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**FUNERARY EYE AND MOUTH PLATES  
IN THE CARPATHIAN BASIN IN THE 10<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

**Abstract:** The objective of this article is to present the funerary eye and mouth plates use as a funeral custom from the 10<sup>th</sup> century in the Carpathian Basin. Presented artefacts, which were interpreted as funerary eye and mouth plates, were sewn onto the shroud used to cover the skull or were placed on the eye cavity and on the mouth of the deceased person. The collected artefacts were divided into four parts, based on the formal aspect. Their characteristics were examined. These artefacts show strong connections with specimens known from eastern Europe, especially with the ones known from the Ural. The ancient Hungarians brought this funeral custom to the Carpathian Basin in the course of their conquest. Ethnic studies are needed to understand the discussed custom, and the subject requires further research.

**Key words:** Ancient Hungarians, burial custom, Carpathian Basin, funerary eye and mouth plates, 10<sup>th</sup> century

This article focuses on funerary eye and mouth plates as they relate to funeral customs of the 10<sup>th</sup> century in the Carpathian Basin. While addressed by many, the previous studies on the subject do not itemize and systemize the so far excavated graves where funerary eye and mouth plates have been found.

The first appearance of the funerary eye and mouth plates in connection with the Conquest period was in 1871, at Piliny-Leshegy, although later the archaeologist Baron Jenő Nyáry found the interpretation of these artifacts wrong (Nyáry 1873, 16–24). The first excavation related to this topic which is worth mentioning occurred in 1958 in Tiszaeszlár-Bashalom-Fenyvespart II. Here the archaeologist István Dienes, in the second cemetery's tenth grave, found four squared silver plates in the buried body's ocular cavities and mouth (Fig. 1). Additionally, remains of some kind of leather shroud were found under the plates (Dienes 1963, 108). István Dienes was the first who started searching for parallels of this custom and started collecting funerary eye and mouth plates from the Hungarian Conquest



Fig. 1. 1–2. Reconstruction of the burial ritual. Based on the 10th grave from Tiszaeszlár-Bashalom-Fenyvespart II. cemetery (Illustrations made by Fruzsina Pápai)

period (10<sup>th</sup> c. AD) in the Carpathian Basin. He found the parallels of this custom in the medieval period of the territory of the Finno-Ugric language speaking people. Istvan Fodor also found the parallels of this custom in eastern areas, at the western foothills of the Urals (Fodor 1973, 174).

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rethinking of the origin of the funerary eye and mouth plates in the Conquest period people's archaeological legacy occurred. Mihály Benkő (historian) was the first one, who thought that the custom of the funerary eye and mouth plates' spread in the Conquest period funerary material was influenced by turkish-speaking nomadic people (Benkő 1998, 128). He was searching the antecedents of this custom in the Central Asian region. According to his opinion this custom spread because of the turkish-speaking people's influence first in western Siberia, than in the Ural region, where the ancient Hungarians met with it and brought it to the Carpathian Basin (Benkő 1987–1988, 169–200). In the 2000's, János Makkay also researched these burial customs and accepted Mihály Benkő's standpoint (Makkay 2007, 62–72). In 2013 the exhibition in the National Museum called 'Ancient Death Masks' added to this topic new results and archaeological finds of the Uralian origin (Fodor 2014, 119–30).

I collected those artifacts, which were determined as funerary eye and mouth plates, sewn onto the shroud covered the skull or just placed on the eye cavity and on the mouth. I divided the collected artefacts into four parts from formal aspect and then I examined the characteristics of them.

The first group contains only one eye and mouth plates (Rakamaz-Strázsadomb, Grave A), which was the most solid of the Carpathian finds (Fodor 1996, 110–119). Unfortunately, no other parallels were found in the region, although it has numerous parallels in the Ural area. In this region this type of masks are called half-masks and they were typical in the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century (Belavin et al. 2009, 105). The gold plates, covering the buried man's eyes, are compared to carnival masks, with openings marking at the eyes. The mouth plate, fashioned after the eye plate is oval shaped also, with oval shaped hole in it (Fig. 2).

The second group are simple, square and rectangle shaped paperthin plates, in some occasions made of gold, but mostly silver (Fig. 3. 1–6). The third group are the secondary used mountings, which show great variety (Fig. 3. 7–11). These were not originally intended to be used as funerary eye and mouth plates.

