

# EXTRA-EUROPEAN OBSIDIAN TOOL ASSEMBLAGES IN HUNGARIAN MUSEUMS\*

## EURÓPÁN KÍVÜLI OBSZIDIÁN ESZKÖZ-EGYÜTTESEK MAGYAR MÚZEUMOKBAN

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### Abstract

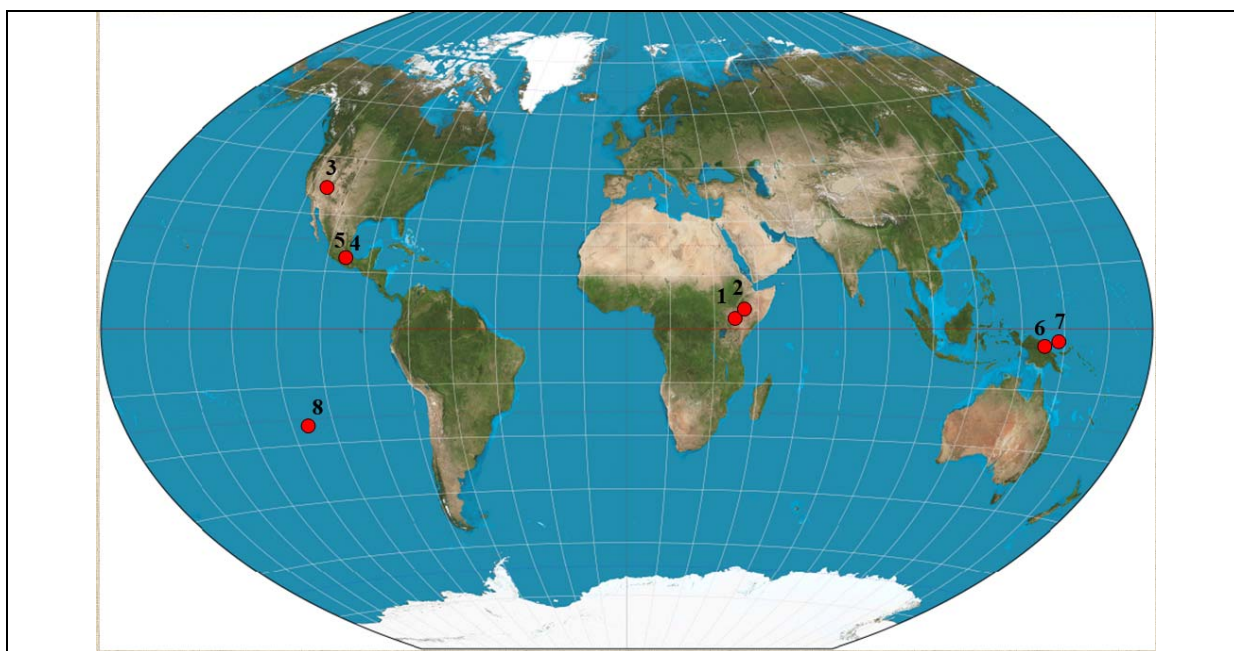
*There are over 1500 obsidian objects registered in four Hungarian museums, acquired mainly by donations, purchase and exchange, from Africa, North and Middle America and Oceania (Melanesia and Polynesia). The assemblages serve first of all to demonstrate the technological skill of different cultures. Some of them were the subject of scientific studies, some others are currently prepared for working up.*

### Kivonat

*Magyarországi múzeumaink több mint 1500 obszidián tárgyat őriznek, melyek főleg adományozás, vétel és csere útján kerültek az intézményekbe Afrika, Észak- és Közép-Amerika és Óceánia (Melanézia és Polinézia) területéről. Az együttesek elsődlegesen a különböző kultúrák technikai felkészültségét szemléltetik. A tárgyak egy része szerepel tudományos közleményekben, némelyek pedig feldolgozás alatt állnak.*

KEYWORDS: OBSIDIAN, WORLD COLLECTION, HUNGARIAN MUSEUMS

KULCSSZAVAK: OBSZIDIÁN, VILÁG-GYŰJTEMÉNYEK, MAGYARORSZÁGI MÚZEUMOK



**Fig. 1.:** Location of the sites mentioned

Key: 1. Prospect farm, Kenya; 2. Naivasha Railway, Kenya; 3. Oregon, Coffeepot Plateau; 4. Mexico; 5. Puebla, Mexico; 6. Huon-Gulf area, Admiralty Islands; 7. Manus, Admiralty Islands; 8. Easter Island

**1. kép:** Az említett lelőhelyek térképe

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Because of the raw material's beauty, obsidian attracted every time general attention among collectors. The collectors and donors who contributed to the wealth of World Collections in Hungary were, with few exceptions, Hungarians living abroad, who considered very important to send their objects to their homeland: we are very grateful for their efforts.

