovingian world. They were deposited in the grave as part of the costume, while their display during the lying-in-state was in part motivated by constructing an idealised image of the deceased and in part by the intention to provide apotropaic protection during the liminal state and in the grave.<sup>125</sup> In the case of functional keys, among which the most unmistakable are the hinged rotary keys worn in their original position, alongside a few other iron keys, several additional layers of meaning can be proposed. Some were possibly added to the costume as an apotropaic device when preparing the deceased for the lying-in-state. However, the joint presence of the casket and its key in the case of the Kölked B-119 burial relegates the iron rotary key to the woman's personal belongings that symbolised her femininity. At the same time, similarly to the Kölked A-128, the Várpalota, and Budakalász 1458 burials (the latter strongly disturbed by looters), her key marked her married status as well as her domestic authority and role. It is also quite possible that these keys were suspended from the belt for the lying-in-state because the popular belief was that these articles would open the way to the desired afterlife. However, some caution must be exercised regarding the latter layer of meaning, given that on the Palmyrene reliefs, the keys believed to open the afterlife – as evidenced by the inscriptions – occur in the portrayals of both men and women, while the hinged rotary keys discussed here all originate from female burials, the single exception being Grave 1284 of Budakalász. Thus, there would be no plausible explanation for the presence of keys almost exclusively in female burials had they been deposited, for example, with Christian connotations as devices for opening the gates of Heaven or Hades/Sheol. Interpreting keys as an emblem of femininity and as symbols betokening a woman's married status and women's power and social role in the household, their concentration in female burials makes sense.

Yet, due caution should nevertheless be exercised with undue generalisations. Despite the many similarities between the two communities, keys were apparently worn quite differently by the population interred in the Kölked

and Zamárdi burial grounds. At Zamárdi, purpose-made amuletic keys worn in pairs dominated; in contrast, none of this type have been recovered from the Kölked burials, relatively many of which contained keys. In the latter community, iron keys were similarly worn singly; moreover, they are not iron keys with long shafts imitating the L-shaped lift keys known from Zamárdi. The differences between individual communities are amply illustrated by the fact that while the key types and the way they were worn documented at Budakalász share many similarities with Kölked, the relatively many keys from the Tiszafüred-Majoros cemetery, bound to the large Avar burial grounds of eastern Transdanubia by a myriad strands, represent entirely different types and are dominated by purpose-made amuletic keys mimicking L-shaped lift keys, which were worn singly by the women of that community. The other Avar-period cemeteries of the Carpathian Basin rarely contain more than a handful of keys.<sup>126</sup> These differences highlight that keys and the reasons for their deposition need to be interpreted on their own terms in the case of various communities and the sites representing them. Of the interpretative options listed by Steuer, as well as of the other potential ones discussed in the foregoing, the most prudent approach is to examine and propose an interpretation that best fits the given context—it seems highly unlikely that there is a one-size-fits-all interpretation for the key finds recovered from Avar-period burials.

## APPENDIX

### A wooden casket from Grave 119 of the Kölked-Feketekapu B cemetery<sup>127</sup>

As mentioned in the above, Grave 119 of the Kölked-Feketekapu B cemetery yielded the iron fittings of a wooden casket, discovered in the foot region of the deceased woman. Attila Kiss, the excavator, correctly identified the “brick-shaped iron lock” and the further iron fittings as parts of a casket.<sup>128</sup> He also documented a dark soil stain in the area of the iron fittings and the field diary records that Kiss assumed that the casket had contained some organic material, perhaps various pieces of textile. It remains uncertain whether the wooden bowls, whose presence was indicated by their metal mounts, had been placed inside or on top of the casket.<sup>129</sup> However, despite its uniqueness in the early Avar-period material record of the Carpathian Basin, no further attention was devoted to this find. Thus, given that it is the single wooden casket from the Avar-period Carpathian

<sup>126</sup>Cf. the data gathered by Garam (2002) 166–169; Garam (2019) 184 Table 2. I am most grateful to Tivadar Vida for providing an overview of the key finds of the Budakalász cemetery.

<sup>127</sup>I am most grateful to Gergely Szenthe (Hungarian National Museum, Budapest) for providing the opportunity to personally examine the iron casket fittings.

<sup>128</sup>Kiss (1996) 55–56.