In the fourth group, the eye and mouth plates included coins on a few occasion. Three graves belong to this group. In two occasions (Szeged-Csongrádi út, Grave 1 and 36) the orbitals of the deceased individuals contained silver plates. In the oral cavity, coin was found (Kürti 1996, 59–60). In one grave (Kiskundorozsma-Hosszúhát-halom, Grave 100) both in the orbital and in the oral cavity, coins were found (Bende-Lőrinczy-Türk 2002, 366–367). It is hard to tell, if in these occasions, the coin was given simply as a part of the custom of making a funerary eyeplate,

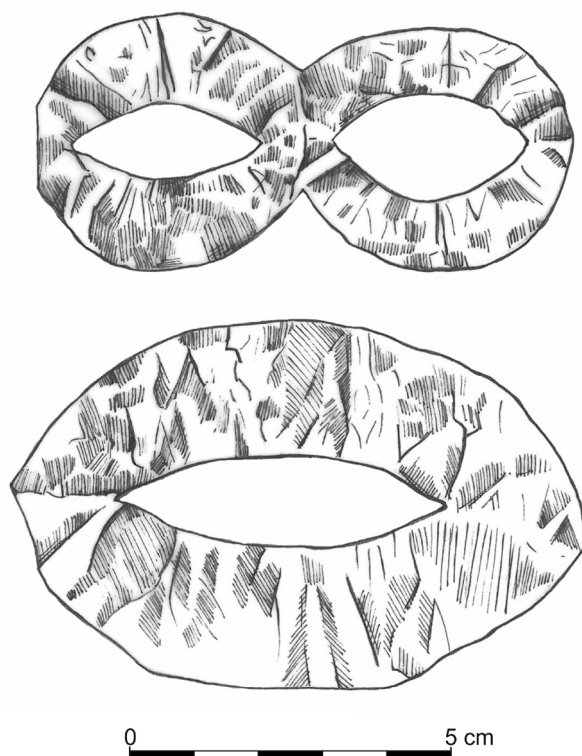


Fig. 2. Funerary eye and mouth plates from Rakamaz-Strázsadomb, Grave A. 10th century  
(Illustration made by Fruzsina Pápai after Fodor 2013, Fig. 44)

or the custom of giving obulus. In the face of it, there is no big difference between the two habits, but the idea behind the two practices shows a huge difference.

The custom of giving obulus is datable back to the antique times. Under the deceased's tongue a coin was placed as a payment to Charon, the infernal ferryman, who shipped the dead across the Styx river. The soul of the deceased after the crossing could only continue the way to the afterlife. This heathen burial custom was in practice in the antique times and after christianity's appearance also, despite the disappearing of the other pagan burial customs (Šeparović 2009, 555). The custom's real spread is datable in the Carpathian Basin back to the 11th century, to the time of Stephen (Saint) I (1000-1038) (Kolnikova 1967, 249; Kovács 1994, 194). It is questionable, whether the coin was part of the eye and mouth plates or we can talk about the two customs being present at the same time. Another way of interpretation is that these coins which were placed in the eye cavities were the Christian variant of the funerary eye plates (Mesterházy 1993, 303).