Their aim was that these objects, by transforming them into public property, should give the same experience to their compatriots as for himself discovering them, and to learn something about the culture of other peoples in the past and in our present. The multicoloured aspect of human cultures - what is one of the primary conditions of the sustainability of human existence - are brightly represented by these elegant, well-worked tools.

By the turn of the 19/20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarians joined in the wide-spread collecting activity of other European people who sent scientific expeditions everywhere, to document the knowledge of extra-European cultures and to „save” the material of these peoples.

The representatives of this activity were ethnologists, archaeologists, doctors, geologists, entomologists, lawyers and other scientists, but voyagers, missionaries, officers, merchants and private collectors participated in similar projects too.

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were thousands of objects in our museums, selected by the people who collected them, sometimes with only very poor information about the circumstances of the findings and even poorer about the objects themselves.

By gifts from Hungarians living in foreign countries, by exchange with other museums or by purchase we have many collections from other continents and among these we can find some obsidian assemblages. (Fig. 1.)

Due to the specific conditions of origin of the obsidian, the geological occurrence and consequently the use of this material are fairly uneven.

The oldest pieces in the Palaeolithic Collection of the Hungarian National Museum from Africa, Kenya came from the Prospect Farm, Middle Palaeolithic Stillbay culture: five obsidian tools (Fig. 2.). More African obsidians are stored in the collection from Naivasha Railway-shelter, Upper Palaeolithic „Upper Kenya-Capsian” tools (8 pieces) made of a local obsidian, (Fig. 3., Dobosi, 1982)



**Fig. 2.:** Tools from Prospect Farm, Kenya

**2. kép:** Eszközök, Prospect Farm, Kenya



**Fig. 3.:** Tools from Naivasha Railway-shelter, Kenya

**3. kép:** Eszközök, Naivasha Railway shelter, Kenya

From North America there is a large amount of Paleo-Indian obsidian tools (1282 pieces) collected in the U.S.A., Oregon State (Coffeepot Plateau) by N. Salgó dated between 8000 B.C. and 1850 A.D. This assemblage, now in the Ethnographical Museum, Budapest, contains projectile points, arrow-heads and spear-points without information on exact provenance. A selection of specific types (60 items) was transferred to the Palaeolithic Collection of the Hungarian National Museum (Fig. 4., T. Biró 1992) More Paleo-Indian obsidian tools got into the HNM from the collection of geologist Gy. Varga (Fig. 5., T. Biró 1992).

Middle America is represented by 5 pieces from Mexico in the Hungarian National Museum (Fig. 6.) and 15 pieces (mainly spear-points) in the Ethnographical Museum collected at the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this latter museum we can find more objects from the Mexico Valley (6 lip-decoration) and a greater assemblage (77 pieces) of spear-points, flakes, arrow-points and some nuclei (cores) from Mexico, Puebla, deposited in the museum in 1903.



**Fig. 4.:** Pieces from the Salgó-collection, North America, Coffeepot Plateau

**4. kép:** Néhány darab a Salgó-gyűjteményből: Észak-Amerika, Coffeepot Plateau



**Fig. 5.:** Tools from the former Varga collection, North America

**5. kép:** Eszközök az egykori Varga-gyűjteményből, Észak-Amerika

After the 50-ies of the 20th century two new donations of some 17 pieces arrived, including two copies of obsidian statues and more arrowheads or flakes.



**Fig. 6.:** Tools from Mexico, Middle America in the Hungarian National Museum

**6. kép:** Mexikói eszközök a MNM-ban, Közép-Amerika

The most interesting part of obsidian objects are from Melanesia: New Guinea and the Admiralty Islands. They are ethnographical material, from the turn of the 19/20<sup>th</sup> century and they are deposited in the Ethnographical Museum.

In the Huon-Gulf area, from Tami Islands (New Guinea), there is a well-documented little collection of razor blades of obsidian (21 pieces): they were used by the local people between 1896-1899. As the collector (Bíró L.) mentions, the obsidian splinters were also used for medical purposes, like a scalpel in a surgical intervention, too. He collected even a „modern” variant of the obsidian splinters, which came in usage at the time of his visit: a knife, made from a beer-bottle.