<sup>129</sup>I am grateful to Zsuzsanna Hajnal (Hungarian National Museum, Budapest) for sharing with me her knowledge of Attila Kiss's field observations and his assumptions about the casket's contents.

<sup>125</sup>Cf. Felder (2015).





Fig. 4. 1-2: Padlocks 1 and 2, Kölked-Feketekapu, Cemetery B, Grave 119 (photo: Ádám Bollók, graphic design: Nóra Mészáros and Zsóka Varga, ©Hungarian National Museum)



**Fig. 5.** 1-3: Attachment loops with attachment plate Nos 1 to 3, Kölked-Feketekapu, Cemetery B, Grave 119 (photo: Ádám Bollók, graphic design: Nóra Mészáros and Zsóka Varga, ©Hungarian National Museum)



Basin locked with a Roman-type padlock known to me, this find definitely merits a more detailed discussion. Let me begin with a brief description of the main surviving parts,<sup>130</sup> based on which a tentative reconstruction of the casket can be proposed.

**Padlock No. 1** (Fig. 4.1).

Iron padlock corroded to an attachment loop. Total L 7.5 cm.

Attachment loop: diam. 1.9 cm, diam. of the iron rod 0.55 cm.

Iron plate: L 3.5 cm, W 1.9 cm, Th 0.5 cm.

Padlock: L of case with hasp-rod 6.1 cm, L of case 4.45 cm, W of case with hasp-rod 2.3 cm, Th of case 2.1 cm, Dm of circular hasp-rod attached to the case, measured on the right side: 0.65 cm.

Heavily corroded iron padlock made up of a rectangular iron case and an elongated U-shaped hasp-rod. The hasp-rod is circular in section on the right side, while it is hammered into a rectangular shape on the left, where a barb-spring is hammered to it. The bolt-hole seems to be located in the case's upper left corner. A fixed spring is attached to the upper panel of the case to the right of the barb-spring. Unfortunately, its lower end is not visible to the naked eye because the front plate of the case covers the lower two-thirds of the case. Neither is the keyhole visible, being in all probability concealed by corrosion.

Hungarian National Museum, inv. no. N.79.1.46.

**Padlock No. 2** (Fig. 4.2).

L 5.5 cm of case with fragment of hasp-rod, L of case 4.7 cm, W of case with hasp-rod 2.4 cm.

Th of case 1.5 cm, diam. of cylindrical hasp-rod attached to the case, measured on the right side: 0.6 cm.

Heavily corroded iron padlock case with remains of the hasp-rod corroded to the case on both sides. This piece matches Padlock 1 both in shape and in all probability in structure. However, the locking mechanism of Padlock 2 cannot be examined by the naked eye because the covering plates are intact in shape on both the obverse and the reverse.

Hungarian National Museum, inv. no. N.79.1.41.

**Attachment loop with attachment plate No. 1** (Fig. 5.1).

Attachment loop terminating in a rivet: L of loop with rivet 2 cm, diam. of loop 1.45 cm, diam. of rod 0.35 cm.

Attachment plate: L 4.3 cm, W 1.3 cm, Th 0.32 cm.

The attachment loop is made from a single round-sectioned iron rod, which was bent to form the loop, after which both ends were joined to create a rivet through the wooden wall of the casket. The rivet is covered with wooden remains of the casket. The attachment plate is of rectangular shape with a perforation through which the attachment loop could be threaded.

Hungarian National Museum, inv. no. N.79.1.42.

**Attachment loop with attachment plate No. 2** (Fig. 5.2).

Attachment loop terminating in a rivet: L of loop with rivet 2.9 cm, diam. of loop 1.4 cm, diam. of rod 0.65 cm.

Attachment plate: L 4.7 cm, W 1.8 cm, thickness 0.45 cm. Iron rivet hammered through the plate's lower end: L 1.1 cm, diam. 0.75 cm.

Identical with the previous piece in form and manufacture, the single main difference being that the lower end of this attachment plate retains the iron rivet with which the plate was secured to the wooden casket.

Hungarian National Museum, inv. no. N.79.1.48.

**Attachment loop with attachment plate No. 3** (Fig. 5.3).

Attachment loop terminating in a rivet: L of loop with rivet 2.5 cm, diam. of loop 1.5 cm, diam. of rod 0.5 cm, fragmentary iron plate corroded to the rivet: L 2 cm, W 0.7 cm, thickness 0.4 cm.