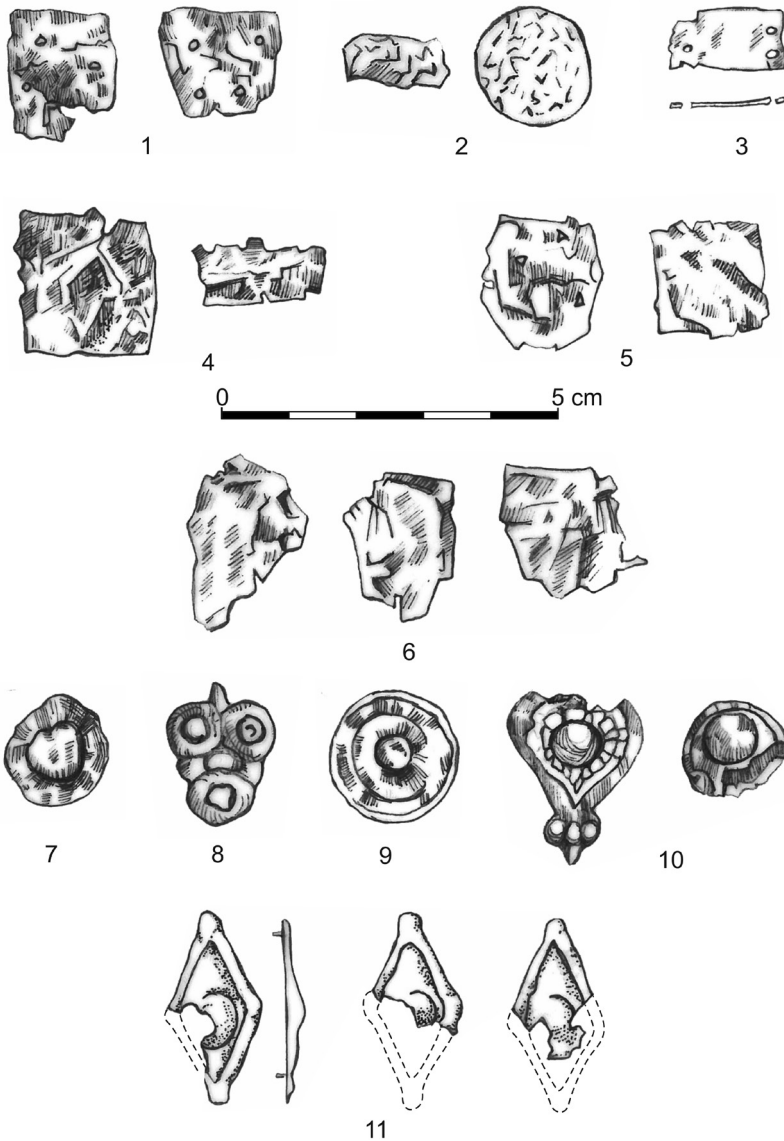


Fig. 3. 1–6. Some metal plates which were used as funerary eye and mouth plates.

1. Hajdúböszörmény-Bodaszőlő-Büdöskút, Grave 6; 2. Karos-Eperjesszög II. cemetery, Grave 14;  
 3. Tiszaszederkény-Vegyí kombinát, Grave 2; 4. Bana-Ördögásta-hegy, Grave 1; Hajdúböszörmény-  
 Vid-Erdős tanya; 6. Sárrétudvari-Poroshalom, Grave 2); 7–11. Some mountings which were used  
 as funerary eye and mouth plates. (7. Szabadkígyós-Pál ligeti tábla, Grave 7; 8. Szabadkígyós-  
 Tangazdaság homokbányája, Grave 26; Püspökladány-Eperjesvölgy, Grave 207; 10. Szabadkígyós-Pál  
 ligeti tábla, Grave 8; 11. Ikervár-Virág utca, Grave 7 (Illustrations redraw by Fruzsina Pápai)

From anthropological point the people buried with the eye and mouth plates of view in 77% of the graves were men, 18% women and the rest, 5% are unknown. However the custom was most practiced by both sexes of the older generation, in an age group that was between 40–59 years old, although in smaller numbers it is present among the younger generation as well. The largest percentage of eyeplates were typically found in male graves. Visualised on a map, it is clear, that this was custom was present mostly in Hungary's eastern, northeastern parts, southern parts, and in small amount, scattered in the western parts (Fig.4). In the course of the chronological analysis specifying the practice's time in the 10<sup>th</sup> century was not possible. Three graves contained coins; in grave 100 at Kiskundorozsma-Hosszúhát-hill the coins dated the custom to the third quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Bende-Lőrinczy-Türk 2002, 366–367), and coins found at the Szeged-Csongrádi út site dated it after the 950s (Kürti 1996, 60).

Unfortunately we know only few things about how the ancient Hungarians placed the funerary eye and mouth plates in the cemeteries. Just in few cases it is clear, that plates were sewn onto some kind of textile or leather (Fig. 3. 1, 3). However, it appears that mostly no means of fixation were used, as the pieces of the eye and mouth plates were only placed on the eyeholes and mouth. It is possible, that they used a method of fixing, that is no longer possible to observe. Only in two graves found in Szabadkígyós-Pál liget site is it obvious, that they used thread for fixing the eyeplates on some kind of textile (Bálint 1971, 65). In the 7th grave the back of the plate found in the left eyehole preserved a piece of textile that previously covered the dead (Knotik 1971, 106). The studies found very strong traces of green and blue paint and also cotton and hemp in the thread (Gulyás 1971, 116). The examination of the textile remains found provided insights into the knitting technique used (Knotik 1971, 105–113).

The described practice is much more current in time and in space, it can not be linked to only one ethnicity. It is important not to forget, that this burial custom is not exclusively a custom of Turkish- or Finno-Ugric speaking people (Veres 1996, 53–66). The funerary eye and mouth pieces found in the Carpathian Basin show a strong connection with the eastern European, especially with the Ural's artefacts. The ancient Hungarians brought this funeral custom to the Carpathian Basin in the course of their conquest. The ancient Hungarians had brought in the first part of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, from the foreground of the Ural area carried several cultural elements with themselves, first to the eastern European steppe and later to the Carpathian Basin (Belavin et al. 2015, 120). This is one of the most important ancient Hungarian types of findings, which can be linked to the Ugric ethnicity (Belavin et al. 2009, 109).

