

**Report on the conference „Child Space” –
Narratives and new perspectives on the
bioarchaeology of children and their biosocial
network/biosocial complexity (focus on
Central-Eastern Europe)***

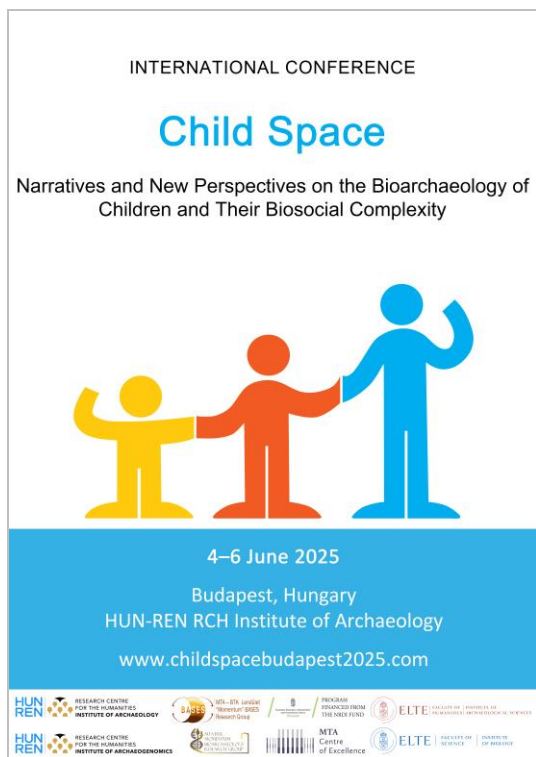


Fig. 1.: Poster of the conference with the logo designed by Bori Szekeres, a 20-year-old graphic designer. The conference logo represents the stages of childhood through simplified silhouette forms. She used different colors for each figure, symbolizing the diversity and richness of childhood. The figures hold hands, symbolizing together-ness and the continuity of development.

1. ábra: A konferencia hirdetőtáblája a logóval, amelyet a 20 éves grafikus, Szekeres Bori tervezett. A konferencia logója a gyerekkor szakaszait mutatja be leegyszerűsített sziluett formákkal. Az alakokhoz különböző színeket használt, ezzel is kifejezve a gyerekkor sokszínűségét és gazdagságát. A figurák fogják egymás kezét, ezzel jelképezve az összetartozást, és a fejlődés folyamatosságát.

The international conference “Child Space 2025 — Narratives and New Perspectives on the Bioarchaeology of Children and Their Biosocial Complexity” took place at the Institute of Archaeology ELTE RCH (former HUN-REN RCH) in Budapest, Hungary,

from June 4 to June 6, 2025 (**Fig. 1**). The co-organizers of this scientific conference are the Institute of Archaeogenomics ELTE RCH (former HUN-REN RCH), the Institute of Archaeological Sciences ELTE FH, and the Institute of Biology, Department of Biological Anthropology ELTE FS.

The meeting focused on the smallest social unit — the central element of the family: the child. The conference aimed to start a dialogue among different research fields on childhood in history. This international forum helped interpret this complex biocultural interaction using human remains, creating a platform for professionals from archaeology, history, physical anthropology, genetics, and chemistry to connect.

The international importance of the event

The importance of a bioregional topic becomes most clear when it aligns with current social issues and challenges. Today, there is active discussion about the relationships between children and their environment, biosocial factors, and the significant influence of transgenerational impacts on human development. Studying children is crucial because it helps us understand past societies by examining a specific segment of them. This analysis goes beyond immediate relationships, like mother-child, to include indirect effects, such as environmental influences. Reconstructing past phenomena and processes can aid in understanding and forecasting the results of present events.

The development and broader application of bioarchaeological methods have undoubtedly enhanced child-focused studies, gaining increasing importance in Central and Eastern Europe as well. Research on the bioarchaeology of children has reached the same analytical standards as that for adults for decades. Although there are several pioneering works and research projects in Hungary and neighboring countries, their integration into research networks remains unclear. The findings are scattered, sometimes published in non-thematic conferences or journals, or in languages that limit their international accessibility. Since ancient communities did not originally exist within today's borders, a comprehensive study of them must go beyond these territorial lines. “Child Space” has facilitated in-depth knowledge transfer to researchers in Central and Eastern Europe regarding the latest developments and trends in this field, especially at the local level. It also aimed to help them position their work within the wider international academic community. The conference provided a platform to create a space for the children of the past and their long-gone childhoods in Central and Eastern Europe by connecting various scientific disciplines within bioarchaeology.