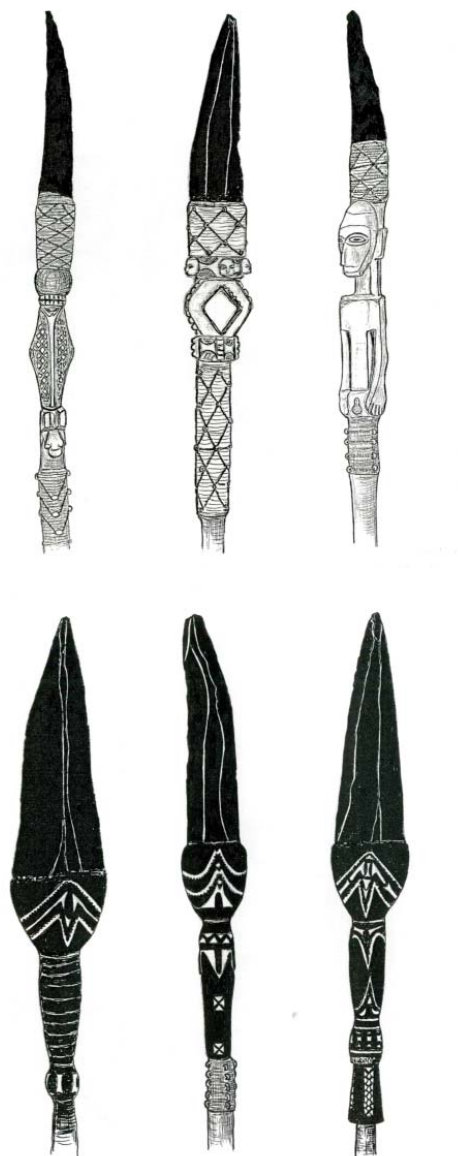
**Fig. 7.:** Admiralty Islands: young man with obsidian-headed spear (after Antoni, 2002, photo by R. Festetics)

**7. kép:** Admirális-szigetek: fiatal férfi obszidián-hegyű dárdával. (Festetics R. fotója)

The Admiralty Islands were famous for their obsidian-headed spears, and everyone who visited the islands collected them as many as they could find. (**Fig. 7., Fig. 8.**)

So, the museum has 56 complete spears and many spear-shafts without obsidian: they are lost in the course of time. The spears come from four different collections, each was made between cca. 1890 and 1902.

There are six spears with obsidian head, made around 1930, collected by a missionary and deposited in the Protestant Church Museum at Sárospatak (**Fig. 9.**) and two daggers from Manus, made in the last 20 years, deposited at the Town Museum of Gödöllő (**Fig.10.**).



**Fig. 8.:** Admiralty Islands: spears in the collection of the Ethnographical Museum (after Antoni, 2002, drawings by J. Antoni)

**8. kép:** Admirális-szigetek: a Néprajzi Múzeum dárdái (Antoni J. rajzai, Antoni, 2002)

All these objects, spears and daggers, after their appearance and their usefulness (as weapons) were made specially for visitors as trade goods or for dancing: the paintings and other decorations (carving, fixation) and the weakness of the connecting parts of the spear suggest that they are not intended for use in combat.



**Fig. 9.:** Spears from the Admiralty Islands at Sárospatak, Protestant Church District Museum

**9. kép:** Admirális-szigetek: obszidián-hegyű dárdák, Sárospatak, Református Kollégium Múzeumának gyűjteménye



**Fig. 10.:** Dagger from the Admiralty Islands in the Gödöllő Town Museum Collection

**10.kép:** Obszidián pengéjű tör, Admirális-szigetek, Gödöllői Városi Múzeum gyűjteménye

On the Admiralty Islands the people had probably similar razor-blades that in New Guinea: the razed head was the sign of mourning (**Fig. 11.**). Obsidian splinters were used by tattooing, by surgery, by the

initiation (circumcision) and eventually by fine works of wood, but – because of their tiny dimensions – apparently they were not interesting enough for the collectors.



**Fig. 11.:** Admiralty Islands: women in mourning dress, with razed head (after Nevermann, 1934, photo by Fr. Fülleborn)

**11. kép:** Borotvált fejű asszonyok (a gyász jele), Admiralitás-szigetek Nevermann 1934, Fr. Fülleborn fotója)

Finally, by donation in 1966, the Ethnographical Museum acquired 9 lance-heads from Polynesia, Easter Island (**Fig. 12.**). They are the typical crescent-shape little mata'a used in combat by throwing the lance against the enemy.

There is a question which needs a special study, if they are archaeological or ethnographic material, including the possibility that they were produced for tourist only about 60 years ago.



**Fig. 12.:** Lance-head from the Easter Island (private collection)

**12. kép:** Lándzsahegy a Húsvét-szigetről. (magángyűjtemény)

Our Extra-European collections illustrates very well the collectors ideas (and the ideas of the time period of the collecting) about „interesting”, „useful”, „exotic”, „valuable” objects: We find, however, only rarely the objects which were really useful or important in the life of the local people.

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