The Avar age (*ca*. 570 to *ca*. 800) was a period of great significance for the early medieval history of Europe. The Avar qaganate was the creation of an elite of nomadic horsemen of eastern origin. Its early history is known from literary sources, but for the later part (*ca*. 700 to *ca*. 800), very few, if any such sources are known. However, the Avar age can now be studied in great detail on the basis of archaeological excavations of cemeteries and, lately, of settlements as well. During the last fifty years or so, considerably energy has been invested in sorting out a firm chronology for the archaeological assemblages of the Avar age. Even though the chronology of Avar history seemed clearly anchored to known moments in history, in fact only the date for the Avar conquest of the Carpathian Basin (568) has received general acceptance. By contrast, the end of the Avar qaganate, an event historians place in the early 800s, has been dated by various archaeologists at various points in time between 800 and 900. More often than not, such differences in understanding basic chronology stem from conflicting views on the medieval history of the region, themselves based on differing views of national(ist) histories. For example, most prominent among scholars inclined to date the end of the Avar qaganate as late as possible within the ninth century are Hungarian archaeologists and historians who insist that the first generation of Magyars in Hungary coexisted with the last generation of Avars.

While absolute dates for the chronology of the Avar age remain under discussion, great progress has been achieved in establishing a relative chronology of archaeological assemblages, especially for the later parts of the Avar age for which no coin-dated assemblages have so far been found. More than forty years ago, Ilona Kovrig, the *grande dame* of Avar archaeology, has proposed a chronological model based on the division of the Avar age into Early, Middle, and Late periods. Her chronology has meanwhile been greatly improved with the assistance of an

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1 An expanded version of this paper appeared in Stadler 2005.
2 Kovrig 1963.
ever-increasing number of new assemblages and computer-assisted methods to order them chronologically. The division into Early, Middle and Late Avar periods has been accepted by virtually all scholars with an interest in the Avar age, even though they tend to favor quite different absolute dates for the beginning and end of each one of these periods.

The relative and absolute chronology of the Avar age

The refinement of Kovrig’s chronology has been made possible by the application of new methods, especially the development and improvement of the image database “Montelius.” Named after the Swedish archaeologist Oskar Montelius (1843–1921), the database came into being in Vienna in 1999 and already has over 500,000 images pertaining to prehistoric and early medieval assemblages in Europe, all entered by some 60 archaeologists, students, and volunteers. The coverage is almost complete for the Avar period, with over 140,000 published artifacts. The database consists of a collection of images of archaeological artifacts allowing for the display of data in at least two different modes. On one hand, the complex-view mode is not very different from the way in which new archaeological information is presented visually in most publications, namely ordered by means of closed-find units (burial, settlement feature, or hoard assemblages). Figure 1 shows just one such example, a Browser ACD. See image displaying artifacts found in the rich Avar-age burial in Kunbábyó ny, which some regard as the tomb of one of the seventh-century Avar qagans. By contrast, in the typological mode, artifact images are grouped by formal similarity, the basic procedure for working with typology. In the typological mode, image could be manipulated with the Drag ‘n Drop tool activated by the computer mouse. All changes operated in the typology structure are immediately brought to the “background” database. Figure 2 shows an example of a typology-mode view of pots with a S-shaped comb-punch decoration. A number of different functions provide support for the work on such an enormous typology. To input the image of any one artifact into the

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3 Oskar Montelius refined the concept of closed find first introduced by Christian Jürgensen Thomsen and in the process laid the foundations of typology as a key method for archaeological research. See Montelius 1903.