Fig. 2.: The organising team (Orsolya Mateovics-László, Gabriella Kulcsár, and Alexandra Anders, Szilvia Fábián, Viktória Kiss, Eszter Melis, Zsófia Rácz, Tamás Szeniczey, Anna Szécsényi-Nagy) and the conference attendees.

2. ábra: A konferencia szervezői – Mateovics-László Orsolya, Kulcsár Gabriella, Anders Alexandra, Fábián Szilvia, Kiss Viktória, Melis Eszter, Rácz Zsófia, Szeniczey Tamás és Szécsényi-Nagy Anna – továbbá a konferencia előadói és résztvevői.

Central themes

The programme included 30 presentations and 15 posters, through which participants from nearly 20 countries could explore the history of children from prehistory to the eighteenth century (**Fig. 2**). The three-day conference was organized into thematic units, maintaining a focused approach on studying former children and their "space":

Rise of Children – The research history of childhood in bioarchaeology, the first and main steps. This session opened the conference with keynote speeches by Rebecca Gowland and Katharina Rebay-Salisbury, both highly respected in their fields. They discussed the origins and methodological development of childhood studies in archaeology and anthropology. Their combined historical-archaeological and biological perspectives united these two areas, establishing the conference's goal.

This introduction was followed by a subtopic called "Little souls – deep grief", which explored perspectives on interpreting child burials, burial customs, and

mortuary archaeology through the talks of Eileen Murphy, the founder and president of the Childhood Society, and Barbara Hausmair.

Finally, two members of the domestic organizing committee, Alexandra Anders and Orsolya Mateovics-László, also provided an overview of how children and childhood have emerged as topics of inquiry within Hungarian ethnographic, historical, and archaeological disciplines.

Children in Society – This session examined social roles and functions such as family relationships, child-rearing, the life cycle, and its interruption. Additionally, from a biological perspective, the presentations explored the research potential of social and environmental changes during the most sensitive period of human development, addressing topics like migration, interpersonal conflicts, status, social roles in childhood, and family connections. Several papers discussed Bronze Age funerary practices across different regions, including Italy, Czechia, and Hungary, presented by Claudio Cavazutti, Michael Ernée, and Eszter Melis and their colleagues. In this part, we also

gained insight into children's lives, mobility, and social roles within the Migration Period Avar communities, including the most recent genetic data from ERC HistoGenes project, presented by contributors from Hungary, Austria, Zsófia Rácz, Doris Pany-Kucera, Tamás Szeniczey, Balázs Gyuris, and István Koncz.

Feeding with Love – This session features studies on child health and diet examined through stable isotope analysis from the Neolithic, Bronze, and Roman Ages in Croatia and Hungary. Other presentations analyze mortality patterns and pathological data from early to Late Medieval populations across Croatia, Serbia, and Austria. The speakers for this part include: Daria Ložnjak Dizdar, Mario Novak, Zrinka Premužić, Željka Bedić, Enikő Somogyvári-Lajtár, Nataša Miladinović-Radmilović and Paul Klostermann.

Child in Space and Time – This closing discussion addressed questions about our current position in childhood research across different archaeological periods and regions. It covered new research directions, project presentations, and the research and experiences of both domestic and international institutions. These were:

SKIN project (Social Kinship and Cooperative Care): How gender influenced funerary practices for children in Copper Age Iberian societies, by Ana Mercedes Herrero-Corral. Klaudia Daňová presented DNA analysis results from other Early Bronze Age burial sites of the Nitra culture in Slovakia, which helped hypothesize potential links between the buried men and the children. Kristóf Fülöp introduced a new experimental Hungarian project on ceramic artifacts from Middle and Late Bronze Age settlements and burials, using archaeological methods along with theoretical and experimental approaches to childhood, educational studies, and visual skills development; addressing complex questions such as the status of children within the community, their socialization processes across cultural differences, and the social context of learning. Ciprian Crețu discussed the Late Antique mortuary record along the western Black Sea coast, examining the region's demographic composition, cultural practices, and social structures. Sofija Stefanović presented findings from the ERC project BIRTH, exploring changes in child-rearing during the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods (10,000–5,000 BC). Alessia Nava shared insights and advanced results on state-of-the-art methodologies, including traditional and non-destructive virtual histomorphometry, which enable the reconstruction of infant growth trajectories, physiological stresses, and mother-infant health status. Additionally, high-resolution elemental and isotopic biogeochemical analyses of dental enamel