In the Ural–Kama region the separate mouth and eye plates are the earliest ones that can be dated back to the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century until the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The eyeplates are elongated or oval shaped, with an oval hole for the



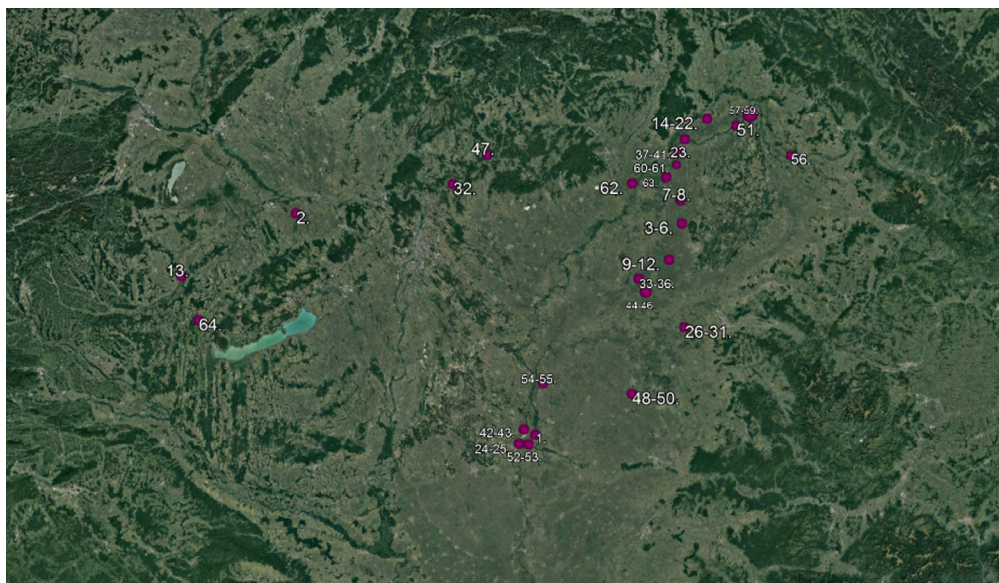


Fig. 4. Distribution map of graves which contained funerary eye and mouth plates in the Carpathian Basin

1. Algyó-258. számú kútkörzet; 2. Bana-Ördögásta-hegy, Grave 1; 3–6. Hajdúböszörmény-Bodaszőlő, Bődökút, Grave 1, 6, Hajdúböszörmény-Vid, Erdős-tanya; 7–8. Hajdúdorog-Gyulás, Grave 3, Hajdúdorog-Temetőhegy, Grave 1; 9–12. Hajdúszoboszló-Árkoshalom, Grave 145, 196, 212, 263; 13. Ikervár-Virág utca, Grave 7; 14–22. Karos-Eperjesszőg, II/ 3, 14, 16, 37, 47, 56; III/ 11, 12, 13; 23. Kenézlő-Fazekaszug, Grave 50; 24–25. Kiskundorozsma-Hosszúhát halom, Grave 100, Kiskundorozsma-Subasa, Grave 143; 26–31. Magyarhomorog-Kónyadomb, Grave 4, 6, 8, 11, 16, 23; 32. Nógrádkövesd, Grave 3; 33–36. Püspökladány-Eperjesvölgy, Grave 200, 205, 207; 37–41. Rakamaz-Strázasdomb, Grave A, Rakamaz-Túróczi-part (Gyepiföld), Grave 1, 2, 3; 42–43. Sándorfalva-Eperjes, Grave 16, 18; 44–46. Sárrétudvari-Hízóföld, Grave 84, 172, Sárrétudvari-Poroshalom, Grave 2; 47. Sósartyán-Hosszútető, Grave 4; 48–50. Szabadkígyós-Pál ligeti tábla, Grave 7, 8, Szabadkígyós-Tangazdaság homokbányája, Grave 26; 51. Szabolcsveresmart-Szelérdomb, Grave 3; 52–53. Szeged Csongrádi út, Grave 1, 36; 54–55. Szentes-Borbásföld, Grave 13, 14; 56. Tarpa; 57–59. Tiszabездé-Harangláb dűlő, Grave 2, 4, 9; 60–61. Tiszaeszlár Bashalom-Fenyvespart, Grave 9, II/ 10; 62. Tiszaszederkény-Vegyí kombinát, Grave 2; 63. Tiszavasvári-Aranykerti tábla, Grave 4; 64. Zalaszentgrót, Grave 8

eyes. More rarely these consist of two pieces, signifying the two eyes, but it is more common that the eyeplate is one piece. The mouthpieces, fashioned after the eyeplates are oval shaped also, with oval shaped holes in them (Fig. 5; Belavin et al. 2009, 105).

