

Interview with Dr. Attila Gyucha, 2015-2016 IEMA Postdoctoral Fellow

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Dr. Attila Gyucha is currently the Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute for European and Mediterranean Archaeology at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. He received a Master of Arts in Archaeology in 1996 from József Attila University in Szeged. He earned a Doctorate in Archaeology in 2010 from Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, completing a dissertation entitled, “The Early Copper Age in the Körös Region.” He currently works on international projects in both Greece and Hungary and has been one of the directors of the Körös Regional Archaeological Project since 1998.

Dr. Gyucha, what are your current research interests and which projects are you currently working on?

At the moment, I am involved in several international projects in Hungary and in Greece. These projects focus on the Neolithic of southeastern Europe, but diverge from there. In Greece, I'm involved in an American-Greek project at the famous Alepotrypa Cave site and its surroundings to understand the aggregation processes that occurred during the Final Neolithic. In Hungary, since 1998 I have directed the Körös Regional Archaeological Project (affectionately known as KRAP) with my friend and colleague William Parkinson (The Field Museum) investigating cultural and socio-economic changes in various periods of prehistory. Our study area, the Körös region in southeastern Hungary has a uniquely detailed archaeological record based on intensive surface collections. The surveys, which started in the 1960s, have covered more than 1,550 square miles and mapped ca. 15,000 settlements and cemeteries from the Neolithic to the 17th century AD. This truly incredible dataset makes the region an ideal laboratory for studying social, economic, and cultural transformations in Europe. In the first decade of the 2000s we focused our research on one of the greatest unsolved questions of European prehistory: why flourishing tell sites were abandoned without exception around 4,500 BC. The second phase of our research program steps further back in time to see the other side of the same coin. Our major goal is to model the processes that brought about the first large agricultural settlements in Europe during the 7th and 6th millennia BC. As opposed to site-specific research that has dominated prehistoric archaeology in the broader region, our project is exceptional for its regional perspective. In addition to KRAP, in the past 15 years I have supervised and mentored a number of masters and doctoral dissertation projects, and have assisted former American

KRAPers to begin their own long-term research projects in the Körös region with other Hungarian colleagues.

Your work as the IEMA post-doc centers on the prehistoric development of urbanism in the ancient world. How did you get interested in the subject?

Neolithic tells in Southeastern Europe and the Near East, occupied by hundreds or thousands of individuals have been labeled many times as proto-urban or urban settlements. Recent technological developments in prehistoric archaeological research, improvements in remote sensing techniques in particular, have resulted in a wealth of new data regarding these demographic and economic centers. In addition to detailed pictures of the extent and spatial arrangement of tell sites, investigations of areas around tells also frequently have produced surprising data, which shed light on remarkably sophisticated settlement organizations indicating a considerable degree of social and economic complexity. Furthermore, the recent introduction of regional, diachronic studies helps us place these sites in broader geographical and temporal contexts. These advances provide an unprecedented opportunity to study the socio-economic processes and mechanisms behind prehistoric population aggregation. However, to gain a more complete understanding of the emergence, development, and collapse of these societies we need to use a broader, cross-cultural perspective that considers a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches to ancient and modern urban societies. It's fantastic that I have been given the opportunity to devote nearly a whole year at UB to develop this idea, to organize the ninth annual IEMA conference on population aggregation and early urbanization, and to instruct a seminar on the same topic.

Who has proven to be the most inspiring to your own work?

Other than my older brother, who took advantage of my early interest to archaeology by making me shovel our garden every spring from the age of about 7 in the hope of finding “treasures,” the work of Ferenc Móra, a fabulous Hungarian archaeologist who wrote a book entitled *A Travel in Underground Hungary* also had a major influence on me. Later, Stuart Piggott’s, V. Gordon Childe’s, and Colin Renfrew’s books solidified my decision to become an archaeologist. Since my college years I have been very fortunate to be able to learn from and work with several of the “giants” of Hungarian archaeology; one of them, Pál Raczky, will attend the IEMA conference this year. The most critical turning point in my career, however, occurred on a spring day in 1998, when after a usual, long fieldwork day, I found a random American waiting for me at the Munkácsy Mihály Museum in Békéscsaba, Hungary. Being the only prehistoric archaeologist who spoke some broken English, I ended up having to talk with him. It was Bill Parkinson. The success of our first, overnight meeting turned into a fruitful collaboration – the Körös Regional Archaeological Project. The first two years of fieldwork was a sometimes challenging adjustment process to merge Hungarian and American methodological approaches. During these years, I gradually became familiar with the anthropological perspective, which was completely missing from Hungarian archaeology until very recently. Therefore, I believe that this genuinely organic trajectory has contributed the most to my professional work. In addition, during the field seasons of KRAP, I have had the chance to teach and instruct many American and Hungarian students, and through this project I became involved in an international circle of archaeologists. To work in this extensive, worldwide network of excellent professionals is a huge challenge, but this inspires me the most.

What have been the most rewarding, and most challenging aspects of your time as the IEMA post-doc?

What I find most rewarding is to work every day with the faculty members, which have an exceptional reputation, especially for Old World archaeology. Everyone has gone above and beyond to involve me in activities in and out of the department, and to genuinely make me feel like a part of the department. The administrative staff is also extremely great and helpful. Teaching is another thing that I really like, however, it is more important that my students enjoy the classes and benefit from the seminar. Also, previous IEMA post-docs did an excellent job and left me with big shoes to fill. Their diligent notes and shared experiences make my life far easier, and my work related to the IEMA conference organization much more efficient. However, the most challenging aspect is definitely that a day consists of only 24 hours in Buffalo too; it is a constant, unwinnable war to make the most out of each short day.

What advice would you give current graduate students working on their dissertation?

That is quite simple. I mean, quite simple to say, but not so easy to do. So, firstly, stay focused. Secondly, no, really, stay focused. Create a thoughtful and detailed research design and don’t let new ideas that look bright and fanciful at first sight distract you from your original plan. Chase these ideas after you finish. Thirdly, learn that even though it is very important, the dissertation is just one step in your career and not the ‘be-all, end-all.’ And finally, there is a phrase I have heard from my great colleague, Rick Yerkes, ‘there are two different types of dissertations, the excellent ones, and the ones that never happened.’