provide a unique perspective on maternal diet, nursing practices, exposure to pollutants, and mother-infant mobility patterns. Mateusz Jaeger's bioarchaeological study focused on significant necropolises from the Early and Middle Bronze Age in Slovakia. The conference concluded with a talk titled "Unique Hungarian Vác Mummies from a new perspective." Ildikó Pap compiled the funerary and pathological data on the child mummies in the collection.

The abstracts of the lectures and posters were published in a [conference booklet](#), while recordings of the talks are available on the [YouTube channel](#) of the Research Centre for the Humanities of the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) (former HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities). For further information in Hungarian and English, visit the conference's website at:

<https://www.childspacebudapest2025.com/>

PUBLIC EVENTS – Podcasts, round table, child drawing competition, and exhibition

This conference, however, was more than just an academic event. As part of the complex programme, three podcasts and a round-table discussion were organised in collaboration with the editorial team of Glossza, the popular science podcast series of the ELTE (former HUN-REN) Research Centre for the Humanities.

In episode 72, entitled [*Was There Childhood in the Past? Insights into the Historical And Anthropological Study of Childhood*](#), historian Gabriella Erdélyi, head of the MTA–BTK Lendület "Momentum" Integrating Families Research Group, and anthropologist Tamás Szeniczey, assistant professor at the Department of Biological Anthropology at ELTE, discuss how children lived in various historical eras.

In episode 73, titled [*Food for Children, Spice for Adults. Children's Games Past and Present*](#), ethnographer Piroska Tóth, director of the Dr Jablonkay István Local History Collection in Solymár, and museologist Veronika Nagy, professional director of the Hetedhét Toy Museum in Székesfehérvár, explore the diverse world of children's toys.

In episode 74, titled [*Wassup, Heyo, How are You? Children's Mental Well-Being in the Twenty-First century*](#), Zsuzsa F. Lassú, associate professor at the Faculty of Primary and Pre-school Education at ELTE, and Nikolett Arató, assistant lecturer at the Faculty of Education and Psychology at ELTE, discuss the challenges children have to face in the digital age.

What constitutes a safe childhood today? How does digitalisation affect children's development? What challenges do children face in different parts of the world? How do children shape their own spaces – both in the past and in the present? What effect does technology have on their mental health and well-being? How do children today communicate, and how might we better understand them? The round-table discussion entitled *Different Cultures – Shared Problems: Child Spaces in a Global and Digital World* sought answer to these questions (Figs. 3 and 4). The discussion brought together lawyer and children's rights activist Szilvia Gyurkó, world-travelling geologist Árpád Juhász, and art historian and educational researcher Andrea Kárpáti, alongside Adrienn Szilágyi and Orsolya Mateovics-László, on 4 June 2025 in Budapest.

Alongside these events, a children's drawing competition entitled *Life in the Past – Past Through Children's Eyes* was announced as part of the programme for children aged 4 to 15, including pre-school, as well as lower and upper primary school pupils (Figs. 5, 6 and 7). By the deadline of 12 May 2025, an astonishing 240 entries had been received from seventy kindergartens and schools within and beyond Hungary's borders. The works, created with a variety of techniques, explored themes such as: How do children imagine the past? Where and how did children and families once live? What might people have worn hundreds or thousands of years ago? What did they eat in prehistory, antiquity, or the Middle Ages? The sheer range of striking and captivating images prompted the rapid organisation of a children's art exhibition. The opening ceremony and award presentation took place on 4 June 2025. The professional jury of the children's drawing competition comprised art historian Katalin Aknai, art teacher Erna Juhász, archaeologist Gabriella Kulcsár, designer, architect, and graphic artist Nóra Mészáros, and archaeologist-historian Orsolya Mészáros. First-, second-, and third-prizes, as well as several special prizes, were awarded across all three age categories; in addition, several research institutes, research groups, and professional organisations offered special prizes. The exhibition was designed by Zsóka Varga and realized by Balázs Gusztáv Mende, Nóra Mészáros, and Zsóka Varga. It was open to the public for nearly four months, closing on 26 September 2025, during the Researchers' Night, within the framework of the LÁTKÉP 2025 programme series, with a closing event, The Future of Child Spaces, dedicated to the memory of Professor Andrea Kárpáti, who had still shared her thoughts with us at the round-table in June.