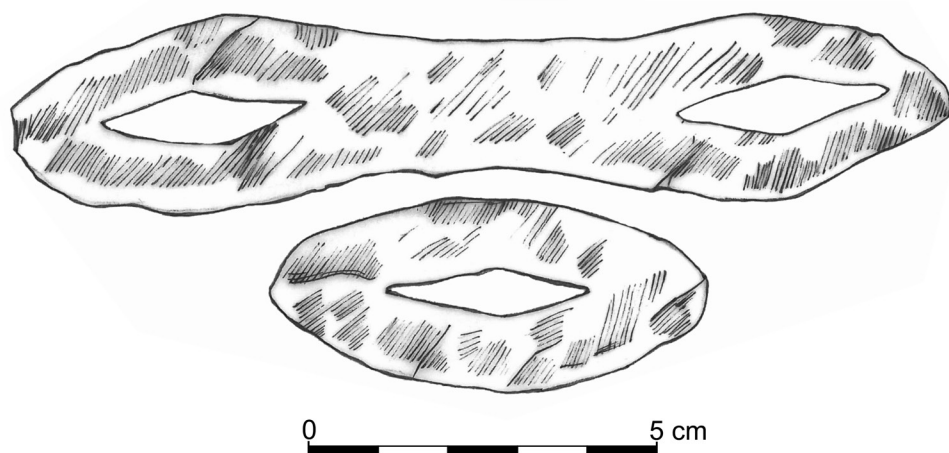


Fig. 5. Funerary eye and mouth plates from Gorbuniata cemetery. 8–10th century  
(Illustration made by Fruzsina Pápai after German 2003, Fig. 1, 1, 3)

In the 9<sup>th</sup> century these become much bigger half-masks. These are two piece eye and mouthplates, that almost connect at the nose (Fig. 6. 1; Belavin et al. 2009, 105).

In the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, burial masks that covered the entire face appeared. These were mostly oval shaped, but in some rare instances also trapezoid or square shaped as well. In these masks both the eyes and the mouth were marked by holes. However, some of the masks indicated the location of the eyes, mouth, moustache, eyebrows, and eye-lashes, thus providing the masks with individual features (Fig. 6. 2; Belavin et al. 2009, 105–106).

In the 9–10<sup>th</sup> century, in the territory of the Eastern-European steppe (Dnieper river), these burial customs appeared. The ancient Hungarians brought this funeral custom here from the west foreground of the Ural mountain. They also carried several cultural elements with themselves for example burials with partial horse remains, silver belt buckles covered in gold leaf, Post-Sasanian influenced artefacts. This area – along the middle section of the Dnieper River which the researchers call the Subotsi find horizon with around 100 burials – shows also strong connections with the Carpathian Basin's artefacts. This area can be identified with the territory known from the written sources called 'Etelköz' (Türk 2014, 31–32; 53).

To understand the idea in the background of giving a burial mask, it is essential to understand the ancient Hungarians beliefs, however we do not have concret informations about it. According to the earlier theories this belief is similarly to the Finno-Ugric or other eurasian peoples, that the human being had two souls.