Attachment plate: L 2.4 cm, W 1.6 cm, thickness 0.5 cm.

Identical with the previous pieces in form and manufacture, the single main difference being that it retains the small iron washer for securing the rivet from the inside of the casket lid.

Hungarian National Museum, inv. no. N.79.1.47.

Due to the heavy corrosion affecting all metal parts, several key features of how the iron fittings were attached to the casket's wooden body can only be tentatively suggested.

*Front side of the casket*

Firstly, it is logical to assume that the two padlocks were attached to the front part of the casket.

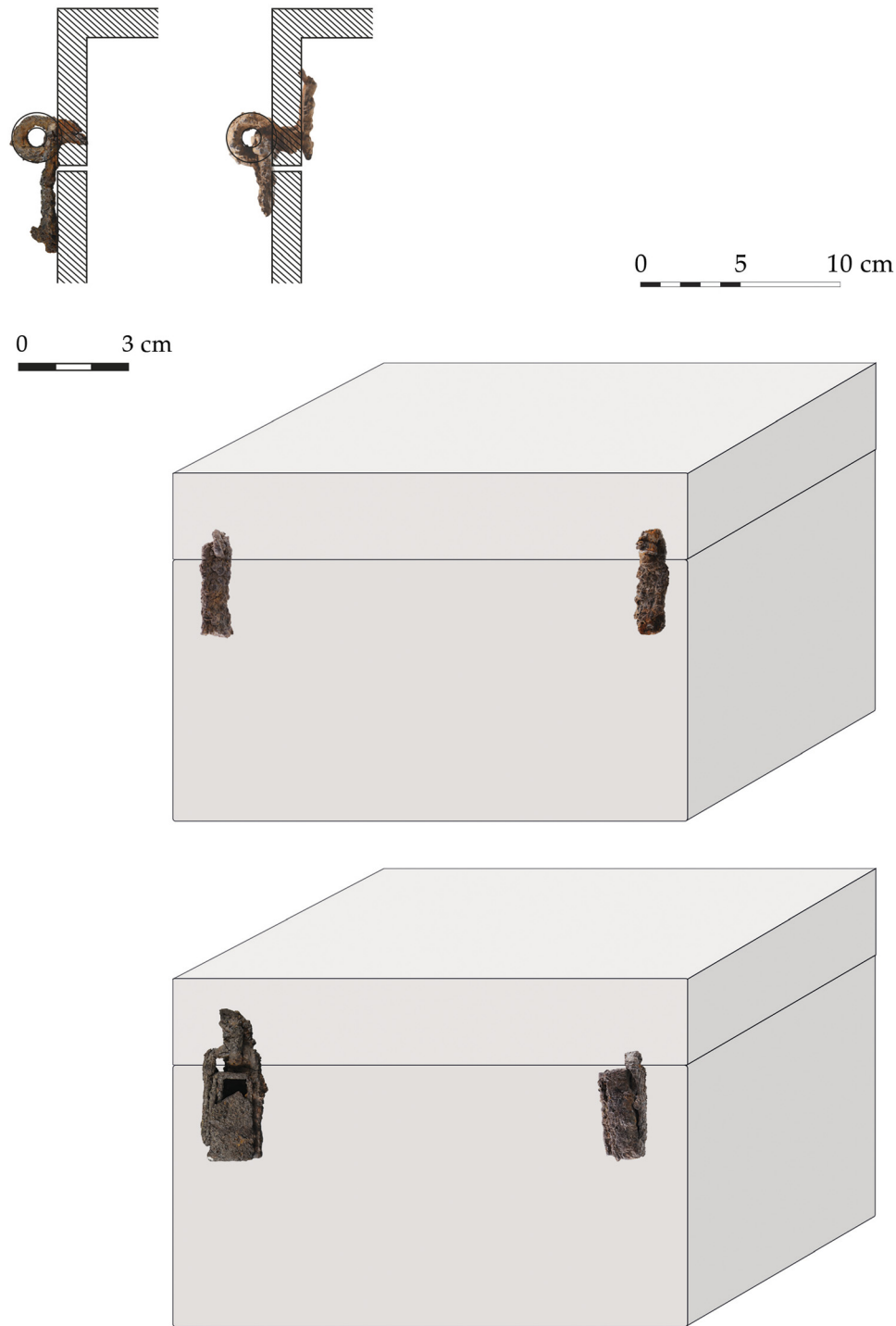
The iron attachment loop corroded to Padlock No. 1 was in all probability fixed to the wooden lid by driving its rivet through the wooden board. The rectangular iron plate corroded to the loop was in all likelihood also riveted to the wooden lid by one or two separate smaller rivets and served to protect the lid from wear and tear as well as to provide stability to the loop while the casket was locked and unlocked. The lower edge of this iron plate with its slightly curved shape seems to be original. While no traces of the assumed small rivet(s) can be made out on the piece, the wooden remains on its reverse indicate that it had been attached to the wooden lid. Another possibility to be raised here is that this plate and the plate of 'Attachment loop with attachment plate No. 3' once formed parts of one and the same object, since according to the excavator's observation, they were found next to each other.<sup>131</sup> In this case, the loop terminating in a rivet served to attach the plate to the wooden lid and thus no further smaller hypothetical rivets were needed. No. 3 further shows that the casket's maker did not entrust the stability of opening and closing the casket to the rivet simply hammered into the wooden panel, but also added another small iron washer pulled on the rivet's inner end on the lid's inner side. The 0.6–0.7 cm distance between this plate and the loop thus indicates the thickness of the wooden panel making up the back-side of the lid.