Fig. 3.: Banner of the round table discussion “*Different Cultures – Shared Problems: Child Spaces in a Global and Digital World*”

3. ábra: A kerekasztal beszélgetés beharangozója “*Eltérő kultúrák – azonos problémák: Gyerekterek a globális és digitális világban*”



Fig. 4.: Around the table, from left to right: Adrienn Szilágyi (Glossza, editorial team), Orsolya Mateovics-László (Child Space organizing committee member) and the guests: Dr. Árpád Juhász, world-travelling geologist, Dr. Andrea Kárpáti, art historian and educational researcher and Dr. Szilvia Gyurkó, children's rights activist

4. ábra: A kerekasztal körül balról jobbra: Szilágyi Adrienn (a Glossza szerkesztőségének tagja), Mateovics-László Orsolya (a Child Space szervezőbizottságának tagja), valamint a meghívott vendégek: Dr. Juhász Árpád világutazó geológus, Dr. Kárpáti Andrea művészettörténész és neveléstudományi kutató, valamint Dr. Gyurkó Szilvia gyermekjogi szakértő.



Fig. 5.: Poster of the Child Drawing competition, *Life in the Past – Past Through Children's Eyes*. The Photo montage created from the entries to the children's competition designed by Nóra Mészáros

5. ábra: Az “Élet a múltban — A múlt gyerek szemmel” című gyermekrajz-pályázat plakátja. A fotómontázs a pályázatra beérkezett alkotásokból készült, tervezte Mészáros Nóra.



Fig. 6.: A snapshot from the opening of the exhibition
6. ábra: Pillanatkép a kiállítás megnyitójáról

An online and printed volume has also been produced from the exhibition, published by Archaeolingua Publishing (<https://ri.abtk.hu/hu/publications/élet-a-múltban-past-through-childrens-eyes>; <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/6af390ab80.html#page/26>). With this volume, we have aimed to preserve the variety and creative vision expressed in the children's drawings. The works of the three age groups have been arranged in six chapters – Life in Prehistory, Life in Antiquity, Life in the Migration Period and the Middle Ages, Life in the Early Modern Period and the Nineteenth century, Folk Traditions, and Life in the Twentieth century and Beyond – that guide the reader through archaeological and historical eras. The included drawings and paintings vividly convey the worlds of past and present, offering a glimpse into the future that can only be understood through the lens of childhood. We are grateful to all participants of the competition: pre-schoolers and primary school students, as well as their parents and teachers. We hope that, following the exhibition, this volume may serve as a lasting collection of works of visual art that allows us to gain a deeper understanding of our contemporary world.



Fig. 7.: Drawings of the exhibition with Zsófia Rác, archaeologist, organizer

7. ábra: A kiállítás rajzai Rác Zsófia régésszel, a konferencia egyik szervezőjével

Closing words

We can view childhood from many different perspectives, which spins like a “marble ball” in space and time. The "Child Space" scientific conference aimed to bring this vivid picture to life using the tools of history, archaeology, and anthropology. We have recognized that children in the past were not invisible; they created their own space through their existence, just as they do today. Their physical remains testify to the environmental and social factors that influenced their development and prevented them from reaching adulthood. Beyond our viewpoint, understanding parents' past attitudes and children's family relationships is essential for comprehending and improving modern human connections.

The organisers of the international scientific conference are the Institute of Archaeology ELTE RCH (former HUN-REN RCH), the Institute of Archaeogenomics ELTE RCH (former HUN-REN RCH), the Institute of Archaeological Sciences ELTE FH, and the Department of Biological Anthropology, Institute of Biology ELTE FS. Organising committee: Orsolya Mateovics-László, Gabriella Kulcsár, and Alexandra Anders, Szilvia Fábián, Viktória Kiss, Eszter Melis, Zsófia Rácz, Tamás Szeniczey, Anna Szécsényi-Nagy.

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