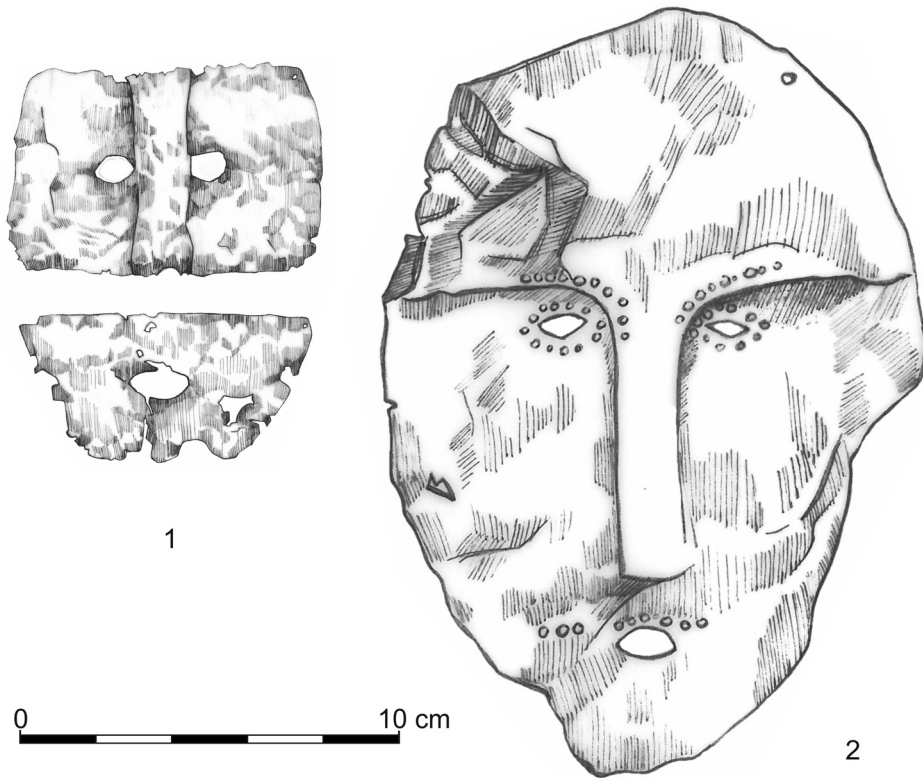


Fig. 6. 1. Half-mask from Bayanovo cemetery. 9th century (Illustration made by Fruzsina Pápai after Fodor 2013, Fig. 34); 2. Dead mask from Bayanovo cemetery 10–11th century (Illustration made by Fruzsina Pápai after Fodor 2013, Fig. 35)

One of them is the body soul and the other one is the free soul (Dienes 1975, 83; Dienes 1978, 193).

It is certain that the function of the funerary eye and mouth plates were in connection with the soul of the deceased. The main question is if the ancient Hungarians used these plates to protect the deceased or to protect the living from the deceased's harmful glance?

In 1963 István Dienes consulted for his article Valerii Nikolayevich Chernyvetsov the Russian archaeologist and ethnographer. He connected the plates on the eye with preventing the dead from seeing, that the dead does not grab someone from living and does not take them along to the afterlife. In parallel with this, these plates also protected the dead's soul as a mask, which could be attacked by harmful spirits on the way to the afterlife (Dienes 1963, 112).

Mihály Benkő during his journey to Inner Asia saw burial customs of the mongolian Kazahs, which included eye and mouth plates. He described this in great detail with pictures included too. According to this, the dead's face is covered with white silk and the cover is then sewed with gold, silver or – if the person wasn't rich – coins or plates on the mouth and eye area. According to the locals, it is for the deceased to see in the afterlife and the eye and mouth plates symbolize the deceased's face. The precious metals were separated too, gold was the sun, silver was the moon's light (Benkő 1998, 126–127; Benkő 2003, 121–122).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century burial habits of the Ostyaks, who kept the custom of the eye and mouth plates, were studied by Russian scholars. According to their descriptions, the Ostyaks covered the face of their dead – usually with buckskin and on the eyes, mouth, nose and ears they sewed buttons made of bronze. They explained, that in this way the dead were not able to speak, see, breathe or hear, thus the deceased loses all connections with the living and moves on peacefully to the afterlife (Belavin et al. 2009, 108).

In the graves of Eastern Europe and the Ural area, in the early medieval period the underlying reason was also the fear of the dead by the living. But it was also about the respect and protection of the dead (Belavin et al. 2009, 108).

Though it is not possible to link to the fear of the spirit returning, to the eye and mouth plates and masks, which include a cut in the plate for the eyes and mouth - as they opened the way for the spirit. Besides the idea of fear it does not stand, that on some occasions the eyes and mouth of the dead were covered, but in the other cases they accentuated the shape of the face and opened the way for the soul. To stop the soul returning there are several ways known from ancient Hungarian burials (lying on the belly, tying up, removing the limbs). These graves typically do not contain findings, while the graves, where funerary eye and mouth plates were found often have wealthy findings.

In conclusion the study of burial eyeplates is an unfinished subject in archaeology. Further studies are required mostly from ethnographic point of view. Hopefully the ever expanding database and more graves found in the Carpathian Basin can change our view about this topic. Important task of the future is to examine the traces of the patina on the skulls, especially the eye and mouth cavities.

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