Since no other metal part is connected to Padlock No. 1, the padlock case itself must have been riveted to the wooden side-panel of the casket in order to enable locking and unlocking the wooden casket to which it was attached. The fact that neither rivet(s)/rivet-hole(s), nor wooden remains

<sup>130</sup>Kiss (1996) Pl.36.2–6.

<sup>131</sup>Kiss (1996) 56.





**Fig. 6.** Theoretical reconstruction of the casket of Grave 119 of the Kölked-Feketekapu B cemetery (graphic design: Nóra Mészáros)

are visible on the reverse of the padlock case does not exclude this possibility because the former could have been covered, while the latter removed during conservation. If both the attachment loop and the padlock case had indeed been fixed to the casket and its lid, the elongated U-shaped hasp-rod would have had to be moveable. Since the key-lock is concealed due to corrosion, its spot cannot be established with certainty. What seems certain, however, is that the removal of the U-shaped hasp-rod was made possible by compressing

a spring fixed to the iron case from the inside by a key from the inner direction within the case. This fixed spring can be seen on the left side of Padlock No. 1 (the first iron plate from the inside), while the barb spring in the middle. The latter was secured to the rectangular end of the hasp-rod. Pushing the barb spring towards the hasp-rod allowed them to be pulled out through the bolt-hole, which is largely covered due to corrosion. If this reconstruction of the locking mechanism is correct, the case itself was probably larger than

its current state since it had to enclose the entire lock mechanism, including the two straight ends of the hasp-rod.

#### *Back side of the casket*

In order to be able to open and close the casket, two further metal fittings have been placed on its back-side on the reconstruction. In fact, both attachment loops and plates seem to have served as hinges to join the lid to the casket's body in a moveable way. As the iron rivet of No. 2 indicates, the long rectangular iron plate was riveted to the casket's wooden side-panel with at least one rivet.

Since the close proximity of the loops and the rectangular iron attachment plates would not allow much space for the lid's movement, and therefore both parts of this hinge construction must have been fixed very close to the upper and lower edges of the casket's body and lid, they would only have fulfilled their purpose in the case of a fairly small-sized casket. That this fairly simple construction method for a Roman-type casket was not unknown is illustrated by a later first-century CE Roman casket discovered in Grave 2370 of the Wederath cemetery in Belgium.<sup>132</sup>

Taken together, it needs to be emphasised that due to the significant gaps in our knowledge resulting from the state of preservation of the above-discussed corroded iron fittings, the reconstruction of the Kölked B-119 casket shown in Fig. 6 must remain tentative at best. The same holds true for the size of the casket. The only possible indication among the published data is the distance separating Ladlocks 1 and 2, situated in front of the feet of the deceased. This would indicate a *ca.* 40–45 cm length for the casket, the obvious caveat being that the area of the right foot was significantly disturbed by animal burrow,<sup>133</sup> which may have moved Padlock 2 out of its original position.

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<sup>132</sup>Cf. Deschler-Erb (1996) 40, Fig. 36.

<sup>133</sup>Kiss (1996) 